

**Questions on Sinai**

**At Sinai, why was the Torah separate from the Tablets?  
Why did God create only the Tablets, and Moshe, the Torah?**

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## Parashas Re-eh

**RABBI BERNARD FOX**

“Since the place that Hashem, your G-d, has chosen to dedicate to His name is far from you, you may slaughter your large and small cattle that Hashem has give to you, in the manner that is commanded. And you may eat in your gates to the extent you desire.” (Devarim 12:21)

During the sojourn in the  
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# The Tablets, the Torah & Mount Sinai

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

*The Tablets of the Covenant were sapphire measuring 6 x 6 x 3 handbreaths*



I dedicate this article in memory of my friend Mindy who passed away this week. Mindy's husband recalled her unique character. She didn't socialize superficially. I saw this in Mindy, it was her praiseworthy mark of a "tznuah", a modest person. Modesty was Moses' mark of perfection too, "anav mikol adam", "more modest than any other person". Moses' modesty was due to his level of appreciation of God's kingship. With the greatness of one's knowledge, comes his or her humility. Mindy genuinely appreciated people, but wisdom was her a security in life. One who is secure, does not seek the approval of others. Mindy needed no approval from man, God alone sufficed. Her excitement in hearing an idea, her devotion to her husband's learning, and her unique, delicate and

tender nature displayed her inner perfection. One of such character leaves her friends and family with an indelible affection for her. Mindy will always imbue those who knew her with an appreciation for what we can achieve - what we must achieve. The Talmud says that better is the ministering to a teacher, than learning from him. This means that a close, personal relationship impacts our personalities, greater than their teachings. Mindy made this impact. May God comfort her family along with all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.  
*Moshe Ben-Chaim*

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# The Tablets, the Torah & Mount Sinai

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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Certain facts or events, basic to our beliefs, are sometimes so quickly embraced, that our questions are overlooked, or not even detected. Children often ask us about our accepted foundations. Their questions are undiluted by social pressures, so they see the large holes in our beliefs, and not being repressed, they verbalize them. We hear their questions - from the mouths of babes - and wonder why we never realized such problems. Of course, our ignorance is the source of these problems. But if we didn't ponder the questions that children ask - and certainly if we have no answers - we are missing some basic principles of Judaism.

Such is the case with Sinai. Recently, I was reviewing Deuteronomy 10:1, where God instructed Moses to quarry a new set of stones for God's engraving of the second set of Ten Commandments. (God wrote the Ten Commandments on both sets, but God quarried only set #1, Moses was commanded to quarry set #2.) The first set of tablets, you recall, Moses broke in the sight of the people. A Rabbi explained this was done so the people would not worship the stone tablets as they did the Golden Calf. A new set of tablets was then required. Subsequently, I pondered, "Why do we needed the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets at all? If we need commands, we can receive them orally from God, or from Moses, so why are tablets needed? Also, why was there miraculous writing on the tablets? If Moses felt the people might err by deifying the first set,

why was a second set created?" I also wondered why a box was required for the second set, but not for the first?

I then started thinking more into the purpose of the tablets, "Was this the only thing Moses descended with from Sinai? Was there a Torah scroll? What about the Oral Law? What did Moses receive, and when?" I also questioned what exactly comprised the content of the Written Torah and the Oral Law. Events subsequent to Sinai, such as the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy had not yet occurred, so it did not make sense to me that these were given at Sinai. I looked for references in the Torah and Talmud. What did Moses receive at Sinai?

I wish at this point to make it clear, that I am not questioning the veracity of our Written Torah and our Oral Law as we have it today. Our Five Books of Moses, Prophets, Writings, Mishna, Medrash, and Talmud are all authentic, and comprise authentic, Written and Oral Law. What I am questioning, is how and what was received, by whom, and when. I am doing so, as this is part of God's design of our receipt of Torah. If He gave it over in a specific fashion, then there is much knowledge to be derived from such a transmission. Certainly, the Ten Commandments must be unique in some way, as God created separate stones revealing only these ten. What is their significance?

The answers begin to reveal themselves by studying these areas in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Exodus 19, and 24 recount the arrival of the Jews at Sinai and the events which

transpired:

Exodus, 24:1-4, "*1. And to Moses (God) said, ascend to God, you, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy from the elders of Israel, and prostrate from afar. 2. And Moses alone, draw near to God, but the others, do not approach, and the people, do not ascend with him. 3. And Moses came and told over to the people all the words of God, and all the statutes, and the entire people answered as one, and they said, 'all the matters that God has said we will do.' 4. And Moses wrote all the the words of God...*"

Verse 24:12 continues: "*And God said to Moses, 'ascend to Me to the mountain, and remain there, and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the Torah and the Mitzvah (commands) that I have written, that you should instruct them.'*"

"And Moses wrote all the the words of God..." teaches that prior to the giving of the tablets of stone, Moses ascended Mount Sinai, learned ideas from God, descended, taught the people what he learned, and wrote "the words of God." (This was the order of events prior to Moses' second ascension to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.) What were these "words"? Ibn Ezra says this comprised the section of our Torah from Exod. 20:19 - 23:33. This is the end of Parshas Yisro through most of Parshas Mishpatim. This was told to the Jews before the event of Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The Jews accepted these laws, and Moses wrote them down. This is referred to as the "Book of the Treaty." Moses entered them

into a treaty with God, that they accept God based on the section mentioned. Only afterwards was that famous, historical giving of the Ten Commandments from the fiery Mount Sinai. The Jews were offered to hear the Torah's commands.

