

PASSOVER DOUBLE ISSUE

# JewishTimes

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Serving God is Self Serving

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### LETTERS

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

## "Image of God"

**READER:** Torah says man is created in the "image of God." Bestowing man with emotions contradicts this, as God has no emotions. Secondly, as emotions do not apply to God, how does Torah say God "loves," and "hates"? Thirdly, as God granted man emotions, what is the idea of man being told to control all his emotions, namely anger, contentment, jealousy etc.? Why give something, if not to use it?

—Saul S. Aptekar

**RABBI:** As to your first question, Man being created "in God's image" (Gen. 1:27), God did not make man a duplicate of Himself. "Created in God's image" means man has a soul, an intelligence, with which to perceive God. But this is not man's exclusive faculty; "God's image" refers to only one human faculty. God gave man many faculties. One could rightly say, "God

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created man in the image of an animal” too.

Regarding your second question, it is true that God has no emotions, as emotions are creations, and the Creator is not comprised of His creations. But as the Rabbis teach, traits applied to God are always in the negative, since we cannot possess positive knowledge of God. To express that God is not evil, Torah says He is merciful and long-tempered. But God’s mercy is unlike human mercy...His mercy is not an emotion. To express that God does not approve of idolatry, Torah says human idolatry “angers” Him. But God does not possess anger. Applied to God, “anger” is a metaphor for God’s will that man prioritizes accepting God alone and rejects any other god.

Lastly, God giving man emotions does not mean man should abuse them. God gave us a Torah to guide how we engage our emotions and all aspects of life.

**DANI ROTH SAID AS FOLLOWS:** We are created in the image of God, but not exactly like Him, since we differ as we are physical beings. Regarding the second question, Torah describes God with emotions because that’s how we can understand what Torah is trying to tell us. And for the third question, if we had no emotions. then what would we be tested on? ■

## Learning from Animals

**READER:** Talmud Eruvin 100b: “*Rabbi Yochanan said that if the Torah had not been given we would learn modesty from a cat (as it covers its excrement), that stealing is forbidden from an ant (as it doesn’t take other ant’s food), forbidden relations from a dove (as it remains loyal to one partner), and moral decency from a rooster.*”

So, is Torah necessary or not?

—Turk Hill

**RABBI:** Although we can derive proper character from animals, most people do not, and thus, Torah is required for the masses. But Torah encompasses not only character perfection, but so many laws and real life lessons addressing monotheism, idolatry, justice, kindness, ownership, marriage, family, Temple and the gamut of human life. So, for many reasons, Torah is required.

Rabbi Yochanan means that God created the natural world with numerous species that exist not for themselves, but for man (Earth exists for man, see Rashi on Avos 2:8). And they serve us not only by providing companionship, food, leather and farm labor, but God designed their habits to inspire man’s habits. That’s some lesson, that their behaviors are not only for their own self-preservation, but to teach man proper character.

During mankind’s first 2448 years, Torah did not exist. Therefore, from Adam through Moses, the natural world alone sufficed to offer man God’s truths. God designed Earth for man, that we can use nature to arrive at truths concerning monotheism, justice, kindness, character, and all Torah fundamentals.



God created the Jewish nation from Abraham the Gentile who had no Torah, which teaches this precise point: Abraham arrived at tremendous truths using his mind alone and pondering Earth’s and man’s designs. Only after exploring and analyzing lessons derived from the natural world, attaining a high degree of perfection, did God speak to Abraham and appoint him as the leader of the Jewish nation. ■

## Serving God is Self-Serving

**READER:** You wrote that “service of God equals service of the self.” How [then] do you explain Rambam in Shemitah V’Yovel (13:13) where the term “to serve Him” is used, that you are acting as God’s servant, performing His will?

—Alex Kahgan

**RABBI:** Rabbi Israel Chait replied:

“The next 3 words after “to serve Him” are “to know God.” So, to serve God means to gain knowledge of God. In gaining this knowledge we benefit ourselves to the highest degree which is God’s will, so we benefit ourselves and are in line with God’s will.” ■

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PARSHA

# Lashon Hara

## Rabbi Israel Chait

**M**aimonides writes:

*That area which man is advised to speak about, this is man's purpose. If man can speak in this all his days, this is the purpose.*

This means that the goal of abstention from negative speech is the engagement in the commanded type of speech (i.e., mitzvos, wisdom, perfection, and the like).

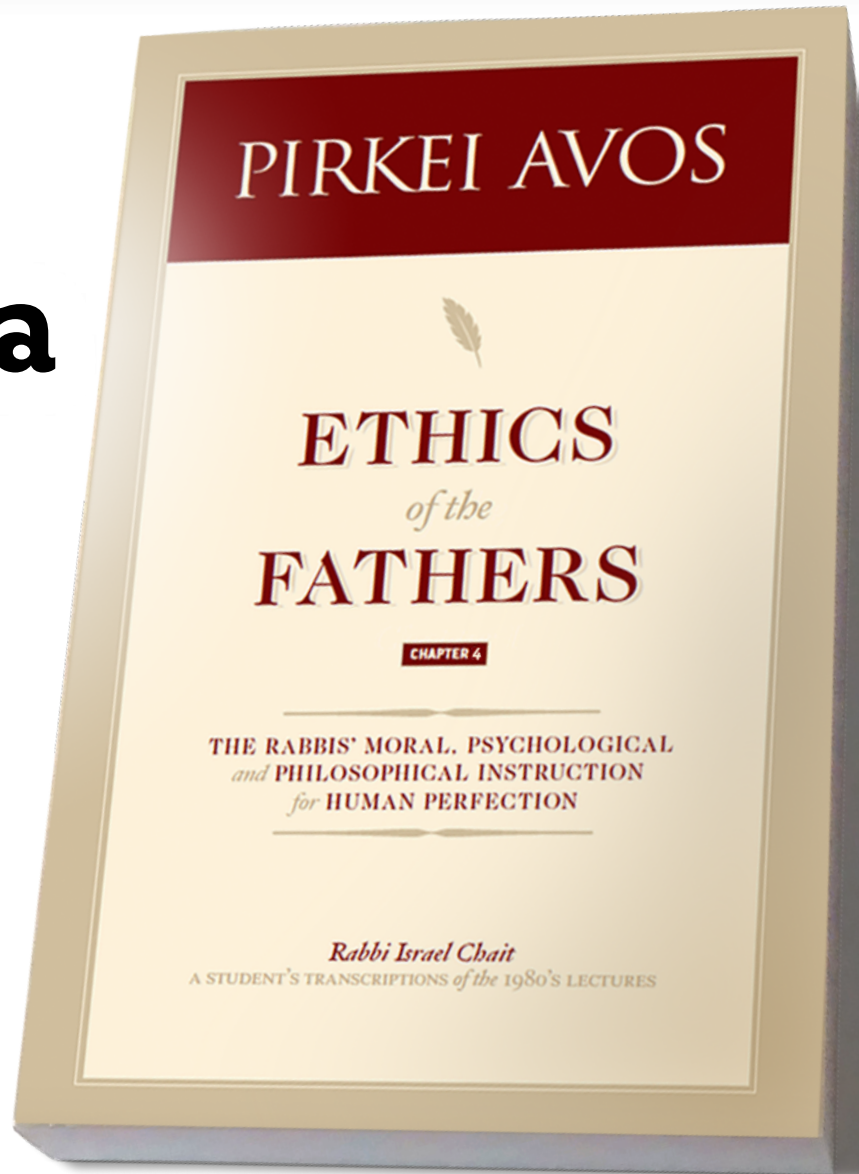
*A person should act as he speaks, as it says, "Pleasant are words spoken from the mouth of one who performs them." Also, "And the exposition [of Torah] is not what is essential, but the action" (Avos 1:7).*

People are most influenced through their attachment to another person. When a person witnesses someone preaching but not practicing, that is harmful. It conveys that the ideas espoused do not have to be carried out in action.

"Tzaddikim sing of God; the pleasant praise is that of the upright [people who act]" (Psalms 33:1). This is why people degrade a person who learns but doesn't care for the upkeep of a beis medrash (study hall.) By not living in a proper way, one creates a profanation of God. Most people never rise above this level of judging others by their actions as opposed to their speech. "And the exposition [of Torah] is not what is essential, but the action" refers to the effect one has on others. People are affected by personalities, not by one's learning.

Why does our mishna say that silence is best, as opposed to saying that proper speech is best? The answer is that silence is the state of frustration that one undergoes when in the process of redirecting his energies. Silence is what perfects a person.

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This is followed by “The exposition [of Torah] is not what is essential, but the action”—teaching that although one’s own perfection is through silence, influencing others toward the good requires action.

Maimonides writes, “Always teach students with brevity” (Hilchos Dayos 2:4). What is the harm in speaking at length? In fact, one of the ways to acquire Torah is through *arichus sifasayim*, elongated speech.

Maimonides does not refer to the number of words spoken. If the student requires a lengthier elucidation, the rebbe must accommodate him.

*And so with words of Torah and words of wisdom, his words should be minimal. But if his words are many and the matter is small, this is foolishness. And on this it is stated, “A dream comes in great matters, and the voice of the fool in many words” (Koheles 5:2).*

Man’s purpose is to partake in abstract ideas (truths). What prevents man from doing so is his emotions (which are expressed in speech). Therefore, man must avoid speaking too much even when discussing Torah. The part of the mind that avoids precise definitions (*svara*) is the same part of the mind that engages nonsensical matters. “Speaking minimally” refers to giving a precise definition, which is brief by nature. If one gives lengthy definitions, he is being descriptive and he is engaging the emotions/imagination. When one’s explanation goes on and on, he is not keying in on the abstract essence of a definition that only the mind’s eye can see. He is engaged in imagination.

