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Rabbi Saul Zucker

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Weekly Parsha

Korach

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Korach the son of Yitzhar the son of Kahat the son of Leyve separated himself, together with Datan and Aviram the sons of Ahaliav and Ohn the son of Pelet, the sons of Reuven.” (BeMidbar 16:1)

Korach initiated a dispute with Moshe regarding the leadership of Bnai Yisrael. Rashi explains that Korach was motivated by personal ambitions. Moshe had appointed

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RESPONSE FROM
TRUE TORAH
EDUCATORS

Segula II

The Rashba views segulas as those empirically proven phenomena for which we may have no explanation, not the popular beliefs in unproven claims like red bendels and amulets

RABBI SAUL ZUCKER

The phenomenon of Segulos has generated much passionate, well-intentioned discussion among people who are sincerely committed to Torah ideals and practice. To deny the validity of Segulos is to deny the words of Chazal who spoke and wrote about Segulos in very clear terms. In fact, it is the clarity of their words which ought to serve as a guide when we seek to understand the rightful place that Segulos have in our lives.

I recently came across a series of Teshuvos written by the Rashba, which sheds a bright and beautiful light on this topic. In his Teshuvos (I:408,413,825, and Teshuvos HaMeyuchasos LeRamban 286) the Rashba defines what Segulos are. He states that there are physical objects which have clearly observable properties that can help in a medicinal, healing, and prophylactic way. Unlike most medicines, however, we do not know **how** or **why** these particular objects work; we know only **that** they work. And we know that they work because we have

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Weekly Parsha

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Elisafan the son of Uziel as prince of the family of Kahat. Korach believed that he should have received this honor.[1] Datan, Aviram and Ohn were not involved in this issue. They did not have this personal motivation to join the dispute. Why did they become involved?

Bnai Yisrael camped in the wilderness in accordance with a specific order. The Shevet – tribe – of Reuven camped adjacent to the family of Kahat. This proximity encouraged close relations between these neighbors. Korach developed a following among members of the Shevet of Reuven. Rashi summarizes this phenomenon with the statement, “Woe to the evil doer and woe to his neighbor”. [2]

Rashi seems to maintain that the members of Shevet Reuven were not, by nature, evil. They were influenced by the attitudes of their neighbors. It is interesting that the good qualities of Shevet Reuven did not have a positive influence upon Korach and his followers among the family of Kahat.

Furthermore, the Shevet of Reuven was adjacent to the family of Kahat on one side. On other sides the Shevet was next to tribes that were not inclined to join Korach’s rebellion. Yet, the positive role models among their other neighbors did not guide these members of Shevet Reuven.

It seems that Rashi maintains that the power of evil to corrupt is greater than the influence of the good to motivate righteous behavior. Every person must struggle to achieve human perfection. Although material instincts pull us toward evil, we can overcome this influence. However, we can never completely eradicate the instinctual component of our personality. We can never assume we are beyond the desire to sin. We can only hope to control our tendency towards evil. The desire remains deep within our personality. The desire to do good is apparently more tentative. It requires the conquest of the intellectual and spiritual over the more basic instinctual. This process is a lifelong struggle. Even in a righteous individual some level of conflict remains.

Rashi’s analysis can now be more fully understood. When evil confronts good it is easier for the evil to exert influence over the good. The evildoer has less conflict. The righteous individual lives with conflict. The evil person encourages a return to the instinctual desires. The righteous person is now confronted with a growing internal battle. Sometimes he or she succumbs to the evil desires.

Rashi urges us to choose our neighbors well. We should not assume they will not influence us. Instead we should adopt the premise that we will be influenced and choose neighbors whose influence will be positive.

“And Moshe became very angry. He said to Hashem, ‘Do not accept their offering. I did not take a single donkey from them! I did not do harm to any of them.’” (BeMidbar 16:15)

Moshe continues to attempt to make peace with Korach and his followers. He sends a messenger to Datan and Aviram. These are two of the leaders of the rebellion. He wishes to meet with them. Datan and Aviram refuse the offer. Instead, they lash-out at Moshe. They raise new issues. Moshe has failed to fulfill his promise to take them to a land flowing with milk and honey. The generation that Moshe brought out from Egypt has been condemned to die in the wilderness. Furthermore, Moshe has made himself ruler over the nation.

Our pasuk describes Moshe’s reaction. Moshe becomes angry. He prays to Hashem. He asks Hashem not to accept the offerings of Korach and his followers. Finally, he declares that he has not deprived anyone of his property. He has not wronged anyone.