Earlier in Exodus, 19:8, we learn of this same account, but with some more information. When Moses told the Jews the commandments verbally, prior to the reception of the tablets, the Jews said as one, "all that God said, we will do, and Moses returned the word of the people to God." Moses returned to God and told Him the Jews' favorable response. Now, Moses knew that God is aware of all man's thoughts, deeds and speech. What need was there for Moses to "return the word"? Then God responds, "Behold, I come to you in thick cloud so that the people shall hear when I speak with you, and also in you will they believe forever..." What was Moses intent on reporting the Jews' acceptance of these commands, and what was God's response? Was Moses' intent to say, "there is no need for the event of Sinai, as the people already believe in You?" I am not certain. The Rabbis offer a few explanations why Revelation at Sinai was necessary. Ibn Ezra felt there were some members of the nation who subscribed to Egypt's beliefs (inherited from the Hodus) that God does not speak with man. God therefore wished to uproot this fallacy through Revelation. Ibn Ezra then, is of the opinion that Revelation was not performed for the Jews' acceptance of God, which they already had

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# The Tablets, the Torah & Mount Sinai

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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accepted, "and the entire people answered as one, and they said, 'all the matters that God has said we will do.'"

According to Ibn Ezra, God teaches the purpose of the miracles at Sinai: "Yes, the people believe in Me, but there is yet something missing: a proof for ALL generations", as God said, "...and also in you will they believe forever." It ends up that the Sinai event of God giving the Ten Commands from a fiery mountain had one purpose; to stand as a proof for all generations. This is something many of us are already familiar with: Such a massively attended event at which an Intelligence related knowledge to man, from amidst flames, was and is undeniable proof of the existence of a Metaphysical Being in complete control of all creation. Sinai serves as our eternal proof of God's existence. We now learn from a closer look, that the Jews had already accepted God's commands prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. That event was to serve as a proof of God's existence, but the Jews' agreement to those ideas was earlier.

## What exactly did God give to Moses at Sinai?

The Torah tells us God communicated many commands without writing, and He also gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Ibn Ezra says the "Torah and the Mitzvah" referred to in Exod. 24:12 is as follows: "The 'Torah' is the first and fifth commands (of the Ten) and the 'Mitzvah' refers to the other eight." This implies that all which God gave

physically, was the Ten Commandments on stone. Further proof is found openly, Deuteronomy 9:10, "And it was at the end of forty days and forty nights, God gave me the two tablets of stone, tablets of the treaty." We find no mention of any other object, such as a Torah scroll, given to Moses. We therefore learn that Moses wrote the Torah, and God wrote the Ten Commandments. (Saadia Gaon views the Ten Commandments as the head categories for the remaining 603 commands.)

The Torah was written by Moses, not God, Who wrote the Ten Commandments. What was God's plan, that there should be a Divinely engraved "Ten Commandments" in stone, and that Moses would record the Torah? And we see the necessity for the Ten Commandments, as God instructed Moses to quarry new tablets subsequent to his destruction of the first set. These stones were necessary, even though they are recorded in Moses' Torah! What is so important about these stone tablets? Not only that, but additionally, the Ten Commandments were uttered by God. Why? If He gave them to us in an engraved form, we have them! Why is God's created "speech" required? Was it to awe the masses, as we see they asked Moses to intercede, as they feared for their lives at the sound of this created voice?

According to Maimonides, at Sinai, the Jews did not hear intelligible words. All they heard was an awesome sound. Maimonides explains the use of the second person

singular throughout the ten Commandments - God addressed Moses alone. Why would God wish that Moses' alone find the sound intelligible, but not the people? Again, Maimonides is of the opinion that the people didn't hear intelligible words during God's "oral" transmission of the Ten Commandments. This requires an explanation, as this too is by God's will. We now come to the core issue of this article...

## Why Moses Perceived the Miracle of Sinai Differently than the People

We must take note of Maimonides' distinction between the perceptions of Moses and the Jews at Sinai. It appears to me, God desired we understand that reaching Him is only through knowledge. God teaches this by communicating with the Jews at Sinai, but as Maimonides teaches, Moses' alone understood this prophecy on his level, Aaron on a lower level, Nadav and Avihu on a lower level, and the seventy elders still lower. The people did not understand the sound. This teaches that knowledge of God depends on one's own level. It is not something equally available to all members of mankind. God desires we excel at our learning, sharpening our minds, thinking into matters, and using reason to uncover the infinite world of ideas created by God. The fact that knowledge is an endless sea, is the driving force behind a Torah student's conviction that his or her studies will eventuate in deep, profound, and "continued" insights. This excites the Torah scholar, which each one of us

has the ability to be. It's not the amount of study, but the quality of it. "Echad hamarbeh, v'echad ha'mimat, uvilvad sheh-yikavane libo laShamayim."

Sinai was orchestrated in a precise fashion. Maimonides uncovers the concept which Sinai taught: In proportion to our knowledge is our ability to see new truths. Moses was on the highest level of knowledge, and therefore understood this prophecy at Sinai to the highest level of human clarity. He then taught this knowledge to the people, but they could not perceive it directly when it was revealed. God desired the people to require Moses' repetition. Why? This established the system of Torah as a constant reiteration of the event at Sinai! A clever method. Sinai taught us that perception of God's knowledge is proportional to our intelligence. Thus, Moses alone perceived the meaning of the sounds. You remember that earlier in this article we learned that the people were taught certain Torah commands prior to the event at Sinai. Why was this done? Perhaps it served as a basis for the following Sinai event which God knew they would not comprehend. God wished that when Moses explained to them what he heard, that the Jews would see that it was perfectly in line with what Moses taught many days earlier. There would be no chance that the people would assume Moses was fabricating something God did not speak.

