



What does Maimonides mean, that Abraham knew that idolatry caused the worshipers to “forget the truth”? What truth?
(See "Idolatry" page 1)

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Weekly Parsha

VaEtchanan

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“Please let me pass over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, the good mountain, and the Lebanon.” (Devarim 3:25)

Moshe recounts that he asked the Almighty to allow him to enter the land of Israel. Hashem did not rescind His decree. Moshe was

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G-D IN MAN?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

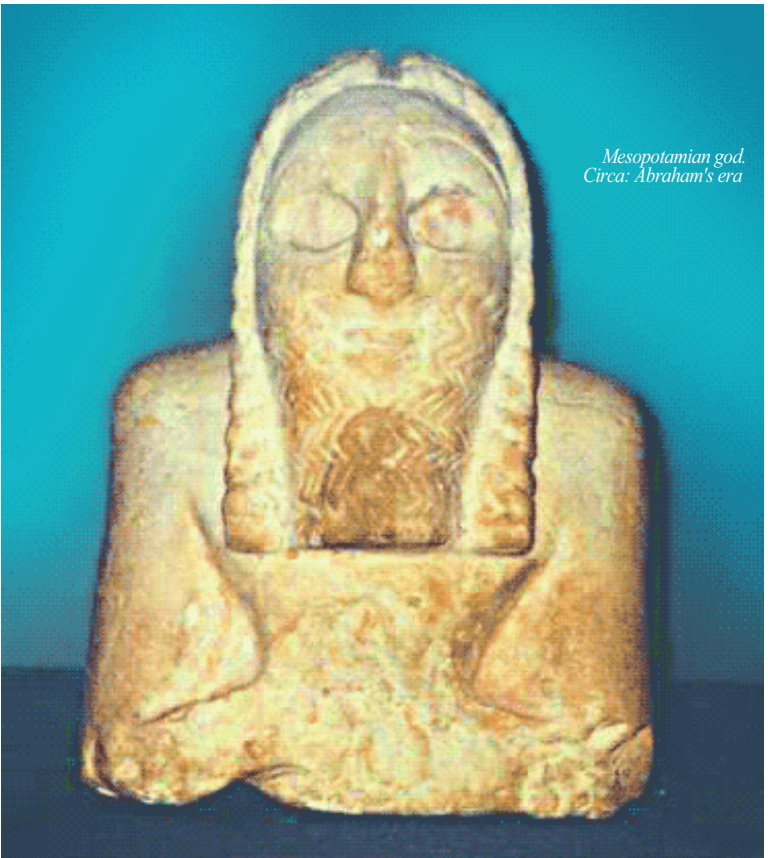
Reader: I have the same question as the reader did. Here's what your website says: “Reader: Further, do you think that the soul of man contains a divine spark, and are you troubled that this form of matter contains divinity?”

Mesora: Man's soul is not part of G-d in any way - G-d has no parts....” I then asked this question to someone who studies Rambam and the Esoteric. I know that you have issues with that also but please tell me if what he says sounds accurate. Here are his words:

“This (Bnei Yisroel and the Torah being a part of G-d) is just language ambiguity. The Rambam also says, on the same page as you quoted, that our existence is bound up in His existence, and therefore His is the only real existence because our existence is dependent on His existence. The intention in (for example) Tanya is the same. The source of Torah and of Nishmas Yisrael is G-d, and because of His overriding unity there are no distinctions within Him. The point is that Torah and neshama are part of G-d as opposed to separate from G-d, not that G-d has sections, Chas v'Shalom (G-d forbid).”

Please let me know what you think.

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Mesopotamian god. Circa: Abraham's era

Idolatry

The DEATH of REASON

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Continuing in Maimonides' Laws of Star Worship 1:3, we find another interesting statement. Maimonides teaches that although Abraham worshiped idolatry at a young age, his mind constantly pondered the physical world and the world of ideas, until he recognized “his Creator”. But before this point in his law, Maimonides states that Abraham realized that there is G-d, that He is one, and He caused

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(G-d in Man?)

Letters

I'm researching to find truth and nothing more, thank you very much.

Mesora: When you hear views that are not supported by reasoning, this is a good sign that there is no reasoning available. The person you quoted said, "The point is that Torah and neshama (soul) are part of G-d as opposed to separate from G-d, not that G-d has sections, Has v'Shalom (G-d forbid)".

His view is baseless. He makes up this theory that "neshama (the soul) is part of G-d." This is not found in Torah, or in reason. He also contradicts himself by first admitting G-d has "parts" (against Maimonides) but then denying G-d has "sections". These words mean the same! This writer is not thinking.

Additionally, as the writer is of the opinion that all is "part of G-d", he has an unanswerable problem: Maimonides correctly states if the world would be destroyed, G-d would still exist. However, according to this writer, how can the world be destroyed, if it contains people, and these people contain "parts of G-d" in their souls? This means G-d can destroy human souls – He can destroy "parts of Himself"! This clearly disproves this writer's view. G-d is really not "in" man, or "in" anything. G-d cannot be located geographically, or as partaking of His own creations, such as human souls. It is heresy to suggest that G-d has parts, and further, to suggest that He can destroy these "parts" of Himself.

Note that the person you quoted does not use reason to support his words; he simply expects your acceptance. However, this is not how our Rabbis learned and taught. A reading of almost any commentary on Torah, or of the Talmudic Rabbis will bear out that such great minds based their views on precise reasoning.