There are two problems with Moshe’s comments. First, Moshe seems to be defending himself. He seems to feel that he needs to prove that he has not been despotic. Why is Moshe defending his integrity? Second, Moshe begins his defense by observing that he has not deprived anyone of personal property. This seems to be an odd defense. Moshe seems to be defending himself by asserting that he is not a thief! This does not prove he has not assumed unwarranted authority.

In order to understand Moshe’s comments, some background is needed. In fact, Moshe did have the status of a king. He was the temporal ruler of Bnai Yisrael.[3] As king, Moshe did have the right to confiscate private property for his own use.[4] Now, we can begin to understand Moshe’s comments. He was not asserting that he was not a thief. He was declaring that he had not exercised his rights as king. He had not practiced his right of confiscation.

Why did Moshe feel compelled to defend the beneficence of his leadership? Datan and Aviram had challenged Moshe’s leadership. Moshe realized that there were two possible causes for this rebellion. The first possibility was that Datan and Aviram could not accept anyone’s leadership. They were simply unwilling to submit to any leader. The second possibility was that his own behavior had evoked their response. Perhaps, unintentionally, he had been overbearing.

Moshe decided to test the issue. He humbled himself before Datan and Aviram. He attempted to appease them. If Datan and Aviram rejected this overture, Moshe would know that his actions had not produced this dispute. Such a reaction would indicate that even the most unobtrusive leadership would not be tolerated.

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(Korach continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

Datan and Aviram immediately rejected Moshe's appeal. Now, Moshe knew with certainty that he had not caused this rebellion. This is the meaning of Moshe's comments. Moshe is asserting that he has been not been an overbearing leader. He has not even exercised the rights of a king. Therefore, he is not responsible for this rebellion. Korach, Datan and Aviram will not accept any leader.

“This is what you should do. Take for yourself fire-plates – Korach and his assembly.” (BeMidbar 16:6)

What was the issue raised by Korach and his followers? As we have explained, they disputed Moshe's right to make appointments to the priesthood. However, at a deeper level Korach and his followers questioned the entire institution of priesthood. Korach argued that the entire nation was sacred. The priesthood should not be bestowed upon a single family. Instead, it should be distributed more evenly within Bnai Yisrael. Moshe rejected this argument. He insisted that the priesthood belongs exclusively to Ahron and his descendants.

What was wrong with Korach's argument? Why does Bnai Yisrael have Kohanim? Why cannot any individual assume the role of Kohen? Rashi deals with this issue. He explains that there is a fundamental difference between the Torah and heathen religions. The heathens have many alternative practices. They have various priests. They worship in numerous temples. In contrast, the Torah insists upon a single law. There is one Mikdash – Temple. There is a single Kohen Gadol.[5]

Rashi's response requires further explanation. Rashi identifies a fundamental difference between the Torah and heathen practices. However, he does not explain the reason for this difference. Why does the Torah insist on a single Mikdash and one Kohen Gadol? Why does the Torah not allow for the diversity accommodated by other religions?

The answer is that the Torah proposes a unique approach to Divine service. Heathen religion is essentially an expression of the worshipper. The mode of service is derived from the personal needs of the worshipper. The worshipper designs the service in a manner that is personally meaningful. This results in remarkable diversity. Different cultures produce their own religious expressions and modes of worship. This is because each culture is unique and seeks to express religious feelings in an individual manner.

The Torah does not treat worship as an expression of the needs of the worshipper. Instead, Torah worship involves submission to the will of the Almighty. Worship is not designed to respond to

the needs of the worshipper. It is a response to the will of Hashem.

The Torah approach implies that there must be unity of worship. Diversity in Divine service is inappropriate. All Jews submit to a single G-d. This Deity has a single will. Therefore, all Jews must worship in a single manner. There cannot be multiple Temples expressing various versions of worship. Neither can there be various High Priests each proposing his own form of worship. There is a single Torah, one Mikdash and one Kohen Gadol.



“And it was on the following day and Moshe entered the Tent of Testimony. And it was that Ahron's staff representing the house of Leyve had blossomed. And it had brought forth blossoms and then unripe fruit and then almonds.” (BeMidbar 17:23)

Hashem commanded Moshe to collect a staff from the prince of each tribe. Ahron's staff represented the Shevet of Leyve. These staffs were then placed in the Mishcan. The following day Ahron's staff blossomed and bore fruit. This miracle indicated that Ahron was truly the Kohen appointed by the Almighty.