God does not wish this lesson of Sinai to vanish. This is where Moses' writing of the Torah comes in. God

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# The Tablets, the Torah & Mount Sinai

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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could have equally given Moses a Torah scroll along with the tablets, but He didn't. Why? I believe Moses' authority - as displayed in his writing of the Torah - reiterates the Sinaic system that knowledge can only be found when sought from the wise. It is not open to everyone as the Conservatives and Reformed Jews haughtily claim. The system of authority was established at Sinai, and reiterated through Moses' writing of the Torah. Subsequent to Moses, this concept continues, as it forms part of Torah commands, "In accordance with the Torah that they teach you..." (Deut. 17:11) God commands us to adhere to the Rabbis. God wishes us to realize that knowledge can only be reached with our increased study, and our continually, refined intelligence and reason. Words alone - even in Torah - cannot contain God's wisdom. The words point to greater ideas, they are doors to larger vaults, and they, to even larger ones. Perhaps this is the idea that the Jews did not hear words. As the verse says, "a sound of words did you hear". Maimonides deduces that no words were heard, otherwise, the verse would read "words did you hear", not "a sound of words". The Jews heard sounds with no words.

## A Purpose of the Tablets

We now understand why Moses taught the Jews commands before Sinai's miracles. We understand why Moses wrote the Torah - not God. We understand why God created the miraculous event at Sinai, as well as the system of transmission of knowledge. But we are left with one

question. Why did God create the Ten Commandments of stone? Why was the second set alone, housed in a box?

Let us think; they were made of stone, both sets - the broken and the second set - were housed in the ark, there was miraculous writing on these tablets (Rabbeinu Yona: Ethics, 5:6), they contained the ten head categories for all the remaining 603 commands (Saadia Gaon), and they were to remain with the people always.

Why did the tablets have only ten of the 613 commands? We see elsewhere (Deut. 27:3) that the entire Torah was written three times on three sets of 12 stones, according to Ramban. Even Ibn Ezra states that all the commands were written on these stones. So why didn't the tablets given to Moses at Sinai contain all the commands?

Perhaps the answer is consistent with the purpose of Sinai: That is, that the system of knowledge of God is one of 'derivation' - all knowledge cannot be contained in writing. God gave us intelligence for the sole purpose of using it. With the tablets of only ten commands, I believe God created a permanent lesson: "All is not here", you must study continually to arrive at new ideas in My infinite sea of knowledge. So the head categories are engraved on these two stones. This teaches that very same lesson conveyed through Moses' exclusive understanding of God's "verbal" recital of these very Ten Commands on Sinai: Knowledge is arrived at only through thinking. Knowledge is not the written word, so few words are engraved on the

tablets. But since we require a starting point, God inscribed the head categories which would lead the thinker to all other commands, which may be derived from these ten. God taught us that our knowledge of Him is proportional to our intelligence. This is why Moses alone perceived the "orally" transmitted Ten Commandments. Others below him in intelligence, i.e., Aaron, his sons, and the elders, received far less.

This theory is consistent with Saadia Gaon's position that the Ten Commandments are the head categories of all remaining 603 commands. Saadia Gaon too, was teaching that God gave us the necessary "Ten Keys" which unlock greater knowledge. Saadia Gaon saw knowledge not as a reading of facts, but as it truly is: a system where our thought alone can discover new ideas, and that new knowledge, opens new doors, ad infinitum. All truth is complimentary, so the more we grasp, the more we CAN grasp.

The tablets mirror the event of God's revelation, and the nature by which man may arrive at new ideas. Just as Moses alone understood the sounds at Sinai, and all others could not readily comprehend the sounds, so too the tablets. All is not revealed, but can be uncovered through earnest investigation. Moses possessed the greatest intellect, so he was able to comprehend Sinai more than any other person. Just as Sinai taught us that refined intelligence open doors to those possessing it, via Moses' exclusive comprehension, the tablets too were a necessary lesson for future generations. They were commanded

to be made of stone as stone endures throughout all generations. (Placing the second set of tablets in a box may have been to indicate that the Jews were now further removed from knowledge, in contrast to the first set. They removed themselves via the Golden Calf event.)

Why was a "miraculous" writing essential to these tablets? Perhaps this "Divine" element continually reminds us that the Source of all knowledge is God. Only One Who created the world could create miracles within a substance, such as these miraculous letters. We recognize thereby, that Torah is knowledge of God, and given by God. These tablets are a testament to the Divine Source of Torah, and all knowledge.

We learn a lesson vital to our purpose here on Earth to learn: Learning is not absorbing facts. Learning is the act of thinking, deriving, and reasoning. "Knowledge" is not all written down, very little is. Thus, the Oral Law. Our Torah is merely the starting point. God's knowledge may only be reached through intense thought. We must strive to remove ourselves from mundane activities, distractions, and from seeking satisfaction of our emotions. We must make a serious effort to secure time, and isolate ourselves with a friend and alone, and delve into Torah study. Jacob was a "yoshave ohallim", "a tent dweller". He spent years in thought. Only through this approach will we merit greater knowledge, and see the depths of wisdom, with much enjoyment. ■

# Parashas Re-eh

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wilderness, the slaughter of animals was strictly controlled. Animals could not be slaughtered freely and eaten. Instead, animals were only slaughtered as sacrifices. A person wishing to slaughter an animal for personal consumption offered it as a Shelamim sacrifice. A portion of the animal was offered on the altar. A portion was distributed to the Kohen. The remainder was consumed by the individual offering the animal.

This restriction was not a hardship in the wilderness. The entire nation camped around the Tabernacle – the Mishcan. It was not a burden to bring an animal to the Mishcan for sacrifice. However, Moshe is preparing the nation for its entry into the land of Israel. In the land of Israel, this restriction would be onerous. It is not realistic to require that the slaughter of every animal be performed at the Mishcan or Holy Temple. The Torah acknowledges this problem. In response to this issue, Moshe announces the creation of a new institution – Shechitah Chulin.

What is Shechitah Chulin? In the wilderness as slaughter – shechitah – was performed as part of the process of sacrifice. Shechitah was not performed merely to prepare meat for consumption. Shechitah Chulin is the slaughter of meat for personal consumption. Shechitah Chulin is non-sacrificial slaughter.