This view, that "everything is really G-d" is something, which the original Chassidic movement felt was accurate, and which the Vilna Gaon rightly viewed as heresy. These Chassidim took this view so far; they said G-d was contained even in sin. Based on this second error, they condoned a "tzaddik" - a righteous man - to steep himself in sin, so his subsequent 'elevation' would be catapulted even higher...a nonsensical notion. Without Torah knowledge and training, one's ideas cannot be reasonable, as we see here. The Rabbis actually taught the opposite, "sin begets sin", and not improvement. This makes sense, as one's sins forge a greater attachment to the emotions, and thus, the person is further attached to a sinful path.

The idea that G-d is "in" anything is heresy, as G-d is not physical. This also applies to G-d "being in man's soul", or "in sin". This problem stems from the mind's inability to think abstractly. Such individuals cannot think outside of physical space, and therefore, they force G-d into their limited thinking. They say G-d must be "everywhere", as if they are still infants. Truthfully, their minds have not passed the age of three.

Let us consult the truly wise Torah leaders, and not

the likes of those by whom you might be misled: King Solomon stated, "the heavens cannot hold You." (Kings I, 8:27). G-d said to Moses, "You cannot know Me while alive." Is this writer you quote claiming greater knowledge than Moses? Is he suggesting that G-d is wrong - that he CAN know G-d, enough to make such statements? I suggest this writer familiarize himself with the Torah's positions.

G-d does not exist in the physical realm. G-d created the physical, and thus, is not bound by it. But those with infantile minds cannot understand this, so they suggest that "G-d is everywhere." Then they compound that error by saying G-d is in man's soul and in sin itself...since G-d "must be everywhere". We see that one false idea can have far reaching and numerous, damaging side effects.

When you hear views that are unsupported, uttered without rational support, and certainly which contradict Torah, push away such notions both hands. □

*Taken from "Getting It Straight"
Practical Ideas for a Life of Clarity*

Books

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ

"What are you reading?" asked a familiar voice.

Startled, I looked up from my book. The willows beside my favorite park bench swayed gently in the breeze as the sun, so welcome after days of rain, radiated its heavenly heat into my face. Silhouetted against the radiant glare was my friend, the King of Rational Thought.

"Dialogues Of Plato," I announced proudly, holding up the book as he sat down next to me. "I just started it last night. It's fascinating."

I was surprised to see a frown flicker across his face.

"I see," he said quietly. "I presume you're reading it for entertainment?"

"Well, yeah, uh, I guess so," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I notice that you're about a third finished with it already."

"Yes, I am. I've read about 100 pages."

He looked at me. "Since last night?"

"Uh, yeah. I started it around nine o'clock."

He sighed. That wouldn't be unusual, except that I had never heard him sigh.

"I presume you went to work this morning and are just taking a break," he said. "That means you've read 100 pages of the Dialogues Of Plato in less than two hours, which means you're averaging about one minute a page. Correct?"

"Well, uh, yeah, I guess that's right."

"And are you getting anything from it?"

"Of course," I defended. "It's very interesting."

"Really," he said. "And just what exactly have you learned from it?"

"Uh, well, uh, let's see," I began, as my mind desperately searched for an intelligent-sounding response. "He asks lots of questions. And, um, he stood up for what he believed. And, uh, well, you know, there's lots of stuff here. I don't really know where to begin."

He smiled. "Nice try."

"Well, you don't expect me to remember it all, do you?" I was starting to feel a little defensive.

He lobbed the ball back to me. "Why are you reading it?"

That's the problem with not thinking clearly. You can delude yourself, or just skip the process altogether, but it's hard to hide when someone asks you a direct question.

Fortunately for me, he didn't wait for an answer. "No offense," he said, "but you're not reading that book. You're skating over it. Do you realize you've read 100 pages full of ideas from one of the greatest thinkers who ever lived, all in a little over an hour? That's like flying an F-14 at top speed from Las Vegas to Albuquerque and then thinking you've explored the Grand Canyon.

"There's an important principle here," he continued, "and it's one that's routinely ignored in our society. The principle is this: it's better to understand one idea clearly than a thousand ideas superficially. Do you know why?"

I was chagrined. "Uh, because I'll understand it better?"

"Yes," he replied, "but why is that important? What will it do for you?"

I chewed on it for a few seconds, then spoke. "Well, if I recall, you once said that the only way a person makes real behavior change is when an idea is clear to his or her mind. So, if I understand one idea clearly, then it can affect me. But if I know a thousand ideas only superficially, then none of them will affect me."

He smiled. "Exactly. That's why I was so surprised that you were reading the Dialogues Of Plato so quickly. If you really want to gain anything useful from that book, you've got to approach it differently. Forget about getting through it. Take one page. Just one page. Read it. Think about it. Ask questions about it. Ask questions about Socrates' questions. Ask, 'why did he ask that particular question and not a different one?' Chew on it. Ponder it. That's where the real value is."

He rose to leave.

"Thanks for stopping," I said.

"You're welcome," he replied. "Enjoy the book." And with that, he headed out of the park.

I turned back to the Dialogues Of Plato and stared at it for a while.

Then I pulled out my marker and opened the book to page one. □

(VaEtchanan continued from page 1)

permitted to see the land from a mountaintop. But he is not allowed to participate in its possession.

