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JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

How many areas of our lives are out of focus? To what values do we ascribe? Are they valid, true, and real? Is our vision blurred, oriented towards unchecked desires, which have their origin in external or internal fallacies? Do our passions blind us? And now that we have erred, by what means do we correct our aim? Fortunately we have the perfect guide in the form of our Torah, crafted with absolutely accurate precision and clarity, where each and every command targets some perfection in our thoughts, feelings, morals, speech or actions.

This Sunday we commence the month of Elul with the wake up blasts of the shofar. The High Holidays soon approach, when we come before God in judgment. We are fortunate as well to be alive at this time, not already dead with no chance to repent, where we may use this call to reflect, regret, and realign our values and actions with reality; with God's Torah. But not only do the commands' literal content educate us towards truth, the very style of the Torah's written words uncover even more truths; enlightening and invigorating our souls with God's method of concealment and revealing of these ideas. Two examples may be taken from this week's Parshas Re-eh.

“Guard yourselves lest you stumble after them (alien nations) after they have been wiped out from before you, and lest you inquire of their gods saying, ‘How do these nations worship their gods, and I too will do the same’.” (Deuteronomy 12:30)

God designed our minds in a manner that we must focus on individual ideas, as we apprehend nothing when bombarded with sensory overload.

Therefore He designed the Torah in a manner that our minds may identify individual concepts: Torah sections are demarcated by gaps in the lines of text, purposefully indicating the commencement and conclusion of individual themes. And although a section will contain many ideas, there exists in each section, one individual concept which determines and binds all subordinate ideas and lessons located therein.

This is a tradition, a “Mesora” as we call it. However, determining that underlying singularity in each section is not always an easy task, but it is quite enjoyable and captivating. This very section warning against idolatrous tendencies concludes a few verses later with Moses' warning “not to add or subtract from the Torah”. We wonder what the relationship is between these two ideas, between idolatry and altering the body of Torah content.

Man's temptation to follow other nations and

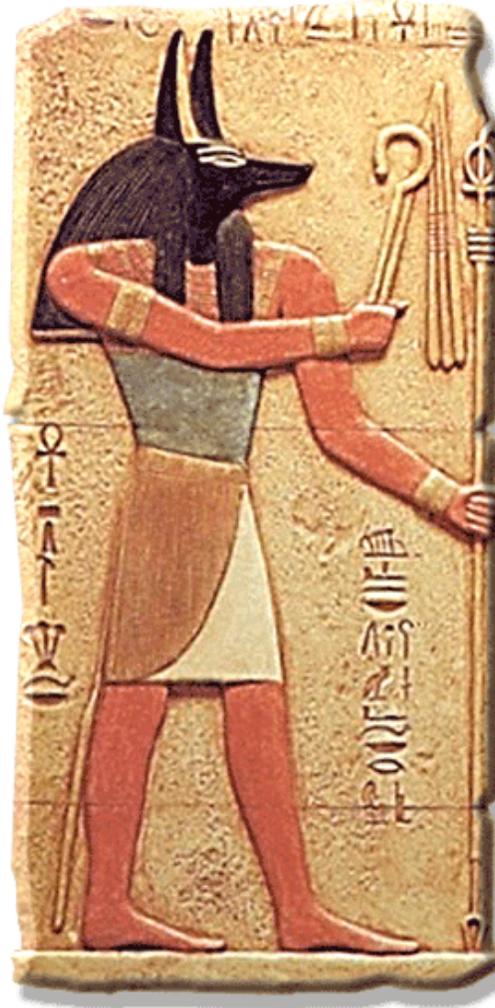
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their gods is a strong drive, and obviously why Moses felt it crucial to admonish the Jews. As we said at the outset, man may follow something externally validated as real, or else, he can only follow his own machinations. There exists no third possibility, for man is equipped with only two faculties: his intellect and his emotions. He is always functioning in one of these two realms. By aligning his warning against idolatry with the obligation to adhere meticulously to the Torah with no deviation, Moses teaches how man's natural and ever-surging fantasies may be curbed: exactitude is required if we are to remain living in line with truth. But once we act without instruction, we will end up following some erroneous, emotional feeling. Moses commanded the Jewish nation to be careful and not alter any part of the Torah. In this fashion, they will be protected from alien religious practices, since they are not allowed to deviate one iota. We see the connection.

But this is an example of not "decreasing" from the Torah, as idol worship equates to an abandonment of certain laws. Interestingly, Moses also warns against "adding" to the Torah. This is expressed in over religious activities. Both, idolatry and over religious zeal are equally prohibited. One might think being over religious is certainly admired by God, but God differs. One who does more than the Torah asks is equally following a destructive lifestyle, for he thinks he knows better than God. Truthfully, man must be humble enough to know that if he does not measure up to the angels, or even a Maimonides, he certainly cannot second-guess God's laws and better suggest what "being religious" means. God knows exactly what man needs, as a doctor knows the quantity of medication to administer to his patients. No patient ever said, "The doctor told me to take 3 pills daily, but I will take 6." No one plays with his life in this manner. So too, no one should play with his soul by adding to what God's limited Torah advises. Remaining true to Torah law, never adding or subtracting is the only means to guard against any deviation. Unfortunately, all too many Jews today pick and choose what laws they will keep. They do further harm to themselves with their justification, "Oh come now, do YOU really keep everything?"

Moses warns against the problem, and offers a solution. In the process, we discover why something seemingly unrelated, is actually the perfect remedy. We understand why Moses connects Torah deviation with idolatry. A further tie between these two themes is what underlies the very reason people deviate: it is their internal desires. The internal, instinctual world is the mother of idolatrous tendencies. Thus, the warning against Torah addition and subtraction is directed squarely at the internal world of emotions, be it



sensual or ideational, as is the case with idolatry. Adhering exactly to God's words, we make it impossible to give expression to our internal desires. Eventually, and only with deep study and analysis of His laws, man will come to see the truth in Torah and the fallacy in all other practices. He will eventually feel no attraction to what his mind will then see as fallacy. He will grow in his desire to understand more absolute truths, and ponder further about God.