Not all meat is prepared for consumption through shechitah. Cattle, venison and fowl require shechitah. However, for fish there is no equivalent of shechitah. We are permitted to eat certain locusts. These creatures do not require shechitah in order to be consumed. This raises an interesting question. Why is shechitah limited to specific species? Why is there no form of shechitah for fish and locusts?

The Talmud discusses this issue. The Sages explain that the exclusion of fish from shechitah is based on a passage in the Torah. Bnai Yisrael complain to Moshe. They are dissatisfied with their diet in the wilderness. They subsist on manna. The availability of meat is limited. Hashem responds that He will provide the nation with meat. Moshe is astonished. He says, “Even if the cattle and sheep are slaughtered, will it suffice them? If all the fish of the sea are gathered will it be enough for them?”[1] The Talmud explains that a careful analysis of this pasuk reveals that shechitah does not apply to fish. Moshe uses the term shechitah – slaughter – in reference to sheep and cattle. However, in

discussing fish Moshe does not refer to shechitah. Instead, he adjusts his phraseology. He describes the fish as “gathered”. This indicated that fish merely need to be gathered. Shechitah is not required.[2]

The Talmud does not discuss the basis for excluding locusts from shechitah. Maimonides provides a basis for this law. First, Maimonides explains the exclusion of fish from shechitah. He quotes the Talmud. Fish are excluded because they are “gathered” and not “slaughtered”. Then, Maimonides extends the Talmud’s reasoning. He explains that the term “gather” is also used in reference to locusts. This reference is not found in the Torah. It is pasuk in the Sefer Yishayahu. The Navi uses the phrase, “a gathering of locust”. Maimonides concludes that this association of locusts with the term “gather” is the basis for their exclusion from Shechitah.[3]

Rabbaynu David ibn Zimra – RaDvaZ – discusses Maimonides’ position in his responsa. RaDvaZ explains that Maimonides’ position is difficult to understand. Maimonides extends the reasoning of the Talmud to locusts. He maintains that because the term “gather” is used in reference to locusts, they are excluded from Shechitah. This is a difficult line of reasoning. The term “gathered” used in reference to fish does imply that shechitah is not needed. The pasuk juxtaposes fish and cattle. The pasuk states that cattle must be slaughtered. Fish must merely be gathered. However, no such distinction is made in the case of locusts. The Navi is not distinguishing between locusts and other creatures. The passage is not dealing with shechitah. Therefore, the use of the term “gather” in reference to locusts does not seem to imply that they are exempt from shechitah.[4]

How can we explain Maimonides’ position? It seems that, according to Maimonides, the Talmud is not merely indicating the source for excluding fish from shechitah. The Talmud is providing an insight into the basis for this exclusion. The Talmud is explaining that there is a basic difference between fish and the animals that require shechitah. Animals requiring shechitah are slaughtered individually. They are not gathered or consumed in bulk. In contrast, fish are generally gathered in nets and consumed in quantity. It is true that this is not the case for every species of fish. Some fish are individually caught and consumed. However, the overall characteristic of this genus is that it is gathered and consumed in quantity. This distinction is the basis for the exclusion of fish from shechitah. Animals that are – in general – individually slaughtered require shechitah. This criterion dictates that cattle and fowl require shechitah. Fish do not meet this criterion. Therefore, they do not require any form of shechitah.

We can now understand Maimonides’ extension

of the Talmud’s reasoning to locusts. These creatures are also not slaughtered or consumed individually. They are gathered and consumed in quantity. This is demonstrated by the pasuk in the Navi. Locusts do not meet the criterion for shechitah. Therefore, they do not require any form of shechitah.

RaDvaZ offers an alternative explanation for the status of locusts. An introduction is needed to understand his rationale. The Torah permits the consumption of specific species. Other species are prohibited. The status of each species is determined by its characteristics. The Torah – in Parshat Shemini – discusses the various species that are permitted and prohibited. The discussion concludes with this pasuk. “This is the law concerning mammals, birds, aquatic creatures and lower forms of terrestrial animals.”[5] The Torah outlines four categories of creatures – mammals, birds, aquatic creatures and lower forms of animals. Locusts are members of this last category. RaDvaZ explains that locusts are mentioned after fish. Fish do not require shechitah. Therefore, locusts are also exempt from this requirement.[6]

RaDvaZ’s reasoning is difficult to understand. This passage is not dealing with shechitah! Why should the order of this passage influence the requirement of shechitah?

It appears that, according to RaDvaZ, the passage is delineating a hierarchy of creatures. In this hierarchy, mammals are at the highest position. They are followed by birds, fish and then the lower creatures. RaDvaZ maintains that this hierarchy is fundamental to understanding the requirement of shechitah. Only the higher creatures require this special treatment of shechitah. Creatures that are lower in the hierarchy do not receive this distinctive handling. Fish are too low in the hierarchy to require shechitah. Locusts are even lower in the hierarchy. Therefore, they too are exempt from the requirement of shechitah.

**“This is what you must do if your blood brother, your son, your daughter, your wife, or your closest friend secretly tries to convince you, and says, “Let us go worship a new god, previously unknown to you or to your fathers.” (Devarim 13:7)**

This passage introduces the discussion of the Maysit – the missionary. This is an individual who attempts to convince others to worship idols of some other deity. The Torah explains that this person attempts to undermine the spiritual perfection of the Jewish nation. No mercy is shown the Maysit. This person is executed.

Throughout our history, we have been confronted with individuals, institutions and governments that have attempted to convince us to abandon our Torah. We have been subjected to

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forced conversions, expulsions and other forms of religious coercion. At other times, force was replaced by polemics and efforts to proselytize. Bnai Yisrael have consistently resisted all of these various efforts. These many attempts to corrupt the Jewish people have generated a vast quantity of fascinating accounts and narratives. Many of these accounts retain their relevancy and timeliness. One of these involves Rav Chaim Soloveitchik Zt"l.