The Talmud in Tractate Sotah discusses this incident and Moshe's attitude toward the land of Israel. The Talmud is troubled by Moshe's desire to enter Eretz Yisrael. Why was this so important the greatest tzadik and prophet? The Talmud responds that Moshe recognized that many mitzvot could only be performed in the Land of Israel. He wished to participate in the fulfillment of these commands.[1]

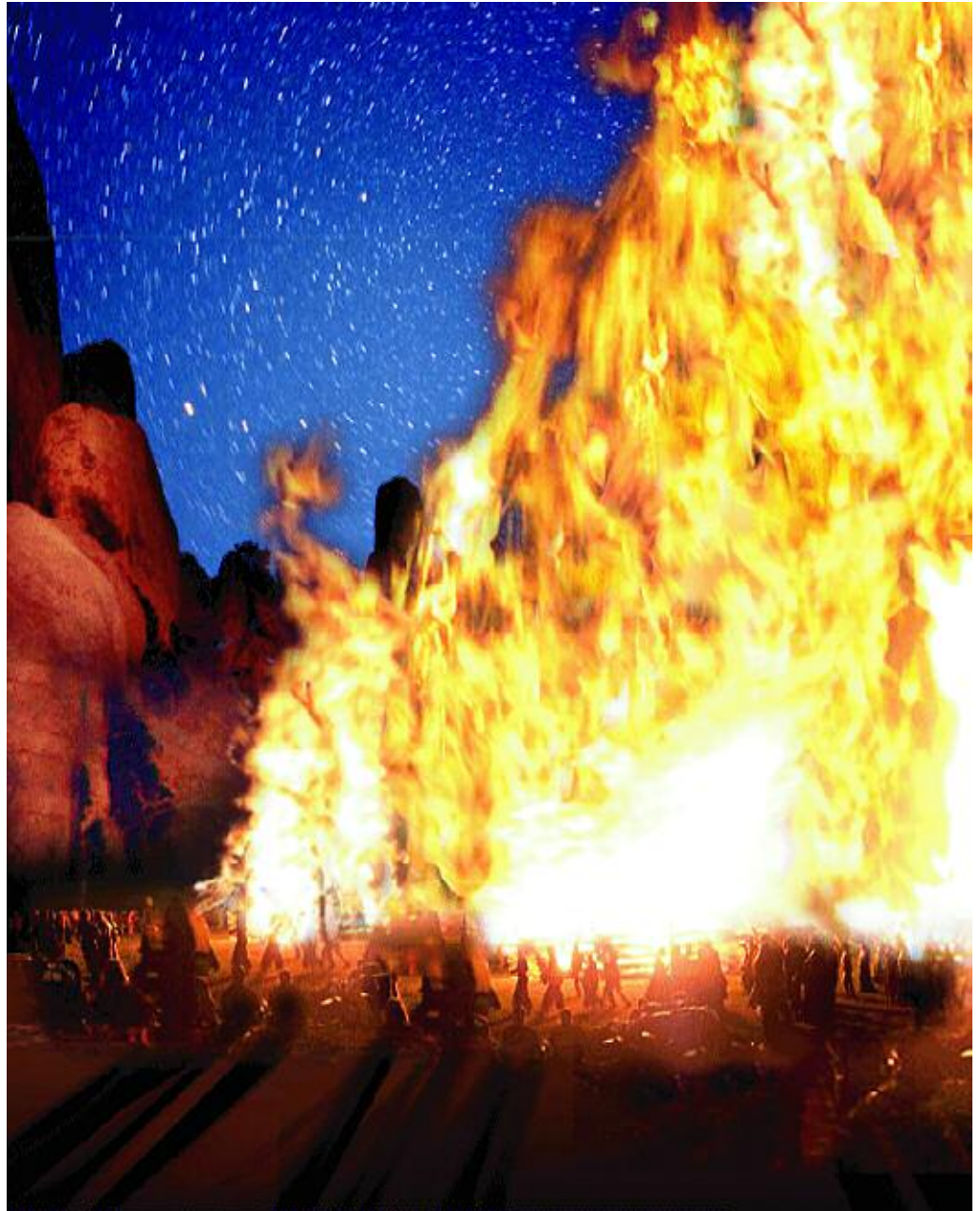
This passage, from the Talmud, provides an important insight into the motivations of the tzadik. The normal person is motivated by self-interest. In many cases even the observance of mitzvot is encouraged by enlightened selfishness. The person recognizes that life will be fuller and more meaningful through adherence to the Torah. The promise of reward may also play a role.

The tzadik is not merely different from this normal person in a quantitative sense. The motivation of the true tzadik is qualitatively distinguished. The tzadik recognizes the respective significance of him/herself and the Creator. This person is inspired by a deep appreciation of the greatness of the Almighty. The tzadik is consumed with the desire to serve Hashem. Personal benefit is meaningless. Only the will of the Almighty is critical.

Now the discussion in the Talmud can be more deeply understood. The Talmud explains that Moshe could receive no personal gain from entering the land. He would not receive a greater reward or live a fuller life. He had already reached the highest level of human perfection. Moshe wished to enter Eretz Yisrael because of his drive to serve the Almighty. He recognized that the Torah was not complete outside of Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, he wished to lead the people into the land. In this way he would help establish the Torah in its fullness – as it was designed to be observed. Moshe's regret, in being refused, was that he would not be able to help establish the Almighty's Torah – in its complete form – in this world.