On this note, I reiterate the dire need that educators insure in their curriculum, regular classes which examine other religions, contrasting them to Judaism, and exposing the absolute fallacy in their doctrines, while teaching the perfection and reasoning of Torah commands. Teaching Maimonides' 13 Principles should precede this. If this path is followed, students will no longer fall prey to missionaries and Jews for Jesus cults. Having clear proofs and answers; they will be dedicated to the perfection and unassailable truths of Judaism, and will easily refute proselytizers. To assist parents and educators, I once again direct you to issues 116 through 126 of the JewishTimes located here: <http://www.mesora.org/jewishtimes>

These issues are free as are all others, so make good use of our efforts and research, exposing and educating the flaws of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and their doctrines as nonsensical and destructive. However, be wary of voiding the education of these false religions, which will certainly keep students in harm's way, making them prime targets of missionaries. If you do not give students the answers, no one else will. (If you have gentile teachers and fear friction, I advise you preempt them about your plans, and even invite them to attend these discussion for their own good. But by all means, do not cower from this responsibility you all owe your children and students.)

"...For God is testing us to learn whether we love God with all our hearts and with all our souls." (Deuteronomy 13:2)

Let's take one more example from this week's Parsha. Deuteronomy 13:2 warns us not to follow a prophet or dreamer who successfully predicts a wondrous sign, while directing us to follow idolatry. We are told not to listen to their words, "for God is testing us to learn whether we love God with all our hearts and with all our souls."

Many problems arise: Why would God test us in this way? What does "test" mean? Does God truly need to "learn" anything? Why would our refusal to follow the prophet or dreamer prove our "love for God"? And why is this prophet any different than Moses, who also gave signs, that we should favor Moses?

The very next verse says as follows, "After God your God you shall go, He you shall fear, and His commands you shall guard, and in His voice you shall listen, and He shall you worship, and in Him shall you cleave." (Deut. 13:4) Some verse! So many topics and actions, and a style of repetition not seen elsewhere. Most of all, we ask again, "What is the relationship between this verse and the warning not to follow the false prophet or dreamer?" How exactly is Deuteronomy 13:4 the 'perfect' response to the false prophet and dreamer?

We must know that God is not "testing" us in the manner you may first assume. This is a test, but one which 'we' initiate, as God would not set up such 'ambushes' on His people. He does not seek that we stumble. He is not vicious. What then is this "test"? It means that God arranged the world and human condition and Earthly experience from Genesis, and this is just another scenario which man will face in life: "Whom do I follow?" The test here is whether we use our minds or our emotions, not that God arranged this specific event. "Do we feel impressed with illusions, or remain firm in our intellectual convictions?" This is the test. But life has many

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tests. We could say similarly, that when we pass a non-Kosher restaurant wafting mouth-watering aromas, that God is again “testing” us. God doesn’t send messages to individuals to do these things: it is “human nature” at work. God certainly is not forcing a prophet or dreamer to say things he does not wish to: God did not send Jesus as a test to the Jews, as God never tampers with free will, not even with Pharaoh. That would violate His plan that each man and woman be the sole cause of his or her actions: “Reward and Punishment” is based on free will everywhere, with everyone, at all times. God also knows what we will do, but that is irrelevant, since we do not, this event is a trial. So the phrase “God is testing you” used here, means that God designed the world so that in many cases – mostly in following God – (not false prophets) we express our free will, and this expression and choice, is termed a “test”.

Now, how shall we refute the prophet or dreamer? We have the answer, but Moses reiterates it again, “His commands you shall guard, and in His voice you shall listen...” This refers to Sinai, from where we received these very commands, and from where we heard the voice created by God[1]. Since we have established proof of God and His Torah from Revelation at Sinai, this is what we know is truth, and nothing else can prove otherwise. An event is as unchangeable as God. Sinai took place, and there is no changing that historic truth. Nothing can disprove God and His will, as expressed in His Torah. This is what is meant by our “love of God”, meaning, “our love of truth”. This is why Moses’ testimonies are superior to those of any false prophet or dreamer: Moses has proof on his side, derived from Sinai. Following proof demonstrates our attachment to reality, and all reality is identical with God’s will. Thus, using our reasoning to detect what reality is, and then adhering to what our minds know to be true, we are “loving God.” We are attached to the source of all reality.

Therefore we again see that Moses aligns one verse on the heels of another, as the latter verse offers the solution to the problems in the first verse. But we must use our minds to discover these truths. And when we do, we are amazed by Moses’ methods of subtle instruction, which propel our minds to uncover more than what can be conveyed with discreet words alone.

The repetitive style of this verse, I feel, may indicate the “overabundance of proof” for following God. Meaning, that which is overwhelmingly rooted in, and validated by reality, is the very method for which we determine what to follow. Judaism is all about truth, proof, reason, and living in line with these fundamentals. We care nothing about what only seems to be a wondrous sign, if the performer

asks that we abandon what we know is truth. Let him make all the miracles he wants, but he cannot convince us that Sinai did not occur. He cannot convince us that the world has no Creator. Signs mean nothing: the message is that which concerns the seeker of truth. For this reason, Maimonides explained that the Jews did not believe in Moses, based on miracles.[2] Therefore, we do not pit Moses against a false prophet, and measure their words based on the ‘more impressive’ miracle. As a matter of fact, if you can discern, you will see the signs of false prophets and dreamers are in fact, mere illusions, as Sforno teaches, “For there is no doubt that all his words are false and conjured from his heart...his miracles are sleight of hand...you shall know without a doubt that he dreamed nothing”. (ibid)

What is the difference between these two sections and their remedial verses? It is clear that the first verse deals with “internal” prodding towards idolatry: we look at other nations’ gods and seek to assimilate. Moses recognized this emotional need, as did Shmuel, and criticized the Jews for desiring a king “as all the other nations”. [3] This act of seeking to worship the gods of other nations is borne of the internal, idolatrous emotions, combined with social approval. The instincts are attracted to less abstract (physical) deities, and abandon the true God in place of phantoms. Therefore, the remedial verse addresses the command to never deviate from the Torah, and this will insure adherence to reality. We must keep a yoke on our internal fantasies. But the second case deals with prophets and dreamers who fantasize that God spoke with them. Here, the deviation from Torah ideals originates not internally, but external to the Jew. The source of error can be either internal, or external. This being the case, the remedial verse calls on us to recall those internal flaws or external events which will arbitrate between Moses and others, reminding us of the true reality: that which was witnessed by millions on Mount Sinai, and what our minds know as truth.