Rav Chaim was traveling on a train. A missionary entered his coach and sat next to two Jews. The missionary engaged these Jews in a conversation regarding religion. In the course of this conversation, the missionary acknowledged that the Sages of the Talmud rejected Jesus' Messianic claims. However, the missionary insisted that this rejection is not credible. He claimed that one of the greatest Sages of the Talmud – Rebbe Akiva – believed that Bar Kochva was the Messiah. Rebbe Akiva was wrong. The missionary argued that this error proved that the Sages of the Talmud are fallible in their analysis of Messianic claims. Therefore, their rejection of Jesus' claims is of little consequence.

At this point, Rav Chaim interrupted the conversation with an amazing claim. He exclaimed that Rebbe Akiva was not wrong. Bar Kochva was the Messiah! The missionary was astounded by this claim. He could not believe that Rav Chaim could make such a ridiculous assertion. The missionary eagerly explained that Bar Kochva could not have been the Messiah. Bar Kochva had died without saving the Jewish people!

Rav Chaim had been waiting for this response. He countered immediately. If Bar Kochva's death proves that he was not the Messiah, then death disqualifies any claimant from consideration as the Messiah! [7] □

[1] Sefer BeMidbar 11:22.

[2] Mesechet Chulin 27b.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shechitah 1:3.

[4] Rabbaynu David ibn Zimra (Radvaz) Responsa, volume 1, number 4.

[5] Sefer VaYikra 11:46.

[6] Rabbaynu David ibn Zimra (Radvaz) Responsa, volume 1, number 4.

[7] Rav Y. Hershkowitz, Torat Chaim, pp. 154-5.

# Re-eh: Appearing Before God

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Deuteronomy, 16:16, we find the command for males to appear before God (in front of the Temple) three times a year; on Passover, Tabernacles and on the Festival of Weeks. The passage reads thus:

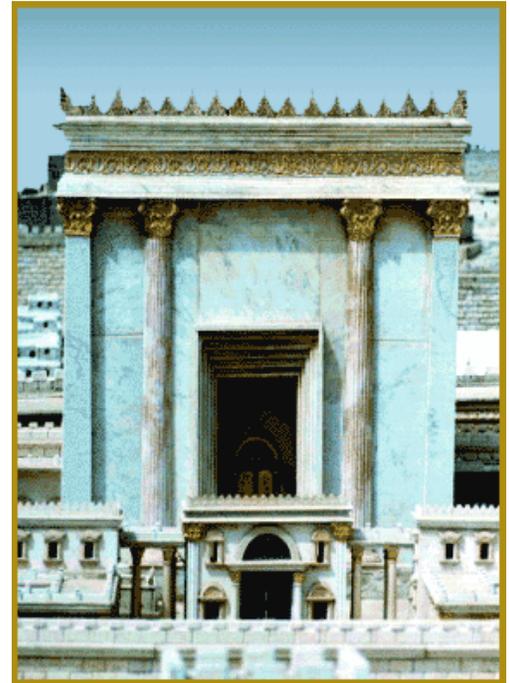
"Three times yearly, there shall appear all males - to the face of God your God - in the chosen place; on the holiday of Unleavened Bread, the holiday of Weeks, and the on the holiday of Tabernacles, and you shall not see the face of God empty handed."

The Amoraim, those who succeeded the authors of the Mishna (Oral law) argued regarding to who we refer to by the term "appear". The Hebrew word "yay-ra-eh" means to appear. This can apply to God appearing to man, and visa versa, man appearing before God. Rabbi Yochanan b. Dahavai explained it as referring to God, meaning, man must place himself in the situation where God appears to him. Rabbeinu Tam explained it referring to man appearing before God.

Rabbeinu Tam explains his reasoning as follows: There are two versions of the structure of the word; There is "yay-ra-eh", meaning "to appear" before someone. And there is "yi-ra-eh", meaning "to look". The former is the actual written form located in the Torah script, while the latter is the accepted pronunciation. We have this many times in the Torah, we call it the "ksiv" and the "kri", the written and the spoken forms, respectively. These dual word forms are Masoretic (Traditional) vehicles for passing down additional teachings, unavailable without the additional word form.

Rabbi Yochanan b. Dahavai held that we use the orally transmitted forms of words as starting points in Biblical exegesis. This means that the term "to look" can apply to both God and man, as both can do the act of looking, in some sense. But this allowed Rabbi Yochanan b. Dahavai to entertain this passage as referring to God. To this, Rabbeinu Tam objected,

"...we do not form Torah explanations based on oral transmission. The primary and authentic explanation must be rooted and commenced in the written form of the Torah, and only then do we look to oral transmission for embellishment. But the primary teaching must emanate from the



written form." (Paraphrased)

Since this is the case, the written text literally means "to appear". Rabbeinu Tam explained that this is impossible in application to God's actions. He cannot "appear in the Temple" to be "seen" by man, as God does not occupy space. Therefore, this written form of "appear" must apply to man. Thereby defining the command as "man must appear before God." (The additional instance of "yih-ra-eh" in this verse also applies to man - being the same word form - and thereby is interpreted that man must also "see". The Rabbis derive from this second instance that blind men are exempt from this command). We have now clarified the command to be "man's obligation to travel to the Temple, appearing before God". Man only is commanded - as opposed to women - and only those men with eyesight.

We now observe a fascinating statement recorded by the Marsha: "Man must appear before God's two eyes, and even man must come to see God with man's two eyes." This is truly astonishing. What can be meant by "God's two eyes"? He is not physical, His knowledge is not

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# Re-eh: Appearing Before God

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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based on vision. God has no organs.