Korach's rebellion had already ended. He and his followers had been destroyed through a series of miracles. Why was further proof of Ahron's authenticity needed?

One explanation is that there were two elements in Korach's rebellion. First, Korach and his followers rebelled against Moshe's authority. The manner in which they protested the appointment of the Kohanim – the priests – was inappropriate. They did not question Moshe in a respectful manner. They denied his authority and encouraged anarchy. Second, they had questioned the

concept of priesthood. The destruction of Korach and his followers indicated that their approach had been sinful. However the question of the legitimacy of the priesthood had not been dealt with fully. The people could mistakenly assume that Korach and his camp were punished for their rebellious attitude. There would remain doubts regarding the position of the Kohanim.

The miracle of Ahron's staff responded to this possible doubt. Through this sign, Hashem confirmed the legitimacy of Ahron and the Kohanim. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 16:1.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 16:1.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 30:13; Rabbaynu Ovadia Sfomo, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 36:31; Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 33:5.

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

[5] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 16:1.



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observed their efficacy time and again through experience. The Rashba then gives a primary example of a Segulah. He states that there can be found in the world pieces of metal that "have the segulah of being able to attract other pieces of metal to them through some type of force." He explains that although we do not know at all how this force works, it clearly does. This is the paradigm for Segulos. Just as it is a fact that magnets attract metal, even though we may not know how or why, there are other objects that have different properties that can be helpful to man.

Now it is clear from the Rashba that the framework within which Segulos work is the framework of science and nature; we simply are not privy to all of the workings of science and nature. (A man who thinks that we have reached the height of knowledge in science has reached little more than the height of arrogance). What is equally clear is that these Segulos do not work through some mystical, magical way (mysterious yes, mystical no). In fact, in juxtaposing Segulos with Darkei HaEmori (Gemara Shabbos 67a and Chullin 77b), Chazal are pointing to a critical factor in how we are to view Segulos altogether. If we take the attitude that empirically tested phenomena work through the principles of science despite the fact that we do not understand these principles, then we are relating properly to Segulos; if, however, we think that they are some type of magical force, then we have dangerously crossed the border into a non-Torah perspective. What emerges from all of this is that for something to be a valid Segulah it must be empirically tested and confirmed, and our attitude toward it must humbly remain within the framework of nature, Hashgachah Kelalis.

It seems to me that there is another area of Segulos to which Chazal allude as well, in the area of Hashgachah Peratis. When Bnei Yisroel were afflicted in the Midbar with poisonous serpents, Moshe was commanded to make a Nachash and raise it up for all to see. When they looked at the Nechash HaNechoshes, they were healed. Rashi (Bamidbar 21:8) cites the Mishnah from Rosh HaShannah 29a that asks: Does a (copper) serpent really heal? The answer given is that when Bnei Yisroel would look at it and thereby come to understand certain ideas, they would then be healed by HaShem. Thus, the object had no inherent power to heal; it was HaShem's Hashgachah that healed, and this Hashgachah was invoked solely because of the people's proper thoughts. In fact, the Gemara (Berachos 10b and Pesachim 56a) tells us that Chizkiyah destroyed the Nechash HaNechoshes and was praised for his action. Bnei Yisroel had attributed inherent powers to the Nechash HaNechoshes and had begun to relate to it as an Avodah Zarah. The lesson, I think, is that in an area of Segulah having to do with Hashgachah Peratis, the Segulah must be identified directly and only through Nevuah, and we must realize that its efficacy depends not upon any inherent power, but on our proper hashkafah.

Yes, we do have a mesorah that includes Segulos; the world does have magnets. However, it is critical that we understand exactly what this mesorah means. It is part of our heritage of relating to HaShem as the Borei Olam through the divine and noble gift of our minds. Making a mistake in this area can have disastrous effects. As long as we are a nation that relates to HaShem properly, we can bask in the glory of a life of Truth; however, if we take noble ideas and relate to them improperly, we are in danger of violating our mission as a people, and, Heaven Forbid, of ceasing to deserve the praise "Ki lo nachash beYakov velo kessem beYisroel, etc." (Bamidbar 23:23). Please, please, dear reader, think carefully about these areas; there is much at stake. ■

Segulas III

Dear Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim, In reference to your article regarding the validity of segulas I would share the following experience with your readers:

My wife and I struggled with infertility issues for 9 years before we were blessed with the first of what would be 3 children. During that time a family member approached us with several of these segulas from a leading rabbinical leader in Eretz Yisrael. While the intentions of the family member were clearly well placed, I had to point out to them that there were, beyond the halachik issues pointed out in your article, very practical halachik issues on which there are no disputes.