Both cases teach us to focus on what is real and true. Many people wish to live in a fantasy world and will do all they can to protect their disoriented and blurred view of reality. But since we all must answer to God – the Creator of reality – and since we live in the world that He created, it is wise that we abandon fantasy, focus intelligently on reality, and do all in our power to use our one life for the best, and that is defined by God. ■

[1] God has no vocal chords, thus, he has no “voice”.

[2] Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 8:1

[3] Samuel I, 12:19

Re'eh

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“Take care lest you become entrapped by them after they have been destroyed before you. You should not seek the i rgods asking, “how did these nations worship their gods; I also will do so.” Do not do so to Hashem your G-d. This is because they did for their gods all sorts of abominations that Hashem despises. Even their sons and daughters they burned in fire to their gods.” (Devarim 12:30-31)

The commentaries are somewhat troubled with the meaning of these two passages. But before considering their concern, let us understand the simple meaning of the passages. Moshe warns the nation that they should not succumb to the temptation to adopt the idolatrous practices prevalent in the land of Canaan. Moshe warns the people that Hashem regards these practices as abominations. In order to emphasize this point, he notes that these idolaters even burned their own children in order to appease their gods.

However, Moshe adds one other observation. He points out that these nations will be destroyed. He tells the people that once they have seen that these nations have been destroyed, they should not be tempted to adopt the forms of worship that they employed. Moshe implies that the destruction of these nations is somehow relevant to the admonition against adopting their various modes of worship. It is this implication that troubled the commentaries. What exactly is the connection between the destruction of the nations of Canaan and the admonition against adopting their various forms of idolatrous worship?

Rashi suggests that the destruction of these nations proves the impotence of their supposed gods and the ineffectiveness of the various ways in which they were worshiped. In other words, Moshe points out to Bnai Yisrael that these nations worshiped false gods through ineffective forms of worship and they were destroyed. This should indicate to Bnai Yisrael that if they abandon Hashem and adopt the idolatry of the nations of

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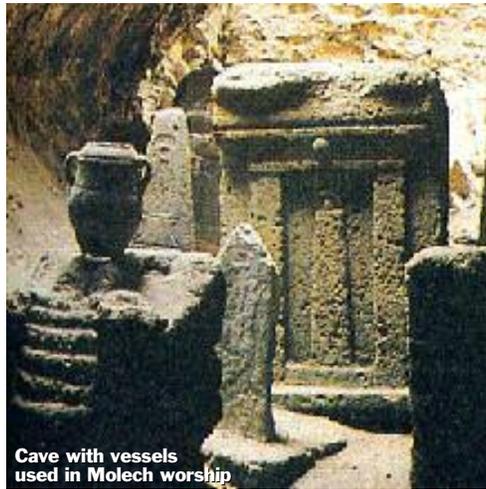
Canaan, then they too will be destroyed.[1]

However, Nachmanides rejects this interpretation. Nachmanides does not elaborate on his reasons for rejecting Rashi's interpretation of this element of the passage. However, Rav Naftali Tzvi Berlin – Netziv – does discuss this issue. He explains that according to Rashi it would seem that Moshe admonishes the people to reject idolatry because it is not effective. Netziv explains that such an interpretation of the passage is problematic. We do not reject idolatry because it is ineffective. We reject it because it is false! It is inappropriate to imply that we should reject idolatry simply because it is not effective.[2]

However, Nachmanides must explain Moshe's message in referring to the destruction of the nations of Canaan. Nachmanides explanation of this reference is based on his interpretation of Moshe's overall message. What is Moshe's specific admonishment? If we carefully consider Moshe's words, there is some ambiguity. He tells the nation they it should not adopt the practices of the idolaters of Canaan. How e v e was Moshe merely telling the people – once again – to not worship idols? Nachmanides suggests that Moshe's message is not a repetition of the often stated injunction against idolatry. He suggests that Moshe is making a new point. We are not permitted to incorporate the various modes of worship employed by the idolaters into our worship of Hashem. In other words, we are prohibited against identifying worship services and rituals from other nations and incorporating these rituals into the service of Hashem.

Based on this interpretation, Nachmanides reinterprets Moshe's reference to the destruction of the nations of Canaan. Moshe is concerned that the people may find some allure in these alien services. They may conclude that these services are really suitable modes of worship. However, they were used by the nations of Canaan in the worship of false gods. These nations perverted services that should have been used in the worship of Hashem and applied them to the worship of idols. This is one of the reasons they were destroyed. In other words, Moshe warned the people that they should not misinterpret Hashem's reasons for destroying the nations of Canaan. They should not conclude that these nations were destroyed because they desecrated the honor of Hashem by employing modes of worship in the service of other gods that are only fit for Him. Instead, they must realize that the modes of worship employed by the idolaters are innately reprehensible. It is not appropriate to adopt these practices and incorporate them into our service of Hashem.

Nachmanides points out that his interpretation of Moshe's opening remark is consistent with the remainder of his address on this issue. Next, Moshe observes that the nations of Canaan even



Cave with vessels used in Molech worship

sacrificed their own children to their false gods. Nachmanides explains that this observation is completely consistent with his interpretation of Moshe's message. Moshe is proving that the rituals employed by the idolaters of Canaan are inherently abhorrent. Their very concept of appropriate worship is grossly misguided. The proof is that for the sake of worship, they sacrificed their own children.[3]

In summary, Nachmanides makes three important points. First, he explains that idolatrous practices should not be incorporated into the service of Hashem. It would seem that Nachmanides would extend this injunction to practices and rituals from any other religion. They should not be adopted.