“Only take heed and be very careful lest you forget the things that your eyes saw and lest you remove them from your hearts all the days of your lives. And you should make it known to your children and grandchildren.” (Devarim 4:9)

Moshe admonishes Bnai Yisrael not to forget the events of Sinai. Furthermore, each generation must relate to the next the events of



Sinai. At Sinai the nation witnessed Revelation. The authenticity of the Torah is based upon the authenticity of this event. We know that the Almighty gave us the Torah because our ancestors witnessed Revelation at Sinai. This provides a unique basis for our religion. Without Sinai, the Torah cannot be objectively represented as the truth.

Nachmonides maintains that Moshe's admonition is a negative commandment. We are commanded to not forget the events of Revelation. He objects to the position of Maimonides. Maimonides apparently does not regard Moshe's directive as a commandment. Nowhere does Maimonides count it as one of

the Taryag – six hundred and thirteen mitzvot.

Nachmonides raises two objections to Maimonides' position. In order to understand these objections, we must understand a basic premise. We must distinguish between two types of evidence – direct evidence circumstantial evidence.

Let us consider an example. Assume a crime is committed. A suspect is arrested. How can the guilt of the suspect be proven? Perhaps, we can prove that the suspect was the only person present at the time of the crime. We might add evidence that the suspect had a motive for committing the crime. In addition, maybe the suspect has previously expressed the intention

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to commit the crime. We might find tools or weapons used in commission of the crime in the possession of the suspect. All of this evidence is consistent with the assumption that the suspect is, in fact, the perpetrator. However, none of these indications directly prove that the suspect committed the crime. All of these indications are examples of circumstantial or indirect evidence.

Now, assume we have a videotape of the suspect committing the crime. This is direct evidence of the guilt of the suspect. The videotape is not merely consistent with the assumption that the suspect is culpable. It actually captures the suspect in the act of committing the crime. This is a higher degree of evidence than circumstantial indications. If the evidence provided by the video is corroborated by other cameras or witnesses that saw the commission of the crime by the suspect, there will remain no doubt as to his or her guilt.

Generally, prophets prove their authenticity through performing a wonder or miracle. Is this direct or circumstantial evidence of prophecy? The sign is only circumstantial evidence. Why? The event of prophecy is the communication between the prophet and Hashem. We do not witness this communication. We only see a wonder performed by the prophet. This miracle is consistent with the assumption that communication exists between the prophet and the Almighty. However, the wonder is not direct proof.

Now, assume we could actually see the prophet communicate with the Almighty. We would have direct evidence of the authenticity of the prophet. Imagine a prophet whose prophecy was witnessed by hundreds of thousands of individuals. These witnesses would provide incontrovertible direct evidence of the authenticity of the prophet.

We are now prepared to return to Nachmonides' arguments. Nachmonides explains that Moshe is the only person whose prophecy is established through overwhelming direct evidence. All of Bnai Yisrael witnessed his communication with the Almighty at Sinai. All other prophets establish their legitimacy through performing wonders. As a consequence of this distinction, it is impossible for any prophet to contradict or challenge the prophecy of Moshe. Based on simple rules of evidence, Moshe's prophecy is more firmly established.

Therefore, conviction in the truth of Revelation is fundamental in establishing the legitimacy of the Torah. If any prophet

contradicts the Torah, we reject the claimant as a false prophet. However, without the events of Sinai we have no basis for distinguishing between Moshe and other prophets. If a prophet would contradict Moshe, it would be difficult or impossible to resolve the conflict. Nachmonides argues that this fundamental role dictates that the conviction in the truth of Revelation must be a commandment.

Nachmonides further argues that Maimonides accepts the central role of this conviction. Maimonides elaborates on this issue in his Mishne Torah.[2] Therefore, Maimonides, too, should include this conviction in his enumeration of mitzvot.[3]

How might Maimonides respond to these questions? Maimonides provides a hint in his Mishne Torah. In Hilchot Talmud Torah – the laws regarding Torah study – he writes that a father is responsible to teach his son Torah. Furthermore, a grandfather must teach his grandson. Maimonides explains that the source of the grandfather's obligation is our pasuk. Our passage states, "And you shall teach it to your children and grandchildren".[4]

Superficially, it is odd that Maimonides quotes our passage to support his contention that the grandfather is obligated to teach the grandson. As we know, this is not the actual overt message of the pasuk. The passage is commanding us to transmit the events of Sinai to each generation. However, if we consider all of our questions in unison a clear pattern emerges.

We can answer all of our questions by acknowledging that Maimonides agrees that we are obligated to transmit the events of Sinai to each generation. It is impossible to exclude this fundamental conviction from the corpus of Torah. However, unlike Nachmonides, he does not view this obligation as an independent commandment. Instead, Maimonides maintains that this obligation is integral to the mitzvah of teaching Torah. We must teach Torah as a revealed truth derived from Sinai. Revelation is the context that gives meaning and legitimacy to the commandment of Torah study.

Why is the grandfather obligated to teach his grandson Torah? According to Maimonides this is a natural outcome of the structure of the mitzvah of teaching Torah. When the grandfather teaches his grandson, the young student comes to realize that the Torah is not a recent invention. He recognizes that he is the recipient of a rich, enduring tradition. This reminds the grandson of the roots of the Torah – Sinai.