As always, we must ask properly, formulated questions to arrive at true answers. How shall we formulate this question? I would suggest as follows: "What do two eyes convey, why not one eye?" Well, two eyes means to me, that something was in full vision, that is, both eyes saw it. But again, in relation to God, how can we apply the term "vision"? But perhaps, "full vision", means not that sight exists with God, but that God beheld something which occupied His 'vision', or, His interest. He was so to speak, "looking" at that which interests Him. What interests God about man? The answer is man's performance of the Torah. We may suggest that "God's two eyes" mean that God took full note of man's action by appearing at the Temple, in accordance with this Torah command. The medrash is relating to us that which "caught God's eyes". It is an important phenomenon when Jews appear before God in the Temple.

This being the case, how can the medrash go on to state that we in turn must have our two eyes working - literally - in order to participate in this command? Why should the Rabbis take a metaphoric gesture, God's eyes, and incorporate it as a physical action which prohibits blind men from attendance?

Here we find a beautiful idea: The fact that God looked at our fulfillment of this command with "both His eyes", conveys, as we said, the idea that this command is set apart from all others. There is some element in this appearance before God, which "fills God's vision", i.e., it is most favorable to Him. The Rabbis interpreted the second instance of "yay-ra-eh" to mean an exclusion of all blind men. They were saying that this very concept of God's delight in man must somehow permeate the very maaseh mitzvah - the act of the command. How did the Rabbis determine that the action together with the concept makes this specific mitzvah so important? They decided to characterize our action with the element of God's delight as is demonstrated by requiring that we too have full vision. This full vision displayed by all attendees at the Temple, reflects the very nature of this mitzvah as one which man performs in God's delight.

What do I mean by God's delight? It is a state in man, where God commands man in this single act which epitomizes man's ultimate state of perfection. This inevitably thrusts our quest onto the specific design of this command: "What

purpose may we find in the act of traveling to the Temple, simply to "appear" before God? (I isolate appearing from the obligation of sacrifice, for the passage clearly separates the two - "do not see God's face empty handed" is a subsequent embellishment on the primary obligation of appearance.) Why on the three Holidays? Why is this not applicable to women? Is it only the principle of "zman gerama" (time-bound commands) which exempts the women? Or is it something more basic in the command itself?"

Man's goal is to come to his greatest appreciation of the Creator. This - by definition - requires a 100% conviction in God's existence. Above all else, we must view this as absolute truth. We must also acknowledge that His system is perfect for man, meaning, all God's ways are just, as it is written, (Gen. 18:17):

"And God said, 'Shall I keep hidden from Abraham that which I do? While Avraham will become a great and mighty nation, and all there will bless him all the nations of the land. For I know in him that he will command his sons and his household after himself, and he will guard the path of God, to do charity and justice...'"

God immediately informed Abraham of His plan to destroy Sodom and Ammorah. Had Abraham awakened after the destruction of the city, he would not have learned the fine intricacies of God's justice, but only that the people were corrupt and deserved obliteration - as with the Flood. However, God 'invited' Abraham to discussions, which was followed by Abraham's defense of Sodom. Abraham exclaimed, "the Judge of the Earth won't execute justice?"

Abraham did not ask this as a question but stated it as a certainty, as God does not answer him on this. God only answers Avraham's true query, i.e., whether the merits of some, can save others. Abraham asked this, as he was not learned in certain ideas of charity. This is beyond natural observation - beyond the idea that each man pays for his own sins, and each merits his own rewards. Abraham now realized that God's invite in this decision making process must mean that there are other considerations which he could not arrive at without God's intervention. Proof of the hidden quality of this idea is that God saves people based not only on THEIR OWN merits, is God's own words, "Shall I keep hidden from Abraham that which I do?" The reason for this engagement is also clearly taught, "that he will command his sons and his household after himself". For

Abraham to be a leader, he must lead with accurate knowledge.

What is the unique quality in the command to appear before God? This act is to demonstrate that we admit to God's existence. We do this by traveling to a place known only for His glory. There is no other attraction at the Temple mount. Besides a desire to approach God, there is no other reason for observing this as a commandment. Additionally, observing this as a commandment simultaneously demonstrates our conviction that this command, this representation of God's system, is completely just, and ought to be followed. Men are obligated, as men are the ones charged with Torah teaching and learning. Endorsement of the system of Torah must be via those who carry the full weight of the system.

The reason this command is to be performed at the holidays, is that these holidays are samples of man acting at his most pristine level of existence. Therefore these days must be inextricably bound up with the concept of Torah adherence - this is man's sole purpose. On these days, man is prohibited from labor, he must divert his attention and activities from the mundane to the sublime - from the physical pursuits, to the spiritual. On these days, man's focus is redirected solely to God's existence, and the system of his perfection. His appearance at the Temple embodies these ideas.

Appearance at the Temple three times a year to be performed on the holidays is an endorsement of our complete belief in God, and His just system. This action is so grand, God beholds our appearance, as it were possible, with "both eyes" □

## Re-eh: Blessings & Curses

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What is the concept intended by Moses commanding the Jews to receive both blessings and curses upon Mt. Grizzim and Mt. Eval respectively?

There are a number of questions to be addressed:

- 1) What were these specific areas of blessing and curse?
- 2) What is a "blessing" and what is a "curse"?
- 3) Why at this time?
- 4) Why on 2 mountain tops?
- 5) Why six tribes on each mountain top?
- 6) Why were the priests, Levites and the Ark remaining in the valley between these mountains, and what was achieved by these individuals placing the blessings and curses?
- 7) What connection, if any, do both Ibn Ezra and Ramban allude to by referencing the Scapegoat thrown off of Mount Azazel on Yom Kippur?

To answer these questions, we must first take

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# Re-eh: Blessings & Curses

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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note at what time these blessings and curses were commanded to be placed. It was upon the Jewish nation's entrance to the land of Israel.