Second, these idolatrous practices are not inappropriate merely because they are associated with idolatry. They are innately objectionable. They reflect a perverted concept of worship. The depravity of the idolatrous concept of worship is indicated by the practice of child sacrifice.

Third, Nachmanides implies that the modes of worship established by the Torah are not arbitrary. They are meaningful and appropriate. They are selected by the Torah because they reflect a suitable attitude and outlook regarding service of Hashem.

It is possible to understand Nachmanides' interpretation of Moshe's comments on a slightly deeper level. It is clear that Nachmanides interprets Moshe's main point to be that we should not adopt the rituals of the idolater's of Canaan because they are meaningless – even ridiculous. As an example, Moshe observes that these idolaters engaged in child sacrifice. Why did Moshe choose specifically this illustration? Cer t a i n Moshe could have identified other equally bizarre practices. Was this illustration merely arbitrary – perhaps, selected because it is so shocking – or does it imply a specific message?

Nachmanides implies that we are incapable to creating and instituting original rituals. Moshe "proves" his point by referring to child sacrifice.

But this is an extreme example. Cannot one respond to Moshe with a counter-argument? It is true that nations of Canaan were sometimes grossly misguided in their concept of worship. Moshe's illustration does prove this point. But does it follow that therefore, every practice that these nations adopted was depraved?

Apparently, according to Nachmanides, the answer to this second question is that child sacrifice is an extreme example of an overall attitude and misdirection. Any attempt to innovate and invent new rituals is fruitless and dangerous. The inappropriateness of these inventions may not be as evident as in the instance of child sacrifice. Nonetheless, any invention or innovation is inappropriate. Why does Nachmanides insist that we are so woefully incapable of creating new rituals?

In order to understand Nachmanides' position, let us consider another issue. It has often been observed that although the major religions all regard compassion as a virtue, many of the greatest atrocities in humankind's history have been performed in the name of religion. Of course, Jews are acutely aware of this phenomenon. Many of the major persecutions that we have experienced – for example, the Crusades – were executed in the name of religion. But this phenomenon is not merely an expression of a hatred for Jews. Throughout history and in modern times it has been common practice for one religious group to persecute and even employ genocide against the members of another religious group. And all of these atrocities are performed in the name of religions that ostensibly hold compassion to be one of the highest virtues.

Let us disregard for this discussion the seeming contradiction in religious doctrine. We will ignore the question of how a religion can preach compassion and at the same time endorse the most shocking forms of violence. Let us focus on the individual. How is it possible for a person to be raised to value compassion and to engage in such atrocities? What happens to this compassionate person? Why does his own personality not rebel against the violence he is contemplating?

There is more than one explanation for this phenomenon. How e v e let us focus on one factor. The human personality is composed of positive and negative traits. There is a dark side to the human being. Buried in the recesses of the human personality are primitive urges that are kept in check by the positive elements of the personality. Every person has at one time or another been seized by a desire that is unpleasant – even difficult to acknowledge. But hopefully, through the influence of the positive elements of one's personality, a person is able to hold this objectionable desire in check.

Now, consider the affect of removing the

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Weekly Parsha

Books

positive elements of the human personality. If these positive elements were removed, then the darkest elements of our personalities would come to the fore. This is exactly what occurs when religion endorses and encourages violence towards others. When a religion condones and incites violence towards others, it incapacitates and suspends the natural barriers that check the dark elements of our personalities. The darkest desires can now emerge and fully express themselves.

Now, let us return to Moshe's message. The idolaters of Canaan had many forms of worship. How did they develop these rituals? We do not need to engage in an anthropological study to answer this question. In some manner, these rituals were human inventions. They were products of the human imagination and personality. But this is a dangerous source for religious innovation. The human personality is not completely positive. It contains its darker elements – the yetzer hara. In fact, we rely on our religious convictions and training to help check the impulses of the yetzer hara. What happens when rather than religion checking the dark elements of our personality, the influence of the yetzer hara informs our concept of worship? It is likely that the outcome will be a religion that expresses some of the most reprehensible elements of the human personality.

We can now appreciate Moshe's illustration. Moshe wished to demonstrate that a religion created by human imagination, will undoubtedly reflect the influence of the yetzer hara. In order to illustrate this issue, he could not refer to some ridiculous or meaningless practice. Such an illustration would only prove that we are capable of folly. But Moshe did not want to prove that we are fallible. He wanted to prove that a religion constructed through the human imagination will inevitably, reflect the darker elements of the personality. Moshe illustrated this point with child sacrifice.

Furthermore, according to Nachmanides, Moshe's contention was that this outcome is unavoidable. The Torah is a revealed religion. It is not a human invention. It is instrumental in checking our darker urges. But when we attempt to invent our own religious innovations, our entire personality is engaged. Nachmanides maintains although we may not suggest human sacrifice, the influences of the yetzer hara cannot be completely removed from our innovations and inventions. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 12:30.

[2] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Devarim 12:30.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 12:30.

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Taken from "Windows to the Soul"

Dead Men's Gods

RABBI MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

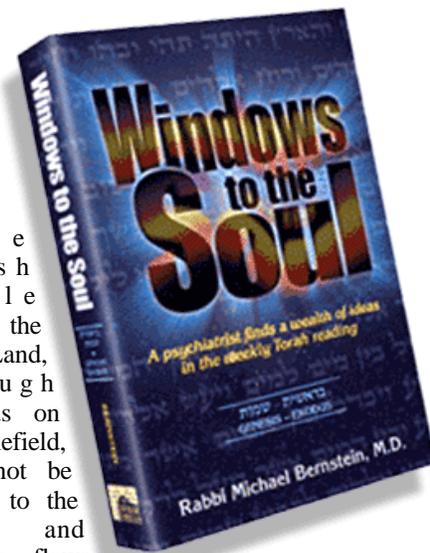
Full victory over the Canaanites will not come, Moses tells the people, when they defeat the defending armies on the battlefield. The ultimate battle will not be fought until afterward (12:30-31). "Watch yourself lest you become drawn to them after they have been destroyed before you, and lest you seek out their gods, saying, 'How did these nations worship their gods? I, too, will do the same.' You shall not do so to God your Lord, for everything that is an abomination to God, that He hates, they have done for their gods; for they have even burned their sons and daughters in the fire for their gods."