Segulah #1- The woman should purchase a "gartel" for a sefer Torah. She should go to the shul and replace the gartel on one of its sifrei Torah with the new gartel. She should then take the used gartel and wear it about her mid-section as much as possible.

Problem: The gartel on the Sefer Torah is considered to be Tashmishei Kedusha. It is considered to be a denigration of that status as Tashmishei Kedusha to use the Sefer Torah gartel for any other purpose than to wrap a Sefer Torah and therefore such a use would be prohibited.

Segulah #2- Brew a tea out of the leaves of a particular plant. The husband and wife are to drink this tea together while saying the "Anah HaShem Hoshiya Na" (Psalms 118) repeatedly.

Problem: Other than the fact that a physician said that this brew would likely make us both quite sick, the saying of the verse presents another problem. Namely, the verse as it appears in Psalms 118 encompasses both of the "Anah HaShem's" as said in Hallel. When said within the framework of Hallel, where each part of the verse is repeated independently, this follows the directive of the Sages who formulated the Hallel based on the Psalms. However, to say only the first part of the Pasuk repeatedly with the "Shaym HaShem" would most likely be a violation of the prohibition of "Lo Sisa es Shaym HaShem la shav"-taking the name of God in vain. It also represents a distortion of the pasuk, which presents another

problem.

Needless to say, we did not take either of these suggestions.

Yet another "segulah" comes to mind and unfortunately is practiced in shuls far and wide. It is the practice of giving the husband of an expectant woman in her 9th month the kibud of Pesicha -the opening of the ark for the removal and replacement of the Torah. Supposedly, this segulah is for ensuring an easy delivery.

I would point out to those who practice this, the following:

1. Let us assume that there is some type of validity to this that is beyond our understanding. Shouldn't the soon-to-be father be limited to opening the ark only for the removal of the Torah? One can see a correlation between opening the ark for removal of the Torah, but clearly none for the replacement of it. (Although many bleary-eyed parents might wish they could "put the baby back" during those 3:00 AM feedings)

If the curtain or doors were to jam, would that then be a sign that labor would be difficult? Should a husband risk his wife's health and well-being?

Why is there no practice for the prospective father to avoid pesicha up until the point where the fetus is viable and could live outside the mother's body? If pesicha has some effect on bringing on labor, then perhaps it should be avoided until such time that premature labor would not be detrimental to the health of mother and child?

And if one pursues this logic, perhaps no husband whose wife might even possibly be pregnant should open and close the ark lest he "tempt the ayin harah" and cause his wife to miscarry?

2. Let's assume that there is a psychological benefit to this practice. Akin to the 2 segulas above (the gartel and the tea which both involve the woman), wouldn't it make sense for the woman to open the ark? Or at minimum her husband should have to inform her that he opened the ark? If one assumes a psychological benefit, wouldn't the pregnant woman require some awareness of what transpired at shul?

Clearly all these practices are foolishness. When I have confronted those in shul with the illogical nature of the practices they are quick to laugh at how absurd they are, and yet, they persist in practicing them regularly. They insist "it can't hurt".

Yet every time it happens it only serves to reinforce the superstitious beliefs that have weaved their way into our culture and must be rejected.

As you have pointed out, when we look into the Torah we find that our Avos and Imahos had but one singular response to the pain of infertility, namely Tefilah. They clearly understood that our prayers are to be directed towards the Creator and that such foolish practices have no place.

Thank you for your most cogent presentation.
R/JF, Rockville, MD

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(Segulas continued from page 4)

Segulas IV

This letter was sent by a friend to another person, attempting to explain segulas, and was submitted this week to share her thoughts:

“Dear ----- I’m a good friend of Ch----- ‘s, and she probably passed this on to me because she suspected that I am opposed to these types of things :)

First, I’d like to say that it sounds like what happened to you was horrible. To be so harshly accused when your only intention is to do chessed is a slap in the face. It’s so nice that you are so concerned for the community and are making such an effort to help people out.

Certainly you are not, as you put it, an “evil anti-Torah person!” You made very clear arguments that this is prevalent in the Jewish community, that people acknowledge hakol bidei shamayim (everything in the hands of Gd) but still do silly things, and that this can have a positive psychological impact. Implying you are a rasha (wicked person) is not the most effective way to give tochacha (rebuke)! And it’s unfair because it’s not rishus if someone is trying to help people! At worst, it would be shogeg (accidental). I can see from your arguments that you are a clear thinker who values helping people. The best approach would have been to have a discussion with you, not to accuse you! The thought of you being accused like that makes me outraged on your behalf.