A person uses description instead of abstract concepts because he doesn’t believe in the abstract but in the physical representation of the abstract. And since he believes in the latter, he must deal with all representations. But a person who gives definitions deals only with the one abstract idea. Definition is briefer than description because it is the principle that defines the many cases and descriptions. (Namely, one can define “animal” as an animated instinctual creature without wisdom, or one can list many examples



of animals. The former is briefer.)

Urging the teacher to use brevity—*derech kitzara*—the rabbis mean to teach in precise, yet abstract formulations. The final formulation must be brief, but one should discuss a matter [with elongated speech when necessary], which is one of the ways to acquire Torah. But if the final formulation is not brief, it indicates that the nonsensical part of the mind is involved.

“For a dream comes in many matters” (Ibid.). Behind all the matters there is one idea, but the representations are many. Why? Because dreams are the language of emotions and the emotions are attached to every physical representation and image. “And the voice of the fool [comes] in many words” (Ibid.). The fool is not that different from the dreamer. He is tied to the emotions and to the world of descriptions. Maimonides uses this verse to teach that there is only one perfection: the world of the totally abstract, the shortest and most precise formulation.

One must remove himself from all nonsensical areas and engage only in thought. And thought too must be refined from all nonsense so that one ultimately finds himself in the world of

the abstract. This is when man reaches the highest level.

Lashon Hakodesh (the Hebrew language) contains no references to sexuality. The existence of Lashon Hakodesh teaches a lesson that speech should be dedicated only to wisdom and to the control of the emotions. Man’s perfection is through speech, as stated.

## Maimonides Elucidates Lashon Hara

*Man is in an unbelievable blindness. It is a very grave sin in which man stumbles regularly. And no one can avoid daily, *avak lashon hara* [lit. the dust of evil speech: a lesser form of evil speech]. It is preferable to avoid *lashon hara* itself.*

*Lashon hara is the act of repeating people’s faults and reducing their stature in any manner. This applies to debasing a person for what he actually did. Lying would be *motzi shem ra*—character assassination. Both the speaker and the listener are sinners. Lashon hara kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the one spoken about. The listener is hurt more than the speaker.*

*What is the *avak lashon hara*? This is one who intimates to others the defects of people without clearly spelling out his words. King Solomon said [that this refers to] one who hints or alludes [to something] and the speaker gives the appearance that he doesn’t know what people understood from [the information] he [gave], and that he didn’t intend to speak derogatorily. He claims he was joking. “Like a madman scattering deadly firebrands [and] arrows, [so too] is one who cheats his fellow and says, ‘I was only joking.’” (Proverbs 26:18,19). This is *avak lashon hara*.*

The difficulty is that *avak lashon hara* seems worse than *lashon hara* itself. Maimonides discusses *avak lashon hara* as a subconscious state of mind,

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where [aggressive] speech escapes oneself undetected. If the mind were conscious, man could control himself.

*Rav Amram said in Rav's name, "There are three matters from which man cannot escape: thoughts of sin, iyun tefilah, [confidence in the fulfillment of one's prayer], and lashon hara" (Baba Basra 164b).*

We understand thoughts of sin and lashon hara, but what is iyun tefilah? Rashbam says that this refers to one who, after completing his prayer, assumes God will respond, since he prayed with proper intent. Rashbam means this is talking on the subconscious level, where a person is confident he will be answered. This is egocentric.

We thereby categorize these three sins as follows: Thoughts of sin are the lusts; iyun tefilah is ego; and avak lashon hara is subconscious aggression. Man cannot escape a daily expression of these drives, as they [regularly] seek satisfaction, even in a mild form.

Further elaborating on the verse "Do not turn toward the idols [elilim]" (Lev. 19:4), this is a prohibition against following nonsense in life. The question strikes a person since nonsense and idolatry are disparate matters.

Most people don't understand Maimonides' words, "The focus of Torah is the obliteration of idolatry." This is the essence of Torah. People think idolatry is a primitive relic of the bygone past. However, if idolatry is the essence of Torah, it must strike at the core of human existence in terms of human perfection. To reiterate, "nonsense" refers to movies and the like, matters that one conjures up in his mind. As this is the essence of Torah, we must arrive at a precise formulation of this prohibition.

The world of reality for most people is what we refer to as "psychological reality." This is the childhood reality that one projects onto the world scene. Children live with intense emotions. An example of this projection is those whose lives are guided to satisfy the opinions of a few people. Such people find the estimation of others to be the center of their lives. Not only are the

opinions of others important, but they have a universal impact on their minds, where all else revolves around them. This emotion is a carryover from childhood, where family was one's entire world. In adult life, the family (whose opinions were vital) is then extended to others. We see this childhood emotion expressed in adults. For example, pettiness is expressed when a person feels envy toward the success of another. A person would be hard-pressed to explain why this success affects him. But it hits him in a certain way because he retains the emotions of the infantile world.

**The purpose of Judaism is to remove a person from this type of mentality and bring him into the absolute reality. This is where God is the center of reality: "The great essence [ikkar gadol] upon which all depends" (Hil. Yesodei Hatorah 1:4). This comes from an appreciation of God's wisdom in Torah and in the universe. If one is involved in pursuing God's wisdom, all else pales and is immaterial, even the overestimation of our own lives. "A generation passes and a generation arrives" (Koheles 1:4). We are just one generation; our existence is very temporary.**

One hundred years from now our individual importance will not be as great as we imagine it is now. One of my students said, "If one worries about something, he should think about how important it will be five years from now." Thinking in these terms prevents the emotions from latching onto temporal values.

A study of reality exposes our lives as insignificant. Why is it that we don't live with this perspective and we overestimate personal matters? We are still involved in the infantile world. People who read Koheles find it depressing: "Generations pass on," "Man returns to the dust," etc. "Why should we think about our deaths?," people ask (even though death is imminent and certain). We shouldn't necessarily focus on

death, but that we don't consider these matters and deny their truths shows that we aren't engaged in reality. King Solomon, Moshe Rabbeinu, and Avraham Avinu never lost sight of reality. If one is in line with reality and with his position in the universe, he would find his existence is radically different, and he would operate based on different reasons. This isn't easy and one cannot make a quick transition. But this is the purpose of the entire Torah.

**Insofar as a person has made that transition from his small-minded view of himself and those who surround him, and he has elevated his values from the opinions of others to objective reality, he has fulfilled the purpose of the Torah. This was Avraham's greatness. He was completely unconcerned with what anyone thought. The rabbis say, "The whole world was on one side and Avraham was on the other side" (Beraishis Rabbah 42:8).**

Avraham was not courageous, rather he was indifferent to people's opinions. He lived in reality and saw the truth. Matters such as wearing garments of finer quality were of no concern. Such preoccupations are out of touch with reality. Its insignificance was quite clear to one like Avraham. Insofar as great people are great, so is their measure of partaking in reality.

The Torah's purpose is to remove a person from psychological reality and bring him into the framework of the absolute: objective reality. "Do not turn to the idols" prohibits involvement in movies and novels. This takes time and one cannot remove himself immediately; it is a long process. God gives man seventy to eighty years. Nonetheless, although we aren't perfect, we must study the meaning/definition of perfection.

Idolatry is a person's projection of the infantile mind onto reality. Idolaters' every aspect of life is dictated by their infantile beliefs. It was a tremendous distortion to the point of sacrificing their children's lives to their gods. These

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beliefs stem from a powerful source in man's nature. Primitive idolatry is not far out of reach in Western society. It too has expressions of the infantile.

This is what is meant by "Do not turn to the idols": Do not turn toward those aspects of the human mind that are subtle expressions of a much greater phenomenon of idolatry. "Do not turn..." is speaking to the modern individual. (Raw idolatry speaks to primitive man.)

Idolatry removes man from his central faculty: the Tzelem Elohim (the intellect), the ability for a person to appreciate God's wisdom. This explains the absence of progress in idolatrous cultures. Their intellects are functionless after generations of following primitive idolatrous beliefs. Novels, movies, and anything that is nothing more than a person's fantasies embody "turning toward idolatry."

The Gemara says that if one sees he's about to commit a sin, he should recite the Shema. By doing so, he focuses on the Creator of universe, which in contrast, makes him view his petty desires as ridiculous. If this doesn't help, the Gemara says one should remember the day of his death. On that day, a person will realize that many things are unimportant. Why then should one take a two-step approach? Instead, remember the day of death and forget about reciting the Shema? The answer is that remembering one's death isn't the best approach. It is depressing, but it is a last-ditch effort. More preferable, however, is reciting the Shema. Whereas the reminder of death offers man nothing positive, reciting the Shema offers something in place of his sin: It can make man very happy as he perceives an alternate and more joyful reality than a life of sin. This is why reciting the Shema is the preferred step. Shema also does not bring with it any sadness. Divrei mussar (moral rebuke) also have this saddening effect. A person should not feel sad at losing his desires. This is because the temporal enjoyments of desires are no comparison to the joy one attains when perceiving true ideas and living in line with them.