These verses reveal the great seductive power of idolatry. Consider the situation. The Jewish people have just conquered the land. With God's help, they have destroyed the indigenous defenders and completely exposed the impotence of their gods. God's power is manifest; the pagan's imaginary deities are discredited. Incredibly at this moment of Jewish triumph, the Torah warns the victors not to be drawn to the gods of the vanquished. Why would they be drawn to these dead men's gods or find their cults attractive? What is at the root of this strange seductive power?

In actuality, idolatry is much more apt to arise out of the psychological needs of idol worshippers than from an intellectual mistake. Idolatry allows its adherents to create and observe, in the guise of a religion, a system of rituals and practices that satisfy their primitive urges and address their insecurities. Even when these pagan religions call upon their adherents to make sacrifices, there is a simultaneous satisfaction of deep primitive urges. Often this attraction is so subtle that the worshippers, unaccustomed to self-examination, are unaware of its insidious nature.

The Jewish people entering the Holy Land, although victorious on the battlefield, would not be immune to the drives and character flaws that draw people to idolatry. It was quite possible they would turn in that direction as they contended with the psychological pressures of their daily lives. However, having no direct experience with idolatrous cults, they might be intrigued by the vestiges of the destroyed cults all around them, sensing their psychological appeal. And they would ask, "How did these nations worship their gods? I, too, will do the same." The Torah forbids them to do this and warns them (12:31) that, in the end, such practices can even lead their followers to throw their children into the fire.

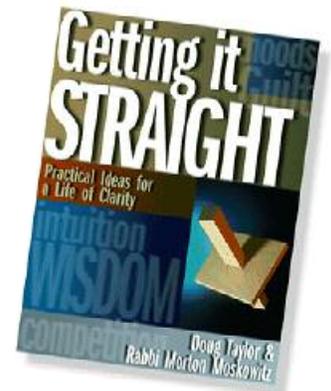
Ironically, the practice of child immolation, from a psychological perspective, reflects selfishness rather than altruistically intended, though misguided, religious fervor. The practitioners may tell themselves they are sacrificing their beloved children selflessly, but the exact opposite is true. These supposedly religious people are tremendously narcissistic, full of undeflected self-love. Attached to the physical reality and fearful of their own mortality, they are prepared to make the penultimate sacrifice of a relatively expendable part of themselves, namely their children, in order to protect that which is most important, namely themselves. ■



Taken from "Getting it Straight"

Evolution II

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ



"Care to live dangerously?"

His eyes sparkled behind the question as we settled in patio chairs at the small cafe overlooking the water. Spring had finally arrived, accompanied by a gentle afternoon breeze holding promises of the warm summer days to come. We each ordered herb tea.

"That depends," I said. "How dangerous?"

The King of Rational Thought smiled. "Do you remember when you wrote about our conversation on evolution and abstract thinking a few months ago? That evolution couldn't possibly have occurred based only on survival of the fittest because the ability to think abstractly about the idea of evolution itself wasn't needed for survival and therefore would never have developed?"

"Yes," I said. "And I also remember that two of my readers wrote and took issue with your conclusion."

"Right. Since then, I've had time to study their responses," he said. "Want to tackle one of them?"

I hesitated. "Uh, why is this dangerous?"

"Because," he said as the waiter brought our tea, "many people think that evolution answers the question about whether God exists or not. That makes evolution a religious topic. And people get very emotional about religion."

"I won't argue that point," I said, absorbing the steamy chamomile blossom aroma. "Ok, I'm game."

"Excellent," he said, pulling the newspaper clipping from his shirt pocket. "This reader points out that walking upright allows us to dance. The ability to speak allows us to sing. And the development of an opposable thumb allows us to button shirts. He goes on to say that dancing, singing, and buttoning shirts have nothing to do with survival. Yet they are by-



products of walking, speaking, and an opposable thumb - abilities he presumes we did develop for survival. Thus he concludes that the ability to think abstractly is similarly a by-product of the development of the cerebral capacity we needed to survive. Got it?"

"Yeaaahh," I said slowly.

"What's wrong with it?" asked the King of Rational Thought.

I was afraid he'd ask that. "What do you mean?" I stalled.

"There is a basic flaw in that reasoning," he replied. "Do you see it?"

I looked and looked. I even stared studiously at my soggy tea bag, hoping for inspiration. It didn't work, and I finally gave up.

"Don't feel bad," he said. "Most evolutionists miss this point. There is a critical difference between (a) using a given capacity for another function, and (b) developing a significantly different or advanced capacity. For example, the capacity to walk and dance are not in the same relationship as the capacity to walk and run. Dancing is simply using walking for another function. But running is an advanced ability. When it comes to evolution, if you don't need the ability to run, you won't develop it.

"In other words," he continued, "if evolution is correct, you might use an ability developed for survival - such as walking - for some other non-survival purpose, such as dancing. But you won't develop a new or advanced ability - such as running - unless you need it for survival. Something useless will not develop in the evolutionary process. Extras like that are detractions which will make you inferior in terms of survival, not superior.

"Similarly," he went on, "the ability to think abstractly is an advanced thinking ability, clearly not needed for survival. It is hardly in the same league with, or ancillary to, the type of thinking that, say, an ape might use to get a banana."

"Wow," I said, as I saw his point. "That's a subtle yet powerful distinction."

"It's about proper classification," he said. "That's one of the keys to knowledge."

"Is there more?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied as he finished his tea and rose to leave, "but I have to go. Maybe we can cover it another time. Are you coming?"