I remember Ch----- telling me that her Rav permitted this practice. I believe he permitted it on the grounds that there is a strong mind/body connection and things that psychologically give a woman hope are permitted. It is true that for it to work psychologically, the woman has to on some level be superstitious, but clearly although this is not the bravest level of functioning the rabbi did not assur (forbid) it. As I myself confront infertility and severe pregnancy losses, I am very familiar with the desperation and superstition that comes from the loss of control. It has been my experience that these customs of doing superstitious things manifest in areas of loss of control: sick people, people who need pamas, people who are trying to get married; in other words, all people who have tzoros. I personally do think that the Jewish ideal is to attempt to not act on these fears (I will explain further), and that it is not ideal to encourage a desperate woman to engage in superstition. That being said, I also understand how desperate people can be and telling them that they are engaging in idolatrous behavior is most likely not going to be helpful!

The basis of my understanding of the Torah approach to superstition is from Devarim 18:9-13. Specifically, there is a prohibition of nichush (superstition) and inun (signs). This is grouped together with idolatry, psychics, séances, consulting the dead, and performing magic (not sleight of hand). Pasuk 13 says “tamim tehiyeh im hashem elokecha,” that we should be tamim, whole or complete, with

Hashem. Rashi says on that pasuk: “Go after Hashem completely and put your hopes in Him and do not chase after the futures (fortune telling, etc.); rather, whatever will happen to you accept with wholeness and then you will be His nation and His portion.”

I understand from this that all of these behaviors come from a person trying to know the future, to gain control over a situation where he is powerless. The Torah urges us not to give in, but rather, to be tamim with Hashem. You yourself recognized that doing these things is a contradiction on some level to total acceptance of Hashem’s supremacy. We know from Yaakov Avinu when in trouble when meeting with Eisav, the 3 things he did: 1) he planned for war, 2) sent a present, and 3) prayed to Hashem. He did 2 things using the laws of nature, and one thing to access hashgacha (Divine Providence). All we have are the laws of nature (medical treatments, psychology, etc.) and Hashem’s help (teshuva, tefilla, tzedaka). Segulas, unless they fall into these 2 categories, are not part of the formula passed down to us by our Avos.

Let’s look at segulas more closely. How do they work? How does it work, that a woman, who goes into the mikvah after a pregnant woman, will become pregnant?

There are a couple of possibilities. 1) There is something “mystical” about the water or the act, which causes her to become pregnant. 2) Hashem causes her to be pregnant because she does this act. (if you can think of other possibilities, please let me know).

We know that there is nothing in the laws of nature that would cause an infertile woman to become pregnant after going into the mikvah after a pregnant woman. Also, as you mentioned, it is clearly not a mitzva (any more than if she had immersed not following a pregnant woman), that the act would bring the woman to a higher spiritual level and make her worthy of divine intervention. We also don’t maintain that the waters have been infused with spiritual power, because according to the Torah objects don’t have power. Only Hashem has power. When Moshe raised his staff and did miracles, it wasn’t Moshe and it wasn’t the staff. It was Hashem.

If we say that Hashem causes her to become pregnant because she did this act, then this is a breach of justice. As it says in parshas Haazinu (Devarim 32:4): “the Rock, His actions are perfect, because of all His ways are justice; a God of faithfulness and no iniquity, He is tzadik and straight.” If you have 2 women, both on the same spiritual level, and both daven and do good deeds, but one immerses in the mikvah after a pregnant woman and one does not, then on what basis should Hashem respond to that one? Immersing does not make her spiritually more elevated, and it does not access any laws of nature. Or what if a woman who is not worthy and does immerse, will she be answered, when her more worthy counterpart who doesn’t immerse won’t be answered? I am interested to hear what you think of this approach to segulas.

The way I handle segulas is that if I can only understand it in a superstitious way, I will not do it. Three times I have come across explanations for segulas.

1) Shiluach hakan. The sefer chinuch explains that when a person sends the mother bird away, he is involved in preservation of the species. It is Hashem’s will that species be preserved. Because he engages in this, he is rewarded by children (continuation of the human species). This strikes me as a “midah k’neged midah” reward (measure for measure), ie, hashgacha.