We can readily appreciate Maimonides'

application of our passage. He is indicating the reason the Torah obligates the family patriarch in the education of future generations. This is because, as our passage exhorts, we must always remember that the Torah is derived from Sinai. The involvement of the elder generation in the education of the young reinforces this concept.

"For Hashem your G-d is a merciful Lord. He will not abandon you or destroy you. He will not forget the covenant with your forefathers that He swore to them to uphold." (Devarim 4:31)

The parasha includes the prophecy of eventual exile. Moshe foretells that the nation will sin. Hashem will drive them from the land. In exile, Bnai Yisrael will suffer persecution. However, the nation will survive and be redeemed. The ultimate salvation of the Jewish people is assured. The covenant that the Almighty made with the forefathers guarantees redemption.

The Midrash comments that on the day of the destruction of the Temple the Meshiach was born. Nachmanides explains that this statement can be understood allegorically. The meaning of the allegory emerges from this parasha.

The Midrash is teaching that the destruction of the Bait HaMikdash and the exile must be understood as aberrations in the relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem. Even during periods of suffering, the covenant still exists. This covenant requires that exile and destruction end in redemption and salvation. This is the message of the Midrash. Even at the moment of catastrophe, the beginnings of inevitable redemption must emerge. This is the birth of the Meshiach referred to in the Midrash. ■

[1] Mesechet Sotah 14a.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah, Chapter 8.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Critique on Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot -- Negative Commands that Maimonides Neglected to Include.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:2.

A Voice Amidst Flames

What is the concept intended by the numerous times the parsha states that the Jews heard G-d speak from the midst of the flames?

The reason why G-d created the event at Sinai as a voice of words emanating from a fiery mountain is as follows: G-d desired that this event be a proof to all generations that the Torah is of Divine origin - not man made. The one element in which a biological organism cannot live is fire. By G-d creating a voice of "words", meaning intelligence, emanating from the midst of flames, all would know for certain that the cause of such an event was not of an Earthly intelligence. They would ascribe the phenomenon solely to that which controls the elements, that being G-d Himself. Only the One who controls fire, Who formed its properties, can cause voices to exist in fire. As the sounds heard by the people were of intelligent nature, they understood this being to be the intelligent, and metaphysical G-d.

The purpose of the Torah's repetition was to drive home the concept, which is supreme and more essential to man's knowledge than all other concepts, i.e., that G-d gave the Torah, He created and controls the universe, and that He is metaphysical.

A question was asked, "Why would the people not err and assume G-d to be fire itself?"

We see the first words heard from the flames were "I am the G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt". This means to say that the Cause of the miracles in Egypt is now claiming responsibility for this event at Sinai. The fact that there were no fires in Egypt shows that fire is not indispensable for the performance of miracles, all claimed by the voice at Sinai. The Jews therefore did not view the fire as G-d, as they experienced miracles prior to this event without witnessing any fires. It is true there was a pillar of fire, which led them by night, but as we do not find fires connected with all miracles, we conclude that fire is not the cause of those miracles, or of revelation at Sinai. There must be something external to fire, which controls the laws of nature, and is above nature. That can only be the Creator. ■

everything that exists, and guides the laws of all matter, and no other god exists, but Him.

Maimonides now makes a point:

"And he (Abraham) 'knew' that the entire world had erred, and the thing which caused them to make this error, is that they served the stars and statues, until they lost the truth from their knowledge."

The problem with this statement is that Abraham had no teacher or one to inform him of anything, as Maimonides says earlier. Therefore, Abraham had no knowledge of the state of these idolaters' minds before this era. How then, can Maimonides state that Abraham knew that idolatry "caused them to lose the truth"? Abraham was in no position to make an assessment of these idolaters' earlier knowledge. He had "no teacher" who might have passed this information to him. You might say that he spoke with others, and they told him this. However, this is not what Maimonides says. Maimonides says that Abraham figured this out on his own. We must understand how this can be.

But we also must figure out how idolatry can cause the worshipers to forget something. Does this make any sense? How can worshipping statues or stars cause a memory lapse? However, this latter question is predicated on an assumption; we are assuming that what these idolaters forgot – was content. Meaning, we assume that when Maimonides writes, "until they lost the truth from their knowledge" that Maimonides refers to some 'quantity' of knowledge. However, this cannot be, as we said earlier; Abraham had no means to know what these people knew in earlier times. There remains only one other possibility, as to what it means that they forgot the "truth".

I believe the "truth" here, refers to the ability to 'think rationally'. "Truth" refers to the "quality" of thinking. Meaning, somehow, idolatry has the ability to remove one from using his critical faculty, his reason. One may worship idolatry for so long, that his entire apparatus, which sets him apart from all other creatures – his intelligence – becomes numb, and useless. The question is, how does this happen?

Abraham was brilliant. He saw an entire culture before his eyes, completely and unanimously steeped in idolatry. No one questioned the rationale behind such acts; the same tree one would use for firewood was also carved into god, and was bowed to. (See Haftora of Vayikra) Abraham put two and two

together. He said to himself:

"Idolatry is a powerful emotion, making no sense. It must be responsible for obscuring reason from working within the hearts of these people. Idolatry has conditioned this culture to 'believe', and not use reason. Years of unquestioned, blind faith had removed man from thinking."