"No, I think I'll stick around a few minutes longer," I replied. "You've given me a lot to think about. Besides, I'm a bit hungry."

A gleam appeared in my eyes.

"Maybe I'll order a banana." □

*“Take words with you, and return to Hashem...”
(Hosea 14:3)*

Teshuva the Concept of

RABBI JOSHUA MAROOF

As we approach the High Holidays each year, the theme of self-improvement becomes one of the focal points of our thought. We are strongly encouraged to involve ourselves in the process of teshuva, or repentance, in preparation for the upcoming Days of Awe. The Jewish notion of repentance, however, is by no means simple or self-evident. What exactly is teshuva, and how does one go about doing it? The Torah provides precise guidelines for the fulfillment of all of its commandments; thus, if we intend to observe the commandments correctly, it is incumbent upon us to consult these guidelines as a matter of course. The commandment to repent of our sins is no exception to this rule - it encompasses a host of halakhot and principles that are indispensable to its proper performance. Therefore, before we can repent in a halakhically meaningful way, we must take up the study of the Torah's unique approach to teshuva.

The Rambam's Introduction: The Mitzvah of Teshuva

Without question, if we wish to develop a better understanding of the subject of repentance, we must turn to the Mishneh Torah of the Rambam. The Rambam was the first of our Sages to provide us with a systematic and comprehensive treatment of the topic of teshuva, and his accomplishment in this area remains unequaled to this day. Careful attention to the Rambam's formulation of the Laws of Repentance is sure to reward us with valuable insight into their deeper significance. As an introduction to these laws, the Rambam writes:

“This section contains one positive commandment, namely, that the sinner should repent before Hashem and confess.”

This brief statement raises a powerful question: what sense does it make for the Torah to institute a commandment to repent? If a person who has transgressed one of the laws of the Torah subsequently decides to repent, he will simply go back to keeping the original commandment he violated. He does not need to be commanded to heed a commandment that already exists! If, on the other hand, he has not yet resolved to abandon his sin, there is no reason to think that an additional commandment will help him. He can choose to neglect the commandment to repent just like he opted to neglect the mitzvah he has already violated!

Additionally interesting is the fact that the Rambam uses an apparently superfluous phrase to describe repentance, calling it repentance before Hashem. Of course, the Rambam is not alone in using this kind of terminology. The Tanach often refers to repentance as returning to Hashem. Nevertheless, this concept is very difficult to comprehend. When a person repents, it appears that he is attempting to return to the observance of a particular commandment, not to Hashem! The association of teshuvah with standing before Hashem does not seem like an accurate depiction of what occurs in real repentance where one's conduct, rather than one's God, is the center of focus. Simply put, how is the notion of being in the presence of God relevant to the process of repentance?

Repentance and Confession

As our investigation of the Rambam's teachings progresses, further difficulties begin to emerge. The first chapter of the Laws of Repentance commences with these words:

All of the commandments of the Torah, whether positive or negative - if a person should violate one of them, whether willfully or inadvertently - when he repents and turns away from his sin, he is

obligated to confess before God, Blessed is He, as it is written: “A man or a woman, when they do any sin...and they shall confess the sin that they did.” This refers to verbal confession. This confession is a positive commandment. How does one confess? He says: “Please Hashem! I have erred, sinned, and rebelled before you, and I have done such-and-such. Now I am regretful and embarrassed by my behavior and I will never return to this thing again.” This is the essential confession. And anyone who makes a more lengthy confession and elaborates on this topic is praiseworthy.

The first feature of this passage that requires some explanation is the repetitive clause “when he repents and turns away from his sin.” Isn't repentance and turning away from sin the same thing? The Rambam appears to be repeating himself unnecessarily here.

The concept of viduy, or confession, is also difficult to understand. Ostensibly, in requiring us to repent, the Torah's primary objective is that we stop behaving in ways that violate its laws. One can certainly make a firm decision to change one's behavior for the better without verbalizing it; in the end, it is what a person does that should matter, not what a person says. Yet, it is clear that the Torah sees confession as indispensable to teshuva. The Rambam reflects this by counting teshuva and viduy as a single, unitary commandment as well as by mentioning repentance and confession together throughout his treatment of the subject. Hence, we must ask, what benefit do we gain by translating our repentance into words? How does this make our teshuva more complete?

Additionally problematic is the Rambam's recommendation that the sinner elaborate on his confession as much as possible. What room is there for elaboration in a viduy? Seemingly, once the sin has been identified, remorse has been expressed, and a resolution to change has been adopted, there is nothing left to say. Whether one's confession is long or short, what we are most interested in is whether the sinner discontinues his inappropriate behavior. There should be no room for differences in degree - either a person has abandoned his error, or he has not.

Defining Teshuva

In order to resolve these difficulties, we must examine the concepts of sin and teshuva more carefully. Specifically, we must consider the fact that a person who violates one of the commandments is doing a lot more than acting inappropriately. His sin is not a random occurrence that can be viewed separately from his personal beliefs and convictions. On the contrary, through his action he is demonstrating something about his entire value system: he is making a statement about what he envisions - or does not envision - as his purpose in life. An example will better illustrate this

(continued on next page)

point. The Torah demands that we restrict ourselves to the consumption of kosher food. Eating kosher is instrumental to our development as human beings because it keeps us aware of our spiritual objective in life even as we are involved in taking care of our physical needs. Observance of kashrut demonstrates our belief that eating cannot be significant in its own right unless it is a means to our ultimate goal - the service of our Creator. Hence, an individual who succumbs to temptation and consumes non-kosher food has not simply committed a technical violation of Torah law. He has indicated through his action that he is not fully dedicated to the philosophical principles of Judaism. He has not adopted an unequivocal set of life priorities - he is torn between the lure of instinctual gratification for its own sake and his desire to develop his mind and soul. In a moment of weakness, his baser drives grabbed hold of him and overpowered his intellect, leading him to neglect an important commandment. The violation itself, however, was only a symptom of a more basic conflict within his personality.