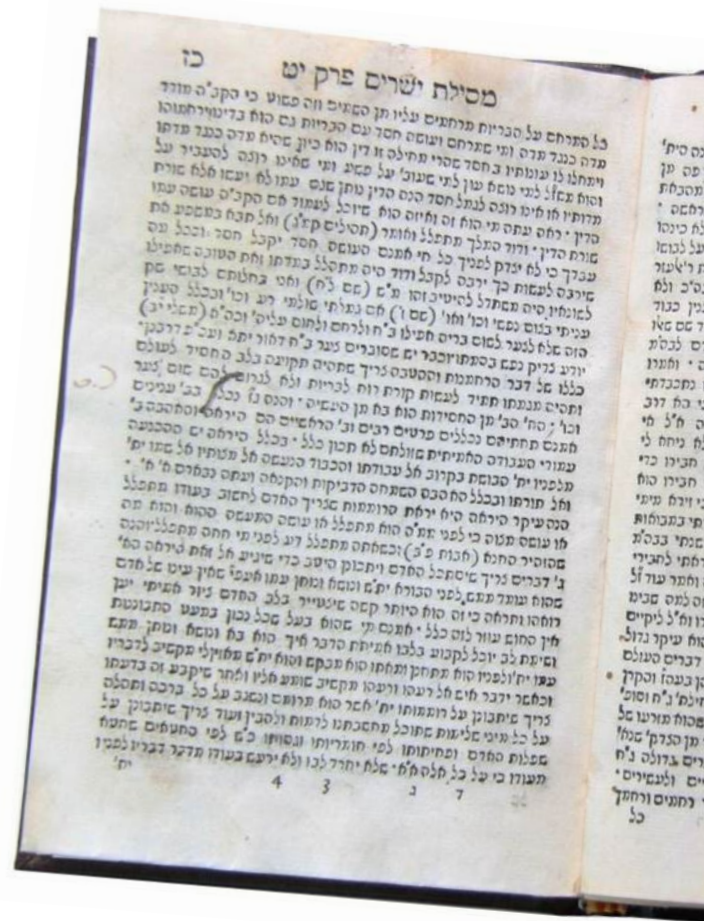
If a person follows the laws of muktzeh based on a feeling that there is some evil spirit residing in the object, no doubt, this is idolatrous. The purpose of the Torah is to prevent such

notions, and this is accomplished through the halachic system. Sometimes muktzeh cannot be moved, sometimes it can. And sometimes one is obligated to move it. All the halachos are worked out in a completely logical manner with complete wisdom.

Therefore, there is no way to attach any taboo to halacha. There is not one mitzvah that is not expounded upon in Torah She-ba'al Peh (the Oral Law) and that is not structured with tremendous wisdom.

It is impossible to say that performance of a mitzvah per se is the Torah's objective. This is like a taboo idea. In the first chapter of Mesilas Yesarim, it says that everyone agrees: The purpose of the mitzvos is a means toward perfection [the act per se is not the objective]. For in Olam Haba (the afterlife) there are no mitzvos. (Thus, this higher state of man's existence is not one of performing mitzvos, which means that there is something greater than mitzvos.) What exists in Olam Haba are the righteous ones engaged in wisdom. Wisdom continues after death. The Gemara says that in Olam Haba, God teaches man the answers to all the difficulties he encountered in his studies while on earth. All agree that mitzvos are a means for perfection. But if one fulfills the mitzvos for some primitive notion or taboo, obviously they don't have much value, but he is better off than not performing the mitzvah, as there is a chance he might come to the truth. But per se, such an act has very little value. The Gemara says one should engage in Torah and mitzvos, even if not for the correct reason, because once one performs them for the wrong reason, he will come to perform them for the correct reason. (But one who performs mitzvos based on a taboo is worse than one who performs them for the wrong reason—lo lishma.) The deduction is that if one would not come to perform the mitzvos for the proper reason, it is not clear if the incorrect performance has value.

In Hilchos Teshuvah, Maimonides says that one should not train others to follow the Torah based on fear of punishment unless the person has low mentality and cannot rise above that level. But this is a low level. Maimonides says that one should follow the



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Torah and mitzvos for their great benefit. One should appreciate being part of the nation God selected to receive his Torah. This is the meaning of the blessing "...that He chose us from all other nations and gave us His Torah" ("Asher bachar banu mekol ha'amim..."). Without Torah, one's life would be empty.

The world at large is of the opinion that happiness is something "out there." However, the Torah says the following:

*For this instruction that I command you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and we shall hear it, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and we will hear it, that we may observe it?" For the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deut. 30:11-14)*

The Torah gives a metaphor for man's fantasy that "somewhere" we'll find that situation and we will be happy. Man incorrectly blames his lack of happiness on external situations. The problem is within man himself as this series of verses ends, "For the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and your heart." If man changes himself internally, he will achieve happiness. But if he does not, he can go to the ends of the universe and he will not be happy.

### Maimonides Continues Elucidating Lashon Hara

He says the Gemara records that at a large gathering, one of the chochamim praised the writing quality of a certain scribe. Another chocham protested, saying, "Don't speak lashon hara." Maimonides explains that praising a person publicly will cause him to suffer abuse. Since there are people present who like him and people who hate him, when the scribe's enemies hear his praises, they will be forced to talk about his shortcomings. This story seems more like good advice than an example of lashon hara. But going back to our



definition of lashon hara, we said that it is "the aggressive instinct finding verbal expression." Maimonides says this case is a protective distancing (harchaka) from lashon hara. This means that one should go so far as to abstain from any speech that can generate aggression toward others, even if that aggression comes from another, like the scribe's enemies. Therefore, if one truly wishes to avoid expressing his aggressive instinct, he must investigate not only his speech, but even the results of his speech. Only in this manner can one fully remove himself from all responsibility of aggression directed toward another person.

There is an underlying psychological principle in this lesson. A person's aggression is deeply rooted and often disguised. The most common disguise is when one says "I didn't realize...." But this excuse exposes an aggressive undercurrent, which is the cause of the mind slipping-up and not realizing the potential harm. By not taking proper precaution, one caters to his aggressive instinct in some way.

The reason people don't have much success in stopping lashon hara is their lack of understanding. If people saw the benefits in abstaining from lashon hara they would probably be more

involved in this type of perfection. Therefore, a person must understand the true good in life so he can grasp the damage of lashon hara. Any person who is not involved in perfecting his speech, is not involved in perfection.

*From the spies we learn that if they, whose lashon hara was only against trees and stones [the Land of Israel], received punishment, how much more so he who speaks of the degradation of his friend?*

The spies prevented the Jewish nation from entering Israel. How can this crime be compared to one who speaks against his friend? We must understand the mechanism of speaking against a land. Why did Maimonides distinguish between lies and truth? (Lies are character assassination, motzi shem ra; lashon hara is truths.) What is the difference? In either case, one is being aggressive in his speech. Why does Maimonides make a point that lashon hara is only when you are not lying? Why do we not categorize lashon hara as all forms of aggressive speech, whether truth or lies? Why must lashon hara be its own category?

In lashon hara, a unique process is

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operating. It is not so much one's words, for even the smallest degradation qualifies as lashon hara. In lashon hara, the listeners have a certain image of the target of the evil speech. And when one makes even the most benign negative comment about someone, it paints that person in a whole different negative light.

The spies didn't say the Land was so terrible. On the contrary, they praised the Land and gave Moshe the report he requested. But there was only one word they used: "however." Later on they went further and said, "It is a Land that consumes its inhabitants."

With the word "however," the spies wished to introduce suspicion and instill fear in people. The spies were saying, "We don't know what it is about the Land, but for some reason, a lot of people die there." The strength of the spies' report to sway the Jews into rebelling against entering Israel was a mystical type of argument, a fear of the unknown: "Wonderful fruit, good land, but we don't know why people are dying there." The spies caused the nation to sense fear by changing the image of the Land. This is why the verse says, "Thus they spread slander among the Israelites about the Land they had scouted, saying, 'The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers'" (Num. 13:32). Why does this verse use the language of "slander" about the Land? It is because the Torah teaches that this employs the same mechanism as lashon hara. The spies mentioned facts with the purpose of tainting Israel's image of the Land. This is lashon hara, where through hearing truths, the listener views the target of the lashon hara in a negative light. That is the speaker's purpose and the way it is received. Motzi shem ra (character assassination) uses a different mechanism: It is transparent aggression, where one lies about another. The Torah splits lashon hara from motzi shem ra because in terms of human perfection, they are two different phenomena. Lashon hara is more concealed and therefore must be rooted out differently from motzi shem ra. As an evil, lashon hara depends more on different psychological mechanisms than motzi shem ra does.

Now that we have identified the mechanism of lashon hara with regards to the spies, what is the kal v'chomer (a fortiori argument) that if one is punished for slandering land, he must certainly be punished for slandering people? The evil

of lashon hara is a lack of knowledge; it distorts reality. Herein lays the harm of lashon hara. One loses out when another person speaks lashon hara and distorts another Tzelem Elohim, an intelligent creature.

In his Guide, Maimonides says there are different types of mistakes. If one mistakenly thinks his friend ate cereal for breakfast but he in fact ate eggs, it is false, but it is inconsequential. If he erred about scientific knowledge, that is worse, since the area of knowledge is greater. If one made an error regarding a person, it is not as damaging as making an error regarding angels, since angels are of a higher existence. And making a mistake about angels is not as severe as making a mistake regarding God. Philosophical knowledge gains importance when we study greater matters.

This answers our question. Making a mistake regarding a piece of land is not as important as making a mistake regarding a Tzelem Elohim. (Degrading a person who is God's handiwork, the one earthly creature capable of perceiving God and His wisdom, and through lashon hara, reducing that person into a "thief" or a "liar" or some other definition, destroys the appreciation of God's true designation of man.)

**Quoting the Tosefta and Talmud Arachin 15, Maimonides writes, "For three sins, man is punished in this world and loses his afterlife: for idolatry, sexual prohibitions, and murder; and lashon hara is equivalent to them all."**

Each of the three cardinal sins are called "great" (gadol). Regarding idolatry, Moshe said of the Jews' Golden Calf, "The people sinned a great sin" (Exod. 32:31). Regarding sexual prohibitions, Joseph refused to sleep with Potiphar's wife saying, "How can I commit this great evil?" (Gen. 39:9) And regarding murder, Cain said of God's punishment of banishment for killing his brother Abel, "My sin is greater than I can bear" (Gen. 4:13). But regarding lashon hara, the verse says, "Mouths that speak many great things" (Psalms 12:4), using the plural and not the singular, as the three sins above. This indicates that lashon hara includes all the "greatness" of the three

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cardinal sins. How precisely does lashon hara correspond to these sins?