This is what Maimonides meant by "And he (Abraham) 'knew' that the entire world had erred, and the thing which caused them to make this error, is that they served the stars and statues, until they lost the truth from their knowledge." They lost the 'ability' for arriving at truth, not that they lost bits of knowledge.

I believe Maimonides described Christianity to a tee. They too are idolatrous, as they worship man. Many worship statues. We see that Christianity's adherents can reiterate verses very well. But these verses contradict reason – and they don't even detect this grave error! Startling! Words can emanate and the speaker does not hear them. Christianity uses "blind faith" as their motto, as if this reasonably defends their great passion. But truthfully, they ignore reason, in hopes they will be sin-free. They abandon reason, in favor of that which is even more unreasonable. Maimonides exposes the underlying flaw, which allows people to dupe themselves, and others. This flaw is the abandonment of searching for what is real, and blindly accepting what is rehearsed verbally en masse. Years of such behavior, and people no longer have a connection to reason. However, reason cuts through fallacy as a sword cuts through air. Just as air poses no obstacle to the blade, false religions are of no impediment to reason. Reason effortlessly unmask the falsehoods of Christianity and other religions, although they all dissemble themselves as truth.

Over the past few weeks, we have addressed Christianity's flaws. Many emails have come in from both Jews and Christians. The Jews, surprisingly, were asking that we tone down this whole discussion. However, we responded that we must follow the Rabbis, who did not allow other issues to mitigate their concern of false religions seeping into ours. Many Christians wrote in with an unconditional "love" regardless of our words. Politely, I asked them what they love about our Jewish religion, whose Jesus-rejecting adherents, they say, will burn in hell. I have not received any answer, but they admitted I would burn in hell too. They love me, knowing I reject their man-god and that I will burn in hell. If this response

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does not clearly display contradictory thinking, I don't know what does. If this is what Christianity produces, i.e., a people who will contradict themselves without blinking an eye, I fail to see why others follow such nonsense.

I appeal to our Christian readers: you have made a good step believing that both Judaism and Christianity cannot simultaneously be G-d's will. Now, as you use reason in other areas of your life, in selecting schools for your children, professions, and locations to live, use this reason in your religious sphere as well. Instead of parroting what all others parrot, stop, consider what you say, and ask why this most important sphere of your life should not also include reason. Follow the very prophet that you stand by:

"He does not take it to his heart, he has no knowledge and no understanding to say, 'half (of the tree) I have burned in fire, and even baked on its coals bread and I roasted meat and ate, and the remainder (of the tree) shall I make into an abomination? To the trunk of a tree shall I prostrate?'" (Isaiah 44:19)

Isaiah rebukes the idol worshipers. Here, he shows their inherent contradiction, in serving idols made from the same tree, which they also use as firewood. Half they cook with, and half they bow to saying, "Rescue me for you are my god." (ibid, 17) Isaiah is saying, "Use reason". He concludes this section saying, "...he does not say, 'is there not falsehood in my right hand?'" (ibid, 20)

Isaiah depicts the idolaters and those who believe in man-gods as living by lies. By saying, "is there not falsehood in my right hand", Isaiah means to say that the idolaters lie to themselves. So too, you Christians who have no reasoning, take a lesson from the very Prophet you quote. Isaiah demands we all use reason. This is his very simple message. And be honest. Although you fool yourself that Jesus is meant by a few inexplicit verses, do not G-d and the prophets constantly adjourn the Jews to keep the Torah of Moses? Is this not more predominant throughout all of the Bible and the Prophets? Don't hang your fate on a few distorted readings, and they are quite far-fetched. Read G-d's words honestly.

Maimonides was a genius by anyone's standards. He stated that Abraham uncovered the truth, that over time, idolatry and blind faith systems remove reason from one's mind. Use reason, before it is no longer available to you. ■

Imagination vs Investigation

Reader: I have several questions concerning (in one way or another) the Rambam's views on idolatry:

1) How is it possible that one transgresses this prohibition if he consider's the possibility that "perhaps the Torah is not from Heaven" (as stated in 'Laws of Idolatry' 2:3)? Aren't we obligated to establish the principles of the Torah based on proof and intellectual investigation? And doesn't all intellectual investigation of the validity of a certain idea, by necessity, involve leaving that idea in doubt until it is verified? And if you say that prior to intellectual verification, we must not leave that idea in doubt, but rather, believe in it until we prove it -- isn't that considered faith? Basically: if one is to live his life by not fully accepting the beliefs of the Torah until he verifies them with his intellect, isn't it inevitable that he'll violate this transgression?

Mesora: You are quoting a law written by Maimonides' (Idolatry, 2:3) which says the following: "...And not idolatry alone is it that we are forbidden to turn afterwards in thought, but all thoughts which cause a man to uproot a fundamental of the Torah's fundamentals, we are warned not to entertain on our hearts, and remove our knowledge towards it, and consider, and be drawn after the imaginations of the heart..." Maimonides continues, "And if all men were drawn after the thoughts of their hearts, we would find the world would be destroyed, because of his (man's) weakness of knowledge."

"Imaginations of the heart" and "thoughts of the heart" are what Maimonides rightfully classifies under idolatrous prohibitions. He does not say we must not study rationally. Of course man must hold false notions until his rational studies eventuate in true knowledge, stripping him of erroneous opinions. This must happen to each member of mankind. There is no escaping this as you stated. But the prohibition here is to follow "imagination", not rational study. Our minds were given for the very purpose of rational study. We must involve ourselves in analytical thinking as much as possible, this is Torah. What we must not do is follow idle speculation which, without Torah guidance

towards truth, will lead us to believe the baseless, emotional inclinations of our hearts.