When we become aware that we have committed a sin, then, this should serve as a stimulus to deeper reflection on the purpose of our existence. We should not write it off as a fluke but should perceive it as a sign that we have moved too far in the wrong direction philosophically, that we have not sufficiently clarified our ultimate priorities in life. We should realize that our action indicates that we are ambivalent about some aspects of the Torah's values and directives, and that, as a result, we still struggle with them in practice. This in turn should motivate us to immerse ourselves in Torah study in order to gain a clearer sense of the purpose of our existence and to increase our awareness of how important its teachings and mitzvot are for our development. We will emerge from this quest with a more definitive set of principles and priorities to guide our lives - and, as a natural result, we will feel compelled to abandon our misguided ways. This, in fact, is the reason why the Rambam uses the double language "when a person repents and turns from his sin" when he introduces the mitzvah of doing teshuva. It is the internal, transformational process of self-reflection, value clarification and study that constitutes true teshuva - the behavior change is, as it were, a by-product of this monumental effort.

Teshuva - A Unique Commandment

Now we are in a better position to understand why repentance must be counted as an independent commandment. It is not equivalent to simply resuming the observance of the mitzvah that has been neglected. Even if the Torah had not included a mitzvah to repent, a person who ate non-kosher food would be expected to return to a kosher diet as soon as possible in order to avoid further violations of the formal laws of kashrut. This change in



behavior alone would be expected as a function of the original commandments to keep kosher, with or without an additional commandment to repent. This change in behavior, however, would not constitute real teshuva. The commandment to do teshuva requires a complex set of operations that transcend the realm of behavior and focus on the values and beliefs of the sinner. When we commit a transgression, we are obligated to delve into our personal convictions and correct the philosophical error(s) that led to the sin. We are commanded to refine our understanding of our purpose in life and the choices we must make if we are to achieve that purpose. Although the person who decides to resume his observance of kashrut will do his best to avoid future kashrut infractions, he will still be required - as a function of his past violations - to engage in the more introspective process of teshuvah at some point in time. By introducing a separate mitzvah of teshuvah, the Torah teaches us that we have not fully repented for our transgressions until we have taken the time to explore the depth of their significance. Superficial changes in our habits are not enough to satisfy the Torah's requirement of teshuva.

The Role of Confession

The new insights we have developed can also help us to explain why confession is such a central feature of repentance. Human speech is a reflection of the ability of human beings to think conceptually. Indeed, from the way an individual communicates an idea it is easy to measure the coherence and precision of his understanding. When a person cannot put what he is thinking into words, we tend to assume that his musings are not yet developed enough to be expressed in speech. Said simply, the use of language is intimately related to the use of the mind. If teshuva were synonymous with bettering our actions, confession would have no intrinsic relationship to it. Repentance would be a matter of the body while confession would be a matter of the soul. One would theoretically be possible without the other. However, now that we see that teshuva is, in reality, a process of thought and analysis, it follows that - if

we have truly completed the process - we should be able to summarize our conclusions in a final declarative statement. At the culminating point of our introspection, we are challenged to demonstrate the clarity of our newfound convictions by expressing them verbally. If we cannot rise to the challenge, our repentance is by no means complete - our thought is not yet clear enough to be articulated. We must continue to seek a better understanding of our personal issues until we have a firm grasp on them, until we can use language to describe them. By the same token, when we have made real progress in our soul-searching, our confession would be expected to mirror the profundity and complexity of our self-analysis. This is why the Rambam states that a confession has the potential for a great deal of expansion and elaboration. The more thoroughly we have delved into the significance of our transgressions and the examination of our life priorities, the richer and more descriptive our confessions will be.

Returning "Before Hashem"

At this stage it becomes clear why doing teshuva is always described as returning to, or before, Hashem. It is true that the immediate stimulus to repentance is usually a specific violation of Torah law that occurs at a particular time in a particular place. However, the process of repentance moves beyond the superficial features of a transgression to an analysis of its underlying causes and a reflection on the ultimate purpose of our lives. Teshuva culminates not merely in the rejection of incorrect values but in the sinner's rededication to the highest human priority - the quest for knowledge of Hashem. As a result of his soul-searching, the penitent's awareness of his true position in the Universe has deepened tremendously; thus, he now stands in the presence of Hashem, humbly refocused on the meaning of his own existence. ■

This essay is based on Rabbi Joshua Maroof's class on Rambam that is held in Riverdale, NY each week. Acknowledgments are extended to all who attend the class and, as a result of their participation, make an immeasurable contribution to the quality of its content. (Ehul 5763)



UNfulfilled Charter

RABBI SHEA HECHT

On June 26, 1945 the United Nations charter was signed by a US representative. According to the charter the UN was set up to "...save succeeding generations from war... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights...in the equal rights...of nations large and small...to practice tolerance...to maintain international peace and security..."

When the UN was set up the peoples of the world must have been duly moved. What an impressive charter! What incredible goals! What hope everyone must have had for a peaceful future. Imagine! An international organization meant to keep the peace, one which learned from the mistakes of the League of Nations - its predecessor.

Though it had great potential, the UN has proven to be a disappointing, bureaucratic, conglomeration of nations driven by hatred and politicking. It is hard to remember when the UN last took a leadership position in global politics that resulted in peaceful co-existence among nations. It's true that the UN does sponsor worthwhile programs that have positive impact in many parts of the world, such as UNICEF and the UNAIDS programs, however any nation or private organization can accomplish the same, probably for a lot less money. Why spend money funding a whole bureaucracy to do that?

Just in regard to tiny beleaguered Israel, it is clear that the UN has strayed far from its original intent. In October 2000, three Israeli soldiers were kidnapped and killed at the Lebanese border right under the noses of the UN "peace keepers." There were signs that the UN peacekeepers were not just witnesses but actual participants in this heinous crime. There was video footage that would have helped the Israelis identify the Lebanese kidnappers, which the UN said they couldn't release because they are 'an international body and they can't play a role in transferring intelligence information to either party'. Interestingly enough in the partial video

footage Israel did get, the car that was used for the kidnapping had UN license plates - which (of course) the UN said were forged. The UN also sponsors schools and textbooks in the PA. These teach hatred and violence towards Israel to the children who learn in those schools - making them ready fodder for the extremists who seek to turn them into human bombs. The UN knows what these schools teach and choose to ignore it.