Lashon hara distorts reality, similar to idolatry. We also understand that lashon hara contains an element of murder (character assassination). But how is it similar to adultery?

Man sins in two ways. One is an unbridled and open instinctual expression. Examples of this first category are adultery and murder. But man also sins in a second manner, through sublimation in speech. One would assume the raw expression is worse. In one sense this is true. But in another sense, the sublimated expression is worse in that one can't extricate oneself: The attachment is stronger—it is constant and it prevents one from change.

One has a place in Olam Haba in as much as he loves the good. But an instinctual person has no place there. And if one is constantly speaking lashon hara (a ba'al lashon hara) he has no place in Olam Haba. Judaism underlines perfection: "Who is the man who desires life, one who loves life and seeks good? The one who guards his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking lies" (Psalms 34:13,14).

Maimonides continues:

*They spoke about this cursed sin very, very much; at the essence of what he says is that whomever speaks lashon hara denies God, as it says, "They say, 'We will grow mighty with our tongues; our lips are with us, who can rule us'" (Psalms 12:5).*

Maimonides says this is the essence of lashon hara. What is this essential element? How does one deny God via lashon hara? One speaks lashon hara to devalue another vis-à-vis society. And this is not

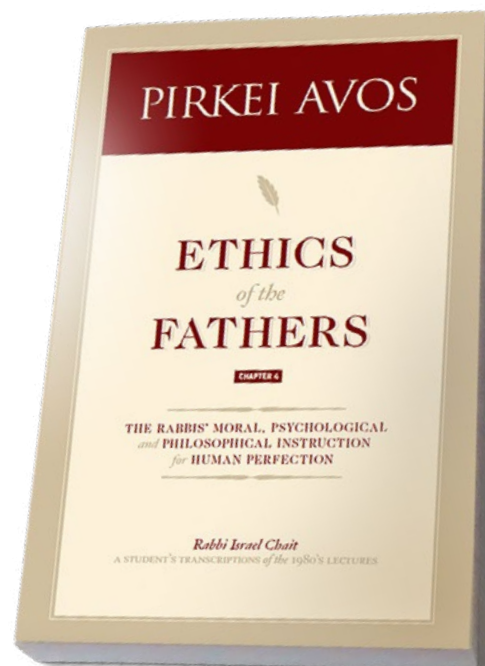
done for any ulterior motive, like degrading your competition on a business contract to secure it for yourself. The Gemara (Arachin 15b) says they asked the snake, "We understand why you bite, but why did you also inject venom?" The snake replied, "And what benefit is there to a person who speaks lashon hara?" The Gemara means that lashon hara has no [ulterior] objective: The act is self-fulfilling. One speaks lashon hara to decrease another person and raise his own self-estimation. He is happy when he feels society values him, and he's upset when it does not.

Denying God (kofer b'ikkar) means one rejects the ultimate reality. The Torah says that Reuven heard about his brothers' plot to harm Joseph and he saved him from their hands (Gen. 37:21). The rabbis say that had Reuven known that the Torah would write this about him, he would have carried Joseph on his shoulders to their father. (Public opinion motivates people.) The medrash continues, "That is good in Reuven's time, but who writes now? God does." This means that one should be concerned only about what God thinks. This is the concern of a person who reaches the highest level. But one who is concerned with society rejects God.

Talmud Arachin 15b asks what one should do to avoid lashon hara:

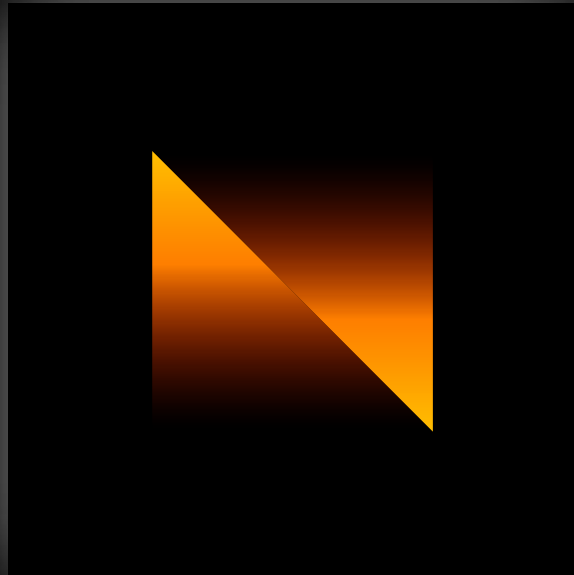
*If he is a Torah scholar, he should engage in Torah. If he is an ignoramus, he should lower himself.*

If the Torah scholar learns Torah, lashon hara will pale by comparison; it will lose its grip. And the ignoramus should lower himself since the appeal of lashon hara is his status in society. He does so by realizing his temporal existence. ■



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**GOD IS**

# The First & The Last

## Isaiah's Praise of the Creator

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

*Thus said God, the King of Israel,  
their redeemer, God of Hosts:  
“I am the first and I am the last, and  
there is no god but Me.” (Isaiah 44:6)*

**A**s this verse concludes, “there is no god but Me,” the verse’s beginning must prove this. How so?


“God is first” means that all other deities required creation—after God—thereby renouncing their claim as a god, for a deity does not need something other than itself to create it. By definition, a deity is not dependent. But all gentiles’ gods required creation.

“God is last” means all other gods expire, again, renouncing their status as gods, as their durations are not their own will.

The gentiles’ deities’ existences and their expirations are imposed against their will by God who preceded them, and Who will survive their deaths. This is a perfect refutation of the religions’ defense of their deities, and a perfect praise of the one eternal God. For He caused all to be. And all that is, eventually expires.

As the gentiles’ gods required creation, and will not protect themselves from expiration, they lack the essential qualities of a deity.

“There is no god but Me.” ■



# SLANDER

**T**his is King David's critique of those who slander:

*May God cut off all flattering lips, every tongue that speaks arrogance. They say, "By our tongues we shall prevail; our lips are with us, who will master over us?" (Psalms 12:4,5)*

King David shares the underlying psychological dynamics. Those inspired by God like King David, articulate God's brilliance with His perfectly selected words. Let us be highly sensitive to his words so we derive the most possible divine wisdom. Here, there are 3 primary critiques.

## PARSHA

# The Evil & Harm of Lashon Hara

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim**

### **"May God cut off all flattering lips, every tongue that speaks arrogance"**

Speech is a social phenomenon; we don't talk when alone. One seeks support from others for their emotions, explaining why these verses refer to "our" tongues, "we" shall prevail, "our" lips, and over "us." These evil people are insecure and require peer support. The Spies too didn't stand on their own legs, but first mustered support by inciting others to join in their evil claims.

What is the arrogance of these sinners? They destroy others with selfish motives like monetary gain, fame, or power. Another dominant motive is to destroy those whom they envy; others who are truly good and righteous disturb the sinner. Rashi (Lev. 26:15) identifies 7 stages of self-destruction, where sinners must "scorn others who practice the commands":

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*Thus you have here seven sins the first of which brings the second in its train and so on to the seventh. And these are: he has not studied and therefore has not practiced the commandments; consequently he scorns others who practice them, he hates the Sages, prevents others from practicing, denies the Divine origin of the commandments, and finally denies the existence of God.*

### **“By our tongues we shall prevail”**

How does speech secure success? The answer: “The pen (words) is mightier than the sword (might).” Evil individuals seek personal gain. These deceivers know their game and its traps. Therefore they say, “By our tongues we shall prevail” as they entrap others, misleading them with fantasies. Once a deceiver succeeds in luring his victim, he sits aback and awaits his downfall, as might is not required when victims fool themselves by their ignorance and fantasies. This is how the pen is mightier: sinners manipulate how others perceive reality, as they know that others too have greed, so they lure them towards phantom successes, conning them with Ponzi schemes. Just as written matters convince readers of their truth as books are foolishly trusted, people are equally fooled by spoken claims. “For how can someone make a claim unless there is some reality to it?” they think. Furthermore, people gauge reality based on their senses, not proof or reason. Thus, written and spoken words which are “seen and heard,” are perceived as “real” existence in peoples’ fantasies, conning people to accept them as truths. Slanderers too fabricate a false reputation that can lead to the victim’s irreparable harm.

### **“Our lips are with us, who will master over us?”**

They seek not only success over others, but to gratify unrestrained desires. Their sense of invincibility is born from “our lips are with us.” These sinners feel that their exclusive control over their lips entitles them to say and do all they wish. This is similar to, “For in the freedom of my heart I go” (Deut. 29:18) on which Rashi says, “I will follow what my heart sees good to do.” In other words, one feels fully justified in following his thoughts.

“Who will master over us” is heresy, as Malbim states:

*“Our lips are with us”— in things between a man and his friend. We will speak slander and deceit.  
“Who will master over us” — They will increase their tongue regarding wondrous matters to deny providence, having no master in heaven.  
“Our lips are with us” — To harm their peers with lying lips, and they have no master on Earth.*

Why do slander and the promiscuous wife (Sotah) both meet with miraculous punishments, while murder, stealing and other crimes do not?

Slander and adulterous relationships are irreversible like murder. But unlike murder, the harm can be denied;

there is no corpse. Yet, the crimes are of equal severity. A slanderer can claim he meant no harm, obscuring his real motives. And the adulteress can keep her secret affair hidden, causing grief to her husband who lives with a haunting suspicion that eats him alive. Torah amazingly depicts his uncertainty and the need for miraculous clarification: “And a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is suspicious about his wife who has defiled herself—Or if a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is suspicious about his wife and she has not defiled herself” (Num. 5:14).