It is for this reason that Maimonides subsumes this prohibition under his Laws of Idolatry. Idolatry is the very result of man's subjective, emotional imaginations. Both idolatry and imagination are two points along the same path. Idolatry is just a few steps down that path, after man allows himself to sinfully entertain his fantasies as truths.

Maimonides also teaches us that not only are the formalized 'actions' of idolatry prohibited, but even the very thought processes leading to idolatry are equally prohibited, even though man's thoughts and fantasies can take on myriads of forms. Sometimes Jewish law prohibits a discreet form, like eating specific animal species for example. Those acts are prohibited, and eating other animals are not. But sometimes Jewish law prohibits not the action for itself, but due to its inevitable result of philosophical corruption, as in our case. What is being averted in this case is the result of a philosophically crippled individual who denies fundamentals necessary for the appreciation of God and His Torah. Since there are many paths which lead to such corruption, and it is impossible to formally isolate and prohibit man's thought patterns, therefore, the category of "idle speculation" is prohibited, not specified thoughts.

Reader: 2) The Rambam states (2:4) that "idolatry opposed all commands" If that is the case, I assume that by studying the practices of idolatry, we will gain a greater understanding of the primitive emotions which the Torah seeks to help us remove -- but how can we accomplish this if we are prohibited from looking at, or even thinking about the accessories and philosophy of idolatry?

Mesora: Rashi (Deut. 18:9) openly states that man should study the idolatrous practices to teach his son how harmful they are. Again, Maimonides says that the prohibition is for man to simply follow the thoughts or imaginations of his heart. But rational analytic study is obligatory, more than any other activity, "Study

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Letters

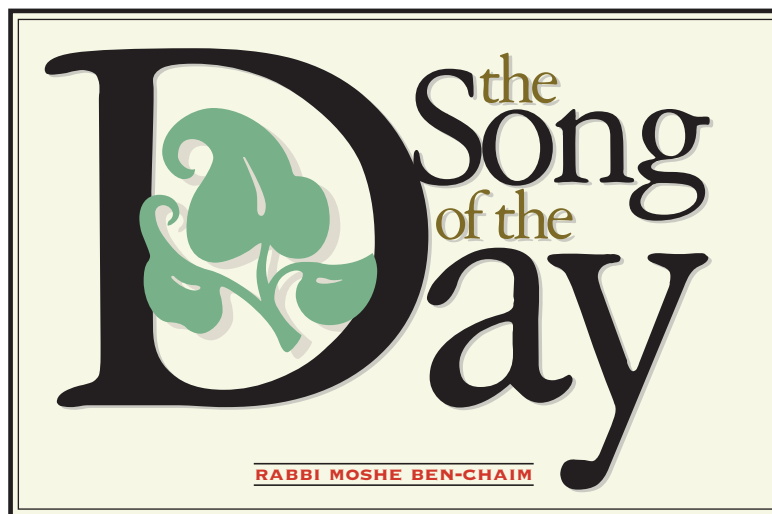
King David's Psalms

of Torah is equal to all other commands" (Mishnayos Payah, 1:1) And part of Torah study is the study of human psychology, including idolatrous tendencies and their roots of origin in man.

Reader: 3) In 2:5, the Rambam (according to my understanding) says that we must treat all heretics like non-Jews. But how are we to know if a person is truly a heretic. Don't we also say that Jews who were raised with incorrect ideas are like a "an infant born to ignoramuses" - and therefore not culpable? Does this mean that the Rambam himself would consider other Rishonim who didn't agree with his view of the "13 Fundamentals" as heretics (for example, the fact that the Ramban holds that the ultimate reward of the Future World is physical)? And furthermore, what practical implications does this have? For example, I attend a shul with many people who are new to Judaism, and as such, might not have sufficient knowledge of the Torah's Fundamentals -- does this mean, for example, that I shouldn't count them in a minyan, or that I shouldn't say amen to their blessings? That seems like an awfully severe judgment to make on innocent Jews with proper intentions, who merely lack information due to their limited exposure.

Mesora: Maimonides would not say that a difference of opinion about the future world - Olam Haba - makes Ramban a heretic. Only the denial of what Maimonides classified as "fundamentals" earns one a status as a heretic. But Ramban certainly agreed with the future world, he merely had a different conception of its parameters.

Regarding your estimation of others, we don't accuse anyone of being a heretic, or any other insulting label, if we are simply ignorant of their beliefs. Only once a heretical opinion is pronounced does the person attain that status of heretic. ■



The Talmud in Rosh Hashanna 31a discusses the reasoning behind the various songs which were recited each day together with the afternoon sacrifice. We now recite them each morning at the end of the morning prayers following Alenu. They are referred to as the "Song of the Day". It is interesting to note the Talmud's reasoning for the Song of the Day: Each day's song correlates to some element which was created on that corresponding day of the week during God's creation of the world.

Sunday: we speak of God's complete rulership, as this was the day in which God brought matter from non existence into existence. Giving existence to that which did not exist is the ultimate demonstration of rulership.