I feel this would be an appropriate time for Moshe to urge the Jews to follow the right way of life, and more so, to put the land in perspective, the conquest of which was anticipated for decades. Perhaps Moshe's plan was to drive a point home to the Jews, that is, that the Land is not a goal in itself. The goal is the adherence to the Torah. To make this point cogent and concrete, and for the sake of being seen from a distance by those who did not ascend, Moshe first commanded the Jews to stand on two mountain tops. (I do not believe all women and infants ascended.) In order for the event to be witnessed by all, elevation was necessary. Moshe desired that the people take to heart the fortune and consequences of living with, or abandoning the Torah. Proper conduct would lead to one retaining the gift of Israel, as is seen by the blessing being placed upon the lush Mt. Grizzim. However, if one abandons G-d, the fate of a barren Mt. Eval is certain. Moshe desired the best for the Jews, and showing them real differences between bountiful and barren topography would be the best means for opening their eyes to the truth of the purpose of the Land, and to the real results of one's actions.

Moshe decreed that people should act as models for both the correct and incorrect lifestyles. He therefore chose that six tribes stand on each mountain top, to indicate that just as there are only six tribes, and either a tribe was on Mt. Grizzim or Mt. Eval, so too, one's life can go in only one of two paths. There is no other choice. As the Talmud's analogy goes, (paraphrased) "...A man is a very sick creature, but there is a bandage. If he keeps on the bandage, all will be well. If however he removes it, his death is certain. The bandage is Torah".

The tribes modeled for the rest of the Jews, as well as themselves, what would result from one of the two paths of life. This is what I believe Ibn Ezra was alluding to with the reference to the scapegoat. The two goats on Yom Kippur also teach man of the only two possibilities he can

travel in life. If he chooses the Torah, then he is as the goat offered to G-d. If he does not, then he is as the second goat destined for tragedy as it is sliced to death by the rocky outline of Mt. Azazel. As the priests and Levites were always involved in study, and do not inherit the land, land-related fortune does not apply to them. Further, they are above the need to do labor, as Maimonides teaches in the last law of Shmita v'Yovale, "not only the Levites, but any one who enters this world - even Gentile - who dedicates himself to learning, G-d will give such a person a portion (his physical needs) as is sufficient for him". Maimonides teaches that there is a special Providence administered by G-d for any human being who sincerely spends his life in the pursuit of wisdom. For such an individual, G-d maintains his sufficient needs. This makes sense, as G-d's desire is just this, that man pursue wisdom. It follows that G-d will then create a situation for such a man to continue his growth of knowledge.

The concept of blessing and curse is not to be understood as anything other than the actual experienced lifestyle. Following the Torah itself, is the blessing, the pure enjoyment of the pursuit of wisdom. Conversely, abandoning a life of wisdom will result in constant frustration and a life of pain.

To say there is blessing besides the Torah is false and diminishes the Torah's worth. To suggest another pain aside from abandoning Torah is unnecessary.

Reader: I was reading your article on Mt Grizim and Mt Eval this morning. I felt a bit confused on one point- at the end you write that the Torah life is its own reward, while simultaneously stating that the right to a bounteous (and secure!) land of Israel is the direct result of following a life of Torah. I feel sure that the answer lies not in one extreme or the other, but in a blend of the two concepts, or maybe in the idea of a result as different from reward or motivation; I would appreciate some clarification on the point though. Thanks!!!

Mesora: Israel is only given as a means to prolong adherence to Torah deals, as we see Divine eviction the result of abandoning Torah. But even so this is not a "reward", as a Rabbi mentioned, there can be no reward in the true sense for Torah adherence, as that would make the reward a more prized object than following the Torah itself, and this cannot be.

Even Olam Haba - the Future World - is only an increase in the same area of involvement in ideas, as the soul is the only part of us which survives death.

Therefore, there are three things discussed, 1) Torah - intellectual involvement, the pursuit of understanding reality - THE prized involvement, 2) Israel - as a secured vehicle for Torah involvement on Earth, and 3) Olam Haba, the highest level of involvement in reality with no physical limitations. ■

# Reason vs Reputation- Law vs Philosophy

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** I recently had a discussion with a very intelligent Jew who, like myself, keeps Halacha. We were discussing a certain topic (the nature of the topic is irrelevant to this discussion) when I began citing sources from the Rishonim. I told him that in matters of Hashkafa I rely on what the Rishonim say, even though it may go against the opinions of present-day rabbis. This led him to ask a very good question.

This is (more or less) what he said to me: "I understand that you've decided to pick the Rishonim as your Hashkafic authorities, but how is that any different than what Conservative Jews and secular professors do? I've had discussions with people who have stated their position that certain Rishonic statements go against the words of the Sages of the Gemara. For example, there is a Midrash that says that God revealed all of the Oral Torah to Moshe -- Halacha, aggadata, machloksim, and chiddushim. The Rambam, however, says that God only gave to Moshe the mitzvos and their explanations, but not the aggadata and certainly not all, future chidushim. Why do we accept the Rambam and not the words of the Sages of the Gemara?"

**Mesora:** Regarding Conservatives: Once Conservatives argue on who were the Baalim Mesora, (authoritative Jewish scholars) and argue on Halacha (Jewish Law), they have no status of authority. Let them make up their false interpretations, but they have deviated from Moses' Torah. All Tanaaim and Amoraim (Rabbis of the Talmud) unanimously consented on the body of Oral Law, Written law, and what was the Halacha in all areas. The Conservatives dispute this, and thereby, lose all credibility. It is simple. In Halacha, we have a conclusive and exclusive body of Judaism's authoritative Halachik (law) positions, called the "Shulchan Aruch". These laws are derived from the Sages' rulings in the Talmud. All Talmudic Tanaaim and Amoraim unanimously agree, the Talmud is the basis for Halacha. No authority ever argued this point. Conservatives and Reformed Jews attempt to rewrite Jewish law, and history, something that the original transmitters - the Tanaaim and

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# Reason vs Reputation- Law vs Philosophy

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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Amoraim - never agreed to. The rule is this; if an authoritative body - Tanaaim, Amoraim and Rishonim - unanimously consented to what the boundaries of Jewish law are, and what their rules of interpretation are, no one has greater authority with which to oppose the originators. Period. These Torah authorities alone possess the sole voice on what comprises Jewish law and its exegesis. It would be like one today creating a new car called a "Ford". Would it be a Ford? No. "Ford" has already been defined, without dispute, and in the fashion that it can never be disputed: Henry Ford defined what a Ford is by his original creation of the Ford. Henry Ford's definition is the ONLY Ford, all others are plagiarized or impostors.