God creates a miraculous punishment in both cases, conveying God’s intolerance, and the very real tragedy of slander and adultery. Deniable sins require undeniable punishment. These sinners inflict irreversible harm on the victims’ equilibrium, relationships, businesses and marriages, but they don’t realize their severity and permanent harm. Ego, viciousness and unbridled desire are to blame.

In parshas Metzora, the slaughtered bird represents the slanderer’s victim, and the blood stained live bird released over a field is now irretrievable, representing the slanderer’s irretrievable evil speech that causes irreparable harm.

### **Summary**

One who slanders others is insecure, explaining why he needs others to hear his slander and side with him. The Spies embodied this flaw.

The slanderer feels he can alter reality by using speech to destroy another human being, who may threaten his own ego, as Rashi indicates above. But if a person acts wrongly, and his actions alone incriminate him, why does the slanderer need to speak? The slanderer is not needed! But the slanderer speaks to self-aggrandize himself, as he takes credit for condemning a person on the way down. This is similar to Bilam the wicked. The slanderer places himself at the forefront as a bandleader, garnering applause for condemning someone already under condemnation. Slanderers amplify and echo the mood of the masses, to gain their favor and popularity. A politician seeking office is wise not to make the first blow against an opponent, perhaps it will backfire. He cleverly waits until his opponent suffers public criticism, then he safely joins in with further ridicule redirecting the masses’ hostile energies in support of himself.

Furthermore, the slanderer is an unruly personality, at times hiding behind a disguise of morality or righteous indignation to justify his venom. The Crusades perpetrated much evil as they used religion to justify their violence. When one feels justified—especially in religious matters—he can throw his entire weight behind his slander, with no remorse. Hitler felt he was doing divine work. Extreme viciousness is a clear conviction of his crime. But when one acts properly against true villains, there is no extreme viciousness, as Megilla says, “The Jews disposed of their enemies, killing 75,000 of their foes; but they did not lay hands on the spoil” (Esther 9:16). They merely removed the threat, seeking nothing more, nor their enemies’ wealth. ■



# Love, Hate & the Weaponization of Language

Rabbi Richard Borah

Our sages are in agreement that the phenomenon of tzaras, often mistranslated as "leprosy", is not the result of a natural disease process, but an openly miraculous occurrence by which a Jewish person receives visible lesions on his or her skin, clothing or home's walls as an indication of and punishment for the person speaking in a destructive manner towards his or her fellow Jew (lashon hara). Unlike other bodily disorders, this affliction is limited to the Jewish people in times when God performs open miracles in their midst. The Rambam writes in his "Guide for the Perplexed:

*All agree that leprosy is a punishment for slander. The disease begins in the walls of the houses. If the sinner repents, the objective is attained: if he*

*remains in his disobedience, the disease affects his bed and house furniture: if he still continues to sin, the leprosy attacks his own garments, and then his body. This is a miracle received in our nation by tradition...(Guide III:47)*

Indications that tzaras is the result of lashon hara include Miriam being punished with this malady after speaking disparagingly about her brother Moses' celibacy. She did not acknowledge the unique quality of Moses' level of prophecy which required him to be continually in a state of readiness for prophetic communication.

Judaism seems quite unique in stressing the potential weaponizing of language as the most widespread and destructive of the many ways that

human being harm and destroy each other. It is a perspective that is quite the opposite of the common wisdom reflected in the well-known phrase "sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me". In many cases the Torah considers the sin of lashon hara as a greater evil than a physical attack or a financial crime perpetuated against a person. A person who habitually speaks disparagingly of other Jewish people is said to have no place in olam haba (the afterlife). The speaker of lashon hara is considered ethically, if not legally, equivalent to someone who violates the 3 sins for which a Jew is required to die rather than commit them (idolatry, murder and certain sexual prohibitions). At first appearance it seems to be just a bit too much! Is speaking disparagingly really that destructive? Is it really such an

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indication of a flaw in the Jewish person's nature that the miraculous disorder of tzaras is warranted to indicate and to combat it? Why?

To clarify the power of lashon hara to destroy one might cite cases where lashon hara results in the loss of someone's life, such as talking about how your neighbor is doing something that the government authorities or the neighbors' enemies hear about and kill them. It may also, depending on the case, result in financial loss, if the lashon hara results in a person being fired from his or her job or having business problems as a result of the things that are spoken. But most cases of lashon hara do not, it seems to me, result in these dire consequences. In addition, if you asked most people whether they would rather be slapped hard in the face or have gossip spoken about them, most would prefer the later.

I think we may obtain some direction in understanding the Torah's severe perspective on lashon hara by looking into perhaps the most impactful and strange case of lashon hara in the history of the Jewish people. This case is that of the 12 spies who went to scout out the land of Israel and report back to Moses and the Jewish people about it. This pivotal event resulted in the original brief trek through the desert to Israel being transformed to a 40 year journey, during which all adult Jewish men at the time of the spies' lashon hara would die before the Jewish people could enter the Holy Land. (Certain individuals and groups were excepted from this decree because of their rejection of the lashon hara that 10 of the 12 spies spoke about the land of Israel. But the vast majority of the Jewish men died as a punishment for listening to this lashon hara. The Torah relates what the spies said to the Jewish people:

*We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we. They spread an (evil) report (debat ha-aretz) about the land they had scouted, telling the children of Israel, "The land we passed through to explore is a land*

*that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature. There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants. In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes" (BaMidbar 13:31-33).*

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether lashon hara against a land is consistent with the laws of lashon hara against a person, this example of the spies speaking against the land of Israel opens up the underlying emotions that propels one to speak it as well as the nature of the damage that results from listening to it. Underlying lashon hara is a profound sense of insecurity about one's own value and capability. It is a sin whose aggression against the other is an expression of the lashon hara speaker's doubts about one's own worth. Just as the spies felt like tiny insects in the presence of the inhabitants of Canaan, the lashon hara speaker suffers from a particular or general lack of self-worth which makes them feel the need to denigrate the other who they fear and see as something of a formidable enemy or opponent.

Regarding the damage done by lashon hara we can glean from the episode of the spies that this particular sin's major impact is not physical or financial damage, at least not directly. What lashon hara is most effective at damaging is the listeners' attitudes and perspectives about the person being disparaged. It is the listener's newly formed negative attitude towards the victim of lashon hara that affectively destroys the possibility of a relationship of "loving one's fellow as oneself". This benevolent perspective is the foundational principle underlying the Jewish person's feeling and actions towards other Jews and is absolutely essential for the Jewish nation to fulfill its God-given role as a light to the nations, to be a model for all the world regarding how a community succeeds in living a life of ethical monotheism in peace and with justice and kindness prevailing in all elements of its society. ■



## A Mount of Mistake

RABBI CHAIM OZER CHAIT

The long period of Galus was a period of uncertainty and instability both regarding the ruling authority as well as determining the Halacha: Do we follow the Rambam, Ra'aved, or Meeri? All this was left to the people of that generation. There was no Torah authority who would give a Halachic P'sak (decision) on what the law is. There was no one authority or Shulchan Orech to tell the people what the correct Halacha was. Which Rishon do we follow? Or was it clear in which areas in the Har Habayit it is permitted to walk? Excavations were not permitted for the most part. Rav Ishtori HaParchi (1280-1345) compiled his famous work The Kaftor VaFerach for the purpose of identifying the holiness of the land and boundaries of the cities according to the Gemara and Midrash. This included the Har Habayit. He did not see Herod's Western Wall as it was all covered with sand and debris, leaving certain uncertainties in identifying the proper areas of the Har Haybayit. Sometimes a Minhag developed as to which route to take on the Har Habayit, as well as the practice which opinion in Halacha do we follow. Other times it was left to each individual.

At about the late 1800's many Rabanim in Eretz Yisroel felt that the Halacha was in favor of the Rambam. The Magen Avraham had already given his P'sak and his opinion was generally accepted as the final Halacha. Furthermore, the Mishna Brura concurred with the Magen Avraham. Many Rabanim felt responsible to clearly establish that the Halacha is like the Rambam regarding the Har Habayit (keep in mind that Rav Kook personally held that the Ra'avad is basically in agreement with the Rambam, all the more reason to follow the Rambam...see last week's article). At that time the Rabanim had no way to enforce the proper route that should be taken on the Har Habayit. Many felt that there was no choice but to issue a ban on entering the Har Habayit. This would prevent the people from violating a probation that is punishable by kares. Not everyone took the ban seriously. In 1855 Sir Moses Montefiore who was aware of the ban thought that he could overcome the ban by entering the Har Habayit in a closed box. Many of the local people were extremely angry with him and pelted him with stones when he subsequently visited a Shul. Some Rabbis

placed him in Cheirem, prohibiting any social or commercial contact with him. This ban was removed only after he solemnly promised that he would not repeat such a visit.

Baron Edmond Benjamin James de Rothschild (known as "The Famous Benefactor") went to the Har Habayit on his visit to Yerushalayim in 1887 and on subsequent visits. Rabbi Kook issued a stringent rebuke to the Baron for failing to adhere to the ban. Rav Kook declared that although the Har Habayit was then in the hands of the Arabs, it would eventually come back into Jewish possession. Rav Kook never intended that the ban should be in force until the days of Mashiach. That would be removing many Mitzvos from the Taryag (613 commandments). Today, Rav Kook would be shocked to see the Har Habayit under Jewish sovereignty and the Jewish people enforcing Islamic law on the Har Habayit, as well as erecting an edifice in honor of Islam and allowing the disgraceful acts of playing ball, and having family picnics on the Har Habayit. On one occasion I saw a funeral leaving the Azara. What a disgrace and degradation to our most holy site. These are clear acts of heresy and infidelity. We are violating some of the most basic tenets of our Torah. We have an obligation to inform the public of what is taking place on the Har Habayit today. We have to change the policy of our misguided government.