Monday: Manipulation of existing matter shows sovereignty, or kingship - the theme on Monday - as God divided the upper and lower waters via the creation of the firmament (atmosphere). Interesting is that kingship is not dependent on man's existence, as man was not created until day

six, nonetheless, God is referred to as a "king" on day two.

Tuesday: In the third day of creation, God made land appear, and made it inhabitable. We therefore sing the song describing God as "standing in the congregation of God". Standing refers to land upon which man requires for standing. That God stands in the congregation of God teaches that man's existence finds purpose only when man lives in a congregation of God, that is, man recognizing God.

Wednesday: On the fourth day God created the luminaries, namely the sun. Therefore, the Talmud continues, we describe God as a vengeful God, Who will exact punishment from those who worshiped the sun.

Thursday: On day five, God created birds, among other things. We therefore read "sing unto God...". The reason given is that since man is impressed by the various species of fowl, man is struck with awe and an urge to sing praises to God.

Friday: We commence song with "God is robed in majesty", as on day six, God completed the works of creation on that day and

rules over them.

Sabbath: We read the "song of Sabbath", referencing to the ultimate day of rest, the Next World.

The questions I would like to address are the following:

Question 1) What are the general concepts described by each daily song?

Question 2) Why are these concepts not in line with physical creation, but also incorporate concepts like revenge, kingship, etc., which is additional to creating objects themselves?

Question 3) What is the concept of referring to creation on each of the six days of the week, when the Sabbath is already devoted to commemorating God of creation?

Question 4) Why not simply recall all seven ideas each and every day, instead of only one idea per day? Why are we mimicking creation by having the songs follow a seven day week, and aligning our days with God's days of creation?

We must say that the Rabbis deemed it essential that man have cognizance of God - the Creator -

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King David's Psalms

The Song of the Day

not only on the Sabbath, but on each day. This is proven by the fact that we recite songs dealing with elements of creation each day. This idea I believe is actually borne out of a passage in Genesis, where the Torah states "six days you shall do your work and on the seventh day, rest". If this passage is to teach the command of the Sabbath, there is no need to make mention of what we should do on the six other days. Simply telling us to rest on the seventh day suffices. Since in this passage we do find a discussion of the other six days in connection with the Sabbath, I conclude that these 6 other days also partake of the very concept of the Sabbath. Meaning, we are to be cognizant of God's creation not only on Shabbos, but on each day of the week, and we are to do so by recalling some aspect created on that day.

This could very well be the source for the idea of reciting songs dealing with creation on a daily basis. It also makes sense that the main idea man must be mindful of, should not be limited to only one seventh of his life. Contemplating that God is the Creator is critical enough that we should ponder it daily. (This answers "Question 3" above)

I would answer the remaining 3 questions above as follows:

Answer 1) Which ideas of creation are so essential for us to ponder weekly? This is exactly what the Rabbis were discussing in the Talmud:

Sunday: The first idea is that God has complete mastery over the world, to the point, that He can simply will matter into existence. Correlating to God's act of creating matter from nothingness. We must recognize

God's creation of the world.

Monday: God's separation of created matter-the firmament. We must recognize God's role as King.

Tuesday: God made land appear and made it inhabitable. We must recognize God's will is for man to exist only in as much as he partakes of intelligence and learns about the Creator.

Wednesday: God is vengeful. We must recognize God desires and dispenses man's justice.

Thursday: God's created multitudes of species for man to stand in awe. God gave us the perfect means to achieve His goal for our contemplation of His wisdom - as it is reflected in all creation.. Our surroundings are designed to call attention to the existence of a Creator with magnificent abilities. (Perhaps birds call our attention to creation more than other species as they sing beautifully, attracting not only us visually, but audibly.)

Friday: Initially I thought this day taught us that God's completion of creation displays that He did not deviate from His plan - teaching that God is trustworthy. However, after discussing this with my friend Jesse Fischbein, she asked that God being consistent should really be part of God's justice, as justice by definition means that God is fair to all, which is based on consistent acts. I agreed. I then realized that what is left from the central points of creation is that one might feel that God can create and leave the scene, leaving all creation Godless. However, this is impossible, as matter cannot exist of its own, as is proved by the very fact that it was brought into existence by God. This is an

essential point. Matter could not have been created without God, and requires regular maintenance of its existence, to continue existing. If God would not will something to exist, it would cease to be. I believe this to be the concept of the sixth day. That is, that God completed the works of creation, but it continues, "and rules over them". Meaning, He continually supplies all matter with existence. This is actually a statement in our prayers, "uvi'tuvo michadesh b'chol yom tamid maseh beraishis", "He renews the works of creation each day regularly."

Sabbath: Through the act of "resting" on God's part, God made a point of teaching us that abstinence from creation is firstly a positive quality, and secondly, was actually the goal of creation, as He blessed the Sabbath day, clearly distinguishing its elevated status. God created physical beings so they may partake of the highest good, that is the world of ideas, which like Sabbath, is not limited to the physical. On the Sabbath absolutely no matter was created, and being blessed teaches that this is God's desired state for man.

Answer 2) The physical world is not the goal of creation, but rather, the goal is man's reflection on ideas. It is for this reason that the Rabbis aligned each day, not with simple matter, but with a concept essential to man's existence, thereby teaching us that we aren't simply praising God for the creation which would make the physical an ends, but we are praising God for the higher aspects of creation, the world of ideas.

Question 4) This question I must think into more. □



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