The origin of a qualitatively new entity, by definition, defines that new entity as the original and REAL entity. This is the formula for determining what is an original, and what is a fake. Again, let's say I create a new device, never before created, a laser beam, which, when pointed at someone talking, or at a source of any sound, even miles away, will record that sound. Now, I call this new item the "LaserCord." It is qualitatively new, as laser beam and sound have never been in operation in such a fashion. It is unique to my creation. Now, let's say another person says the "LaserCord" is really not to use laser, but to use a light beam instead. Does he have any authority on what "LaserCord" is? Of course not. It was my invention, and I brought it into existence. This second person commits two crimes; 1)he distorts authorship, attempting to replace my authoritative relationship to the "LaserCord" with his, 2)he attempts to rewrite history, suggesting the "LaserCord" is something other than it's true form. Just as this individual tries to redefine a "LaserCord", by saying it runs on light and not lasers, Conservatives are equally corrupt in their attempt to redefine what Torah is, who wrote it, and how it is to be interpreted. These issues were originally, and unanimously agreed to by the originators, the Rabbis of the Talmud. Once the Rabbis defined Torah through God's sanctioning of them, and through their strict adherence to the process of derivation and reasoning, the Talmudic body of knowledge was sealed as an undisputed work. No participant in the creation of Talmud argued on its scope or its methods of reasoning. Since the creators of Talmud are the ones who define it, latter

Conservative and Reformed Jews have no authority, for numerous reasons. Conservatives cannot redefine "Ford", "LaserCord", or Torah.

*Regarding Medrashim:* You wrote, "there is a Midrash that says that God revealed all of the Oral Torah to Moshe -- Halacha, aggadata, machloksim, and chiddushim..." Please show me this source. ALWAYS see a quoted source with your own eyes. Many times, distorted sources causes error.

*Haskhafa (Philosophy) as opposed to Halacha (Jewish Law):* There is not psak (ruling) in Haskhafa - philosophy. As a Rabbi once said, no one, not even a Rishon, can tell you what to believe. Either you believe something or not. Acceptance of a truth cannot be legislated. It is a phenomenon wherein you alone decide. This must be clear. For example, no one can tell me that I believe in ghosts. Either I do, or I don't. In contrast to Jewish law, which governs actions, not belief, Jewish law IS legislated. Our actions can be performed, even though we not believe the idea behind the action. So belief is totally up to each one of us, whereas Jewish Law - our actions - are decided by the Rabbi's explanation of the Torah, Prophets, Writings and Talmud. In philosophy, we have no obligation to "agree" with a Rishonic philosophy, especially if your mind disagrees with it. The Rishonim themselves argued on each other's philosophical points. This arguing displays their position is that you must think for yourself, just as they demonstrated. Here, rank plays no role. But I would add, one as great as Rambam should be studied with care.

One's philosophy must align with reason, and with how the world operates, with God's justice, and with Torah. If you feel a position does not align, even a Rishon's position, you have no obligation to agree with him. YOUR reason must dictate your position in philosophy. But again, one with a great reputation should not be easily dismissed.

**Reader:** Alternatively, some people even go so far as to say that the Sages of Gemara didn't even know how to explain the simple pesukim - verses, as demonstrated by their nit-picky and far-fetched Midrashic interpretations. Such people then proceed to virtually re-write the Oral Torah by giving their own interpretations.

**Mesora:** You write, "Alternatively, some people even go so far as to say that the Sages of Gemara

didn't even know how to explain the simple pesukim, as demonstrated by their nit-picky and far-fetched Midrashic interpretations." My response, this can be uttered only by one completely ignorant of Talmudic exegesis. Let this fool study Talmud for 20 years, then let's see if he feels our Sages were "nit-picky", or rather, "genuinely devoted to an exactitude in study, essential for arriving at God's subtle and deep truths".

**Reader:** Now, I'm having a very hard time seeing the difference between what they are doing and what you are doing. There are plenty of Achronim who disagree with the Rishonim, for example, about whether there is any benefit in studying philosophy, about the nature of the soul (a reference to the "doctrine of divine sparks" of the Chassidim), teachings of and the approach to kabbala, etc.

**Mesora:** Each person must be a philosopher. He lives his life according to some principles, some philosophy, of what is good or bad, right or wrong, true or false. No one escapes such decisions. Thus, we are all philosophers. It is against reason to suggest that philosophy should not be studied.

**Reader:** Isn't your rejection of these latter-day authorities in favor of the Rishonim the same type of approach as those who reject the plain meanings of the Midrashim in favor of the explanations of the Rishonim, or who reject the words of the Sages of the Gemara in favor of the plain meanings of the pesukim?

**Mesora:** We do not reject an opinion based on the date the author lived, but on the validity of the opinion. If someone today would prove Maimonides incorrect on a point, we would not follow Maimonides. The greats themselves followed reason, and not those who predated them. In philosophy, reason must rule.

**Reader:** And furthermore, isn't your choice of relying on "the Rishonim" somewhat arbitrary? Aren't you just "drawing the line" a few hundred years later than they do? Who is to say that every Rishon was learning the subject correctly, or that no Acharon could have attained a more correct understanding of an area?"

**Mesora:** I don't favor a Rishonic view that is false, when an Acharon is correct. I feel this is clear. □