By ascending the Har you are making a statement that we will not tolerate the defamation of the Har Habayit. We want to bring back the proper Kedusha to the Har Habayit such as Tefila while wearing our Tallis and Tefilin, building the Beis Hamikdash, Korban Pesach, and the Mitzvos that pertain to the Har Habayit.

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NOTE: One should not ascend the Temple Mount without proper Rabbinical instruction:

- 1) You should be informed of the various routes that are available according to the different Rabbinical opinions.
- 2) You must immerse in a Kosher Mikvah that meets the standards to be kosher med'orisa.
- 3) You must receive instructions for the proper preparations for the Mikvah (Chafifah) ■



# Moshe's Mission

Rabbi Reuven Mann

There seems to be a dichotomy between the goal of the Exodus—which was to extricate the Jews from the enslavement in Egypt, and bring them to the promised land—and the request to Pharaoh, that he allow the people to serve Hashem in the Wilderness.

All that Moshe asked for, was that the Jews be permitted some time off, to observe a Festival to Hashem. The clear implication was, that they would then return to Egypt and resume their labors. But how would that have achieved the objectives of Hashem's intervention, which He had laid out for Moshe at the Burning Bush?

Was this all an elaborate ruse, designed to fool Pharaoh into releasing the slaves on the (false) assumption that they were going to come back, something which the Jews had no intention of doing? This would imply, that the Jews had been compelled to resort to deception, in order to achieve their freedom. From a moral standpoint, this would be justified, as the Egyptians had no right to forcefully enslave the Hebrews. But what kind of impression would this make on the Egyptians who were, as a result of the "signs and wonders", supposed to recognize Hashem and serve Him?

Hashem could have instructed Moshe, to demand absolute freedom for the Jews from Pharaoh, who, of course, would have been compelled to comply. So why did He restrict Moshe to a very modest request?

It should be noted that the issue of deception is raised by the commentators, with regard to the matter of the "gifts" of clothing and jewelry which the Egyptians heaped upon the departing slaves. If they were borrowed items weren't the Jews obligated to return them?

All the great commentators, are compelled to explain why the people had every right to keep the items given to them, by their Egyptian neighbors. Most compelling is the explanation of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who demonstrates that the term "VeShaalah" used in this context, does not mean "to borrow" but to request as a gift.

But the general principle under which the Mefarshim are operating, is that the Jews acted with justice and honesty, in their last dealings with their oppressors. How then are we to understand Moshe's petition, that Pharaoh only grant them time to worship Hashem in the wilderness?

In conjunction with this, there are other issues that arise pertaining to Moshe's mission. Hashem tells Moshe that He will harden Pharaoh's heart and, as a result, he will not let the Jews go. But why would Hashem do something which would seem to counteract the effect of the Makkot, He was planning to bring upon Egypt?

We must also challenge the "negotiating style" of Moshe. Whenever the plague was too painful for Pharaoh to bear, he summoned Moshe and pleaded with him to remove it, promising that he would then comply with Moshe's demands. This occurred during the plagues of Tzefardeim (Frogs), Arov (Wild Beasts), Dever (Plague), Barad (Hail), and Arbeh (Locust). In each of these cases, Moshe simply removed the affliction without demanding that Pharaoh release the Jews simultaneously.

Predictably, after the pressure was relaxed, Pharaoh reneged on his agreement. But Moshe had all the leverage at his disposal to bring Pharaoh to his knees. How are we to understand this strange negotiating technique?

To answer these questions, we must understand the true nature and purpose of the Makkot, that Hashem rained down upon Pharaoh. They were not intended to crush him into surrender. They were essentially "Ohtote UMoftim" (signs and wonders) whose purpose was to demonstrate Hashem's absolute control of the universe.

The goal of all Moshe's endeavors was that "Egypt will know that I am Hashem". He sought to educate Pharaoh and his entire court, about the Existence and Will of G-d.

This required that Pharaoh retain his freedom of choice. He could not be

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forced into believing in Hashem. Thus, in his first meeting with Pharaoh, Moshe performed no miracles, but instead sought to reason with him, alone. When that failed, Moshe performed the sign of the Serpent, in which the staff of Aaron consumed the Serpents of the magicians; but no pain was inflicted on anyone in this demonstration.

However, when Moshe's initial overtures to Pharaoh failed to achieve their purpose, the plagues became necessary. Their goal was educational; but in order to hold the attention of the Egyptians and force them to consider their implications, it was essential that they involve pain and suffering. Without the suffering, the Egyptians would simply have ignored the miraculous phenomena. So blows became necessary.

When the pain was too much for Pharaoh, and he implored Moshe to remove its source, Moshe complied immediately. He did not want Pharaoh to release the Jews because of the pressure of the plagues, for that would not have constituted a Free-Will choice.

And this explains why G-d hardened the heart of Pharaoh. According to the renowned Biblical commentator, Seforno, this was not to remove Pharaoh's Free-Will, but, on the contrary, to preserve it.

For as the Makot increased in severity, they would have broken the King's spirit, and caused him to give in out of fear. Hashem, therefore, provided him with the psychological fortitude to withstand the emotional terror of the calamities, and enable him to consider things calmly.

The narrative of the Ten Plagues is also the story of Pharaoh's internal conflict. He clearly had been deeply affected by the devastation that Moshe brought upon his land. He desperately wanted to get things back to normal, even if this meant he must make certain concessions. But his ego invariably got in the way.

Pharaoh always came up with potential dealbreakers. Stay and worship Hashem in the land. Go, but don't take the children with you. Okay, you can take the kids, but you must leave your livestock behind. He had to demonstrate that he was in control, and refused to surrender unconditionally to Hashem.

Had Pharaoh won the battle with his inner resistances, and freely chosen to fulfill the command of Hashem, the Jews would have kept their side of the bargain, and returned to Mitzrayim after their Holiday. Had he overcome his Yeitzer Hara (Evil Inclination), Pharaoh would have been a different person, and it wouldn't have been long before he would have recognized that the entire enslavement was wicked, and he would have readily freed the Jews. In fact, he would have initiated a religious transformation in his country, featuring the abolition of animal worship and the glorification of Hashem.

Pharaoh was given numerous opportunities to come to his senses, and acknowledge Hashem as the Master of the Universe, to whose Will all people must

accede. However, after the plague of Choshech (Darkness), he suddenly got angry at Moshe and ordered him to leave the palace. This seems to have been a reaction to Moshe's admonition; "You too must give us sacrifices and burnt-offerings that we should offer them to Hashem our G-d. (Even Ezra Shemot 10:25)" This statement of Moshe, proves that the ultimate goal of his mission to Pharaoh, was for the Egyptian ruler to recognize Hashem and lead his nation in renouncing idolatry.

But Pharaoh's stubbornness carried the day. He summarily dismissed Moshe—threatening him with death—if he should endeavor to visit him again. The negotiations with Pharaoh were thus terminated, and now would come the terror of the final plague. This time, Pharaoh would release the Jews not because of Free-Will, but because the pain was too great; he had no choice but to do the Will of Hashem.

The Jews were now under no obligation to return to Egypt. They would have been, had Pharaoh acted because he freely recognized Hashem, and decided to do His Bidding. But as we have seen, that was not the case.

When Pharaoh sent out the Jews, he drove them out never to return again. "And G-d said unto Moshe: Yet one more plague will I bring upon Pharaoh and over Egypt, after that, he will send you away from here; when he does send you away, he will drive you out completely, drive you out forcibly. (Shemot 11:1)" Upon which Rabbi Hirsch comments, "This does not mean that Pharaoh will let you go to serve your G-d, but will send you from here, never to return."

It is thus clear, that Moshe and the Jews used no deception in obtaining their freedom from Pharaoh. To the contrary, the story demonstrates the infinite mercy which Hashem displayed to Pharaoh and Egypt and the extraordinary extent He went to, in order to bring them back to teshuva. This story is a tragedy of missed opportunities.

Let us learn the lessons of this narrative, and apply them to our own lives. Let us put aside ego and stubbornness, and acknowledge the Will of Hashem our G-d, with a full and joyous heart.

Shabbat Shalom VeChag Kasher VeSameiach.