Recent reports say that the UN has paid for the production of thousands of banners, bumper stickers, mugs and T-shirts bearing the slogan 'Today Gaza and Tomorrow the West Bank and Jerusalem.' In addition to the explosive slogan many of these items, which have been distributed to the Palestinian Arabs in the Gaza Strip, displayed the logo of the United Nations Development Program.

The UN support of the Palestinian Authority's propaganda has provoked outrage from many, who are blaming the UN for dispersing the inflammatory message they say encourages Palestinian Arab violence. The Arabic slogan, which refers to disputed territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, has served as the Palestinian Arab effort to spin the withdrawal as victory.

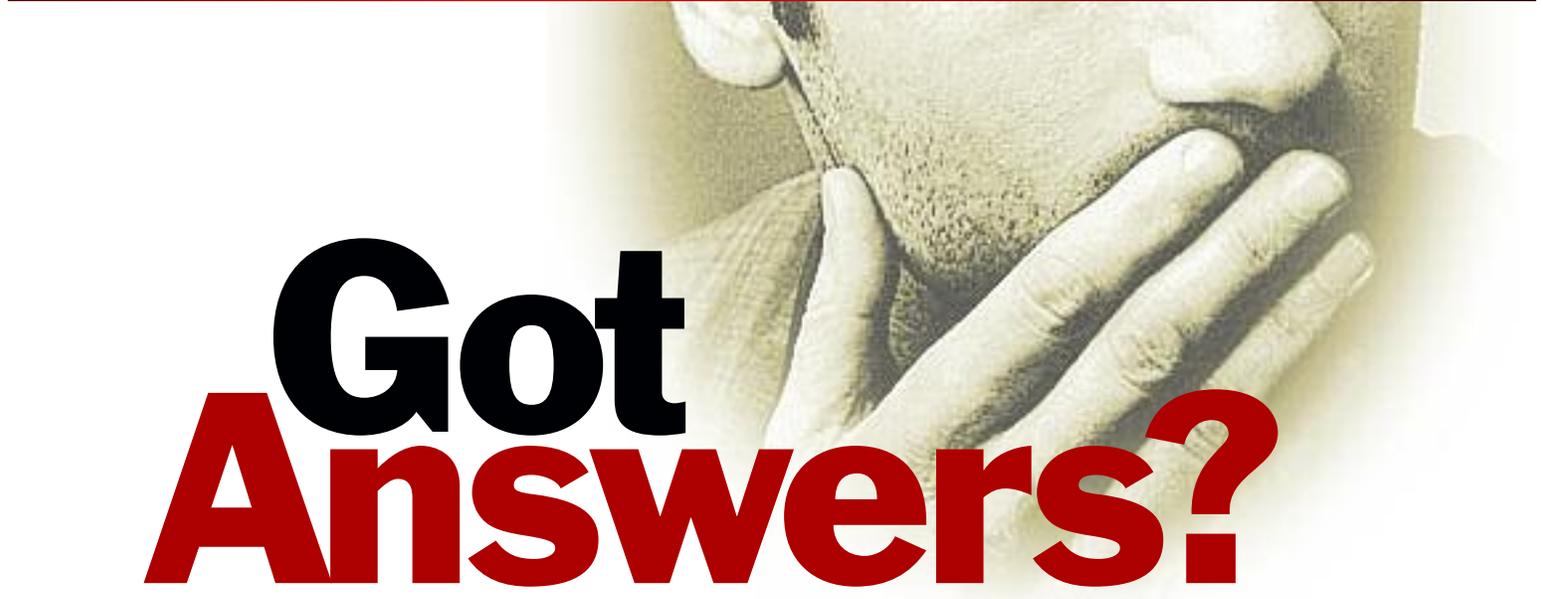
I have a problem with the fact that the UN seems to be an independent world government without any overseer. They do things that affect many different countries and they do whatever they please just because they are the "UN" - which according to its charter should remain neutral in global disputes. The Middle Eastern conflict has lasted too many years and will not be solved by some biased and unchecked world body.

The United State's new ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, has labeled the actions of the UN "inappropriate and unacceptable." Mr. Bolton said that the UN has failed to explain why it gave money to the PA for the production of these items with the provocative slogans. Mr. Bolton told the UN that the most



serious problem for his office was not the fact that the logo was printed on the material, but the fact that the agency used their money to support this divisive message. I applaud President Bush for having the courage to appoint a man with these moral credentials to represent our country at the UN.

The actions of the UN over the years show us that this is not an isolated case, but rather demonstrates what the UN is all about. Though the UN has agreed to stop paying for the anti-Israel propaganda, their track record for biased actions make me wonder what else they have up their sleeve that we just don't know about yet. Actually, the USA would do everybody a favor, especially the people who live in NYC, if they get rid of the entire UN complex and put up affordable housing instead. ■



Got Answers?

School starts Tuesday. What classes have your yeshiva or day school incorporated to protect your children from missionaries, “Jews for Jesus”, and others? Jewish youth invariably meet up with alien religious influences; in college, at work, and on the internet...so Mesora’s presence is helpful.

Will your child have the rational answers and convictions to refute other religions and remain Jewish? Is your son or daughter convinced of Judaism’s irrefutable Fundamentals? Are you? Do they find other religions appealing? Will they raise the statistic of 50% of Jews who intermarry? Avoid teaching your children now – regret it later.

Insure that your school teaches Judaism’s Fundamentals and the flaws of the other major religions. Print our JewishTimes issues #116-126 free. We have composed essays so Jewish youths possess the knowledge essential for an unwavering, Jewish life. Download free: <http://www.Mesora.org/JewishTimes>

**Knowing the answers,
is the only answer.**