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—Rabbi Reuven Mann

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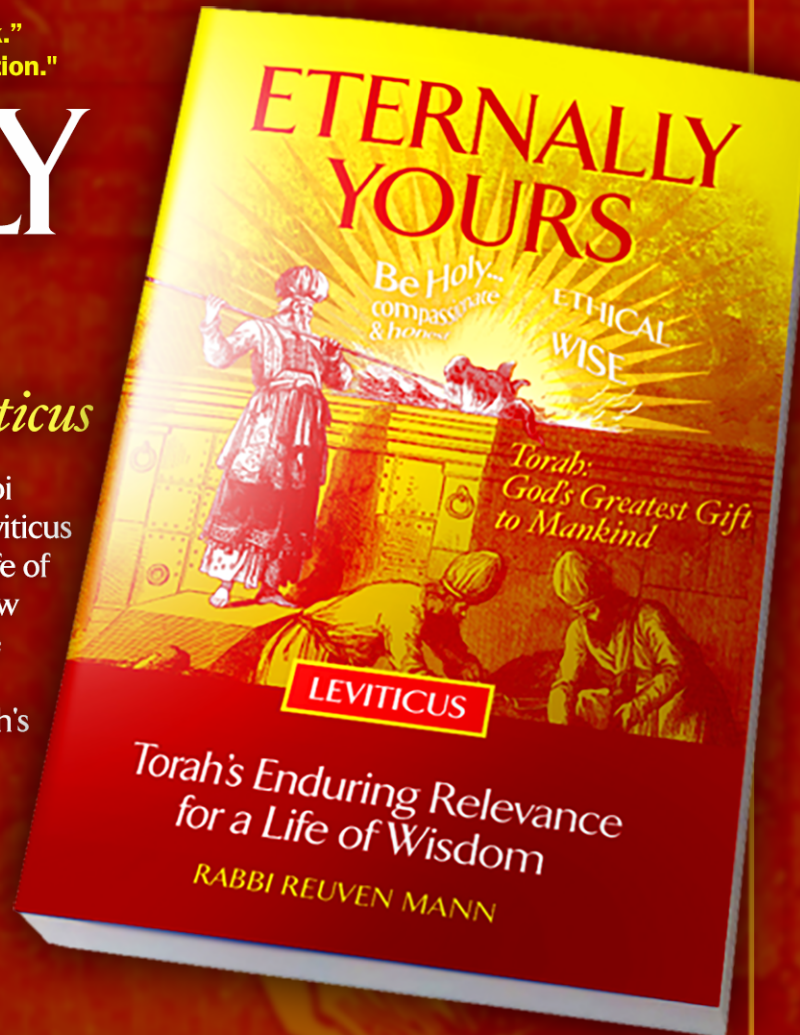
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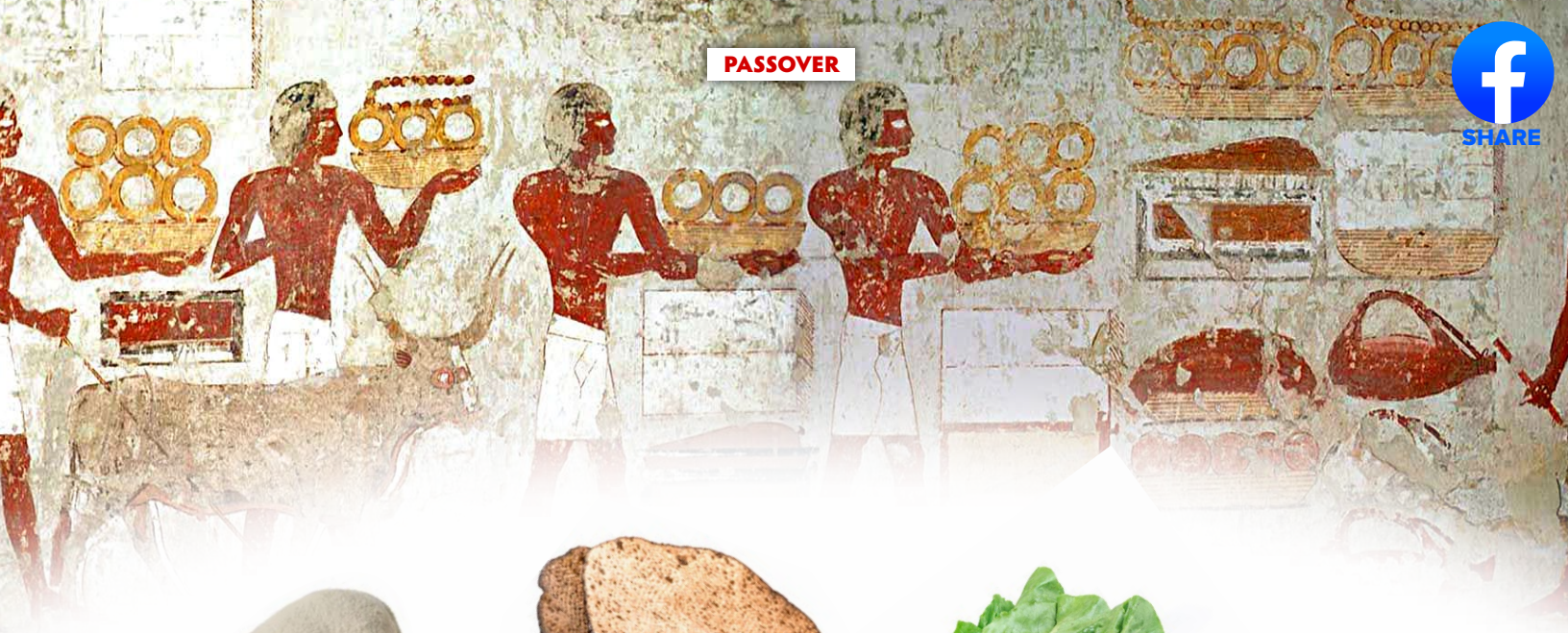
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# Passover's Primary Messages

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

**E**gypt was a hotbed of idolatry and mysticism. The Jews refrained from adapting to this culture while Jacob's 12 sons were yet alive. But once they passed on, the Jews lost these role models and replaced them with the Egyptians, from whom they sought approval through following their idolatry. This sin earned them 210 years of bondage. Once God decided their oppression must end, He sent Moses to Pharaoh, afflicting him and Egypt with 10 plagues. The intent was to reveal the fallacy of any power other than God. None of Egypt's lifeless idols had any affect on the miraculous plagues. And we know this because Pharaoh always sought Moses to end every plague, never seeking safety from anyone else or any deity.

Despite the severity of the plagues, God gave

Pharaoh the resilience to remain with his decision of not freeing the Jews in order that God could "multiply His wonders in the land of Egypt." God also wished to show that a person who goes too far in his sin can lose his ability to repent (Maimonides).

The 10 plagues clearly demonstrated God's complete control over all regions of existence, from Earth to the waters, over animal life and meteorological phenomenon, and even over heavenly spheres. God showed exclusive dominion not only over creations, but He demonstrated His justice through afflicting the Egyptian's and not the Jews, displaying His system of reward and punishment. Through Moses' predictions of the precise moments of the plagues' onslaught and termination, the principle of prophecy was also taught to Egypt.

Prophecy teaches that God relates to man, and not just any man, but to an intellect and not to a mystic. Pharaoh and Egypt realized the inanimate nature of the gods and idols. Not one of their deities performed anything, while Moses' God controlled everything.

To entitle their exodus, God commanded Moses to command the Jews in sacrificing the Paschal lamb and in circumcision. Rabbi Israel Chait explained, to earn freedom, the Jews must demonstrate both intellectual and moral perfection. Otherwise they would be unfit to receive Torah. Intellectual perfection required the rejection of idolatry through killing Egypt's calf god, and moral perfection required circumcision which decreases one's instinctual gratification, thereby freeing energies for the pursuit of wisdom. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Haggadah says that if a person does not expound on three matters on Passover eve, he has not filled his obligation. They are the Paschal lamb, matza and bitter herbs, maror...

### Paschal Lamb

By sacrificing the Paschal lamb by God's word, the Jews rejected idolatry and affirmed monotheism. God commanded them to paint the lamb's blood on the insides of their door posts so the Jews would ponder this reality, that the Egyptian god is simply a biological organism that dies when its blood is spilled. The door post is simply the most frequented part of the house, explaining God's selection of this location for the blood. Eating the lamb further reinforced the lamb's subservience to human needs and not man's subservience to animal.

### Matzah

The lamb was to be eaten together with matzah. Why was Matzah so significant? When the Jews left Egypt they unanimously and without orchestration, took the dough, "rolled up in their garments and carried on their shoulders." For what vital reason does God spare precious space in Torah to recount these details?

Here, God highlighted the Jews' sinful attachment to bread. As the free Jews left Egypt they wished to portray free Egyptians who enjoyed bread, while feeding the Jews hard dry matzah for 210 years. Now free, the Jews desired to enjoy the image of a free person, namely the Egyptian, who ate soft bread. This explains why God shares with us that they rolled up the dough in their clothing and carried it on the shoulders. Clothing is man's expression of dignity, and this dough they planned to bake into bread would give them a dangerous self image. Carrying it on their shoulders was a means of displaying it to others, "Look, I am free!" But freedom as an ends was not God's objective. The Jews were not released from Egypt to enjoy a release of servitude, but to accept servitude to God through His Torah. Therefore God did not allow the dough to rise, and when the Jews baked it, it only turned into matzah. Here we find the significance of matzah: God's restriction of the Jew to express freedom for freedom sake. Unbridled freedom is not God's plan. Matzah embodies the message that the Exodus

was not for the Jew to act like an unbridled Egyptian. But the Exodus released the Jews from man's dominion in order to subjugate them to God's dominion. This is why we count the days from Passover to Shavuot: a clear connection between the Exodus and arriving at Mount Sinai to receive Torah.

### Maror

We are commanded in eating bitter herbs at the Passover Seder. This intends to create a stark contrast between our transition from bitter bondage to freedom. To engender a deeper appreciation for God's kindness, we recall our bitter lives as we enjoy our freedom. We must view ourselves as if we were freed, and that God's Egyptian redemption directly impacts our lives. When retelling the story of the Exodus we follow this pattern, commencing with our history of degradation and concluding with our freedom and praise to God. For when we align our degraded past with God's kindness and our freedom, a greater appreciation for God is sensed and expressed.

### Leaning and Wine

Freedom is expressed through drinking wine and leaning. We also do not pour our own cups as a further demonstration of our free state, when others serve us.

### Elaboration is Praiseworthy

Elaborating on the Exodus amplifies the elaborate acts and miracles God employed to secure our freedom. Dayanu and Hagadda's various interpretations of just how many miracles were performed in the Egypt and during the splitting of the Reed Sea also echo the multitude of kindnesses God showed us. Therefore we mirror God's multitude of kindnesses with our lengthy recount of the Exodus...even to sunrise.

It is crucial that we teach each child according to their level, embodied in the four sons to whom we have four responses. This night of transmission insures that future generations remain loyal to Torah. Additionally, many other mitzvahs function as a remembrance of the Egyptian Exodus, for this event engenders an appreciation for God and a greater loyalty to Torah, thereby ensuring the most Jews will enjoy the benefit of a Torah life. ■



PASSOVER













DANI ROTH &  
R. MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**M**y close friend Dani Roth asked me this excellent question, which I never heard asked even by adults:

“Why did Moses need to wave a staff when announcing the plagues? Couldn’t he just announce the plagues, since it was really God who altered nature to make the plagues?”

Once I heard Dani ask this, I grasped this was a great question. I immediately started thinking and researching the Torah for clues. Dani is correct: God has no needs, so whether Moses waved a staff, or simply announced to Pharaoh the next plague, or even if Moses did nothing, God can cause the plague to start independent of Moses’ actions. Furthermore, what difference is it to Pharaoh and Egypt if they see Moses waving a staff or not? The plague alone is the impressive event!

To answer Dani’s question and learn the significance of Moses’ staff, we must study the first instance of the staff found in Exodus 4:2 during Moses’ first prophecy at the burning bush on Mount Sinai. During this prophecy (which commenced in chap. 3), God outlines His plans to send Moses to address Pharaoh to answer the cries of Abraham’s descendants and deliver them to freedom, also giving them the land of Israel.

Moses was the most humble man on Earth<sup>[1]</sup>, and therefore when God summoned him to lead the Exodus, he replied to God, “Who am I that I should address Pharaoh and take out the Jews?” God then assures Moses He will be with him. Moses then asks what name of God he should use, and God says, “I am, that I am.” God then instructs Moses to gather the Jewish elders and inform them of His plan, and God assures Moses “they will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18). God concludes that He knows Egypt’s king will not initially release the Jews, and that He will bring the plagues. Ultimately the Egyptian king will release the Jewish nation, and the Jewish women will ask the Egyptian women for gold, silver and clothes and they will despoil Egypt. This apparently ends God’s address to Moses.

However, we notice that within God’s initial presentation to Moses about how these events will take place, God does not command Moses to use his staff. This is significant.

In the next verse Moses says, “...they [the Jews] will not believe me and they won’t listen to my voice for they will say ‘God did not appear to you’” (Exod. 4:1). Moses says this, despite God’s earlier assurance that the Jews would in fact believe Moses (Exod. 3:18). Some Rabbis<sup>[2]</sup> critique Moses for this disbelief, while Maimon-

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

## MOSES’ STAFF

# What was its Purpose?



ides teaches[3] Moses was merely asking “how” God intended His plan will cause the Jews to accept Moses’ words, as God stated in verse 3:18. (I will soon propose a third possibility.) Nonetheless, God responds, “What is in your hand?” Moses replied, “A staff.” God told Moses to cast it downward. Moses did so, and it became a snake. Moses then fled from the snake. God then told Moses to grab its tail and it returned to a staff. God explained this miracle was “in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you” (ibid 4:5). In 4:17 God commands Moses to use this staff to perform the miracles and the plagues[4]. But we must ask, as God already told Moses “they will listen to your voice” (3:18) even without the staff, how can God now say that due to the staff miracle, “the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you?” The Jews’ belief is independent of the staff’s miracle!

God then performed another miracle of Moses’ hand becoming leprous. God continued:

“And if they do not believe you, and they don’t listen to the voice of the first sign, they will listen to the voice of the second sign. And if they don’t believe also to these two signs, and they don’t listen to your voice, then you shall take of the Nile’s water and pour it on dry ground and that water you take from the Nile will become blood on dry land” (Exod. 4:8,9). What is this “voice” referred to here? Furthermore, Moses too says “they will not believe me, and they won’t listen to my voice.” Why is “voice” in addition to Moses himself?

Now, while it is true, as Dani’s father said, God could have ultimately planned Moses to use the staff, regardless of Moses’ apparent need for it, it is equally tenable that God’s instruction to Moses to use the staff was only a concession to Moses and not part of God’s original plan. A few other considerations lead me to this assumption. First of all, after Moses pleads with God to find another emissary and God concedes to allow Aaron to speak instead of Moses, God includes in that concession the statement, “And this staff take in your hand with which you will perform the miracles” (Exod. 4:17). Why is the command to take the staff joined to Aaron’s appointment? Secondly, in verse 4:20 the staff is mentioned again, but now Moses calls it the “Staff of God.”

### The Purpose of the Staff

Moses was most humble; he did not wish leadership. Perhaps Moses’ very humility made him perfect for this role in God’s plan. As God wished to display His greatness to the Egyptians, a humble man would ensure that the focus remains on God, and not allow leadership to corrupt him.

I wish to suggest the purpose of the staff is connected to Moses’ humility. Perhaps God gave Moses this staff to equip Moses with complete confidence. Holding the staff throughout the signs and plagues—the staff that turned into a snake and back again—Moses was thereby emboldened to carry out God’s mission confidently. He would be able to speak with a “voice” of confidence.

Perhaps also, God grouped together His concession of sending Aaron with His command to take the staff (ibid 4:17) to say in other words, that both were—for Moses—not Pharaoh or others. And Moses’ reference to the staff in 4:20 as “God’s staff” is another way of saying that Moses viewed the staff as a surety from God: Moses’ sentiment of satisfaction that he will succeed.

This explanation of the staff also explains why the staff was a “response,” and not in God’s original plan: the staff was for Moses, not the Jews, as God already said the Jews will believe Moses “prior” to the staff’s miracle. When God says the staff will be used “in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you” (ibid 4:5), God does not mean the staff is to convince the Jews, for God said “they will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18) without the staff. Thus, the staff was to provide Moses with the necessary assurance, in order that “he” feels confident that the Jews will listen. The staff was to embolden Moses, and was unnecessary for the Jews or Pharaoh.

So Dani, thank you once again for asking me a great Torah question that has lead me to learn new Torah ideas. Together, we are sharing Torah with many other people who will read and learn from this article. ■

[1] Numbers 12:3

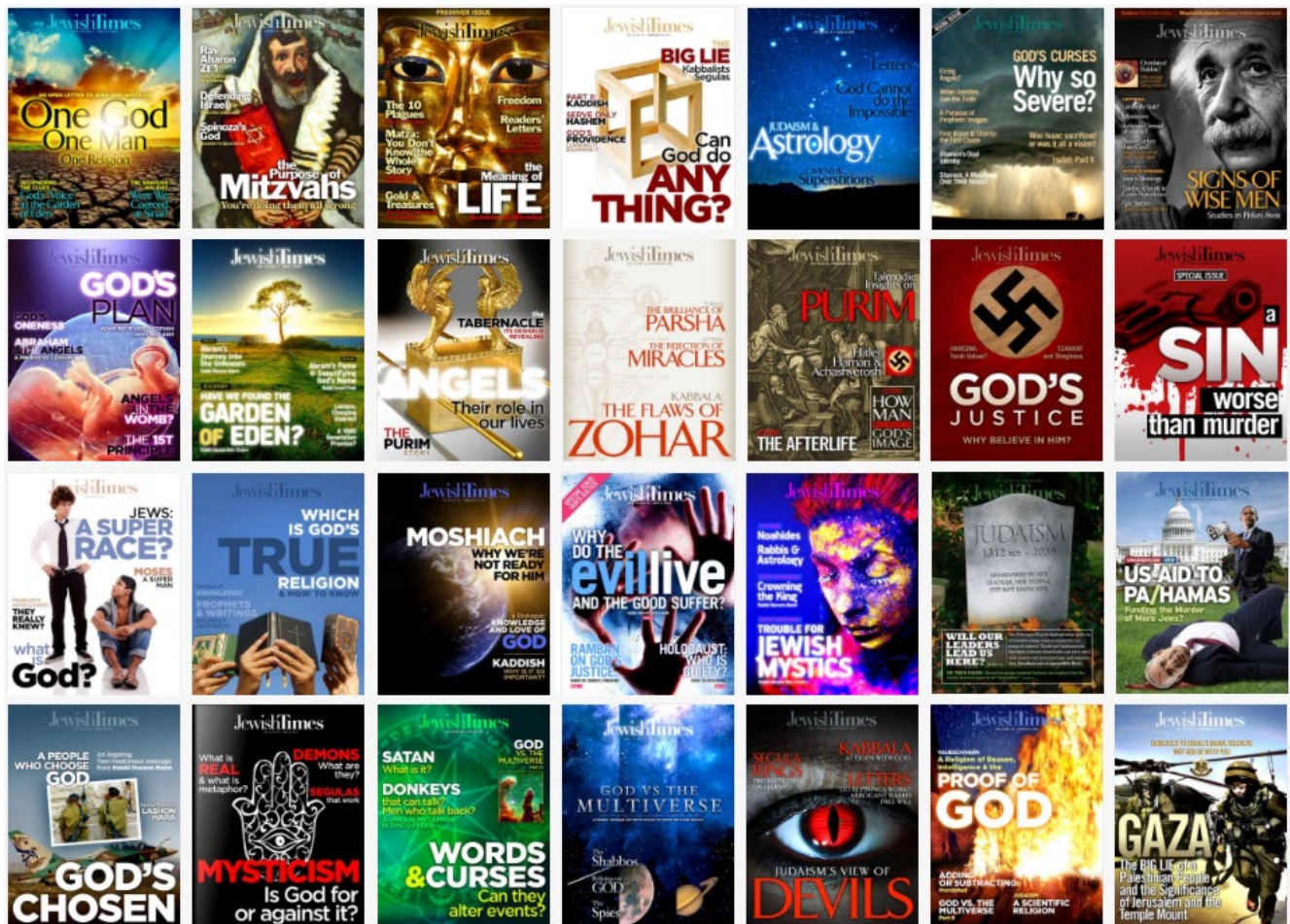
[2] Rashi, Ramban

[3] Guide for the Perplexed, book I, chap. lxxiii

[4] Ibn Ezra, Exod. 4:17

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