2) Eating the esrog after Succos. I actually just heard this explanation this year, attributed to the Rav. According to the opinion that the fruit of the etz hadaas (tree of knowledge) was an esrog, the woman sinned and ate the esrog and now has trouble with childbearing. During Succos the esrog is assur in hana’ah (forbidden in non-mitzva use). By eating the esrog after Succos, the woman demonstrates that she is being careful about this prohibition, and this is a correction of the original chet (mistake) and perhaps will remove some of the punishment. This also fits into hashgacha.

3) Having a ruby to prevent miscarriage. I read the Rabbenu Bachya on it. He explains that grinding up the ruby into a powder and eating it was thought to prevent miscarriage (laws of nature, which we currently know isn’t true) and that it was Reuven’s stone on the kohen gadol’s breastplate. Reuven brought the dudaim (mandrakes) to Rachel, and Reuven represents the middah (character trait) of teshuva (repentance). This is either a psychological effect, which is laws of nature, or teshuva is a way of activating hashgacha.

I have not yet heard anything that explained immersing in the mikvah after a pregnant person, as a method of either the laws of nature, or hashgacha. (There is the psychological element, as I mentioned, which is why perhaps some rabbis permit it, but it is only effective if a person is superstitious, in the way that a rabbit’s foot will only psychologically help a person do well on a test if he’s superstitious and believes on some level that it will help). It seems to me that in a superstitious manner, the water is assumed to be “infused” with the fertility of the pregnant woman and is figuratively or imagined to be “passed on” to the infertile woman.

I’ve gone on at length; this is a subject that is dear to my heart. I hope I was clear and not too long-winded. Please let me know what you think, and if there is anything that isn’t clear, please ask.

I hope you are recovering from being accused in that manner. I really feel like it is super unfair because it is such a widespread thing that goes on in the frum Jewish community. It’s not like breaking Shabbos, where if you do that you can’t maintain that you are Orthodox. Superstition is a very challenging area, and many people have tzoros.”

Jessie Fischbein

the Dangers *of* Understanding Midrashim Literally

*An Open Dialogue
with the
Jewish Community*

PART IV

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Parshas Korach, (Numbers, 17:13) Rashi states an amazing story of how Aaron “seized the Angel of Death “against its will”. In order to understand this metaphor, we must first understand the events immediately prior.

God had wiped out Korach and his rebellion. On the morrow, the Jewish people said the following (Numbers, 17:6), “You (Moses and Aaron) have killed the people of God”, referring to Korach and his assembly. Evidently, the Jews could not make such a statement the same day as God’s destruction of the Korach assembly, perhaps because the Jews were too frightened at the moment. But as their terror waned, they mustered the courage to speak their true feelings, on the next day.

What they said were actually two accusations, 1) You, Moses and Aaron, are murderers, and 2) those murdered are God’s people. The Jews made two errors, and God addressed both.

The method God used to correct their second error was to demonstrate through a miracle that Aaron in fact was following God and Korach’s people were not: detached wood – the staff –

miraculously continued its growth, and blossomed almonds. By Aaron’s rod blossoming, this showed whom God favored, and to whom He related – even via a miracle. Now the Jew’s false opinion that Korach followed God was corrected, as it was Aaron’s staff, which God selected, and not Korach’s.

But how did Moses correct the people’s false opinion, that he and Aaron were murderers? How did the incense, which Moses instructed Aaron to bring, correct the problem, and stay off the plague, which God sent to kill the Jews? What Moses commanded Aaron to do was to take the incense, and stand between the living and the dead during the plague, which only temporarily stopped the plague. It was not until Aaron returned back to Moses that God completely halted the plague. So what does Aaron standing there accomplish, that it stopped the plague temporarily? Additionally, what does his return to Moses and God at the Tent of Meeting do? This is where the Rashi comes in.

Rashi reads as follows:

“Aaron seized the angel of death against its will. The angel said, ‘leave me to do my mission’. Aaron said, ‘Moses commanded me to prevent you’. The angel said, ‘I am the messenger of God, and you are (only) the messenger of Moses’. Aaron said, ‘Moses says nothing on his own accord, rather, (he says matters only) through God. If you do not believe me, behold Moses and God are at the Tent of Meeting, come with me and ask”.

What this means is the following: Moses knew that the people accused him and Aaron of being murderers. The Jews saw Moses and God as two opposing sides, i.e., Moses was not working in sync with God, as he apparently killed the “people of God”, i.e., Korach and his rebellious congregation. The statement, “you have killed the people of God” displays the people’s belief that God was correct to follow, but Moses opposed God’s will. Moses now attempted to correct the Jews, and show that in fact, he and Aaron were not murderers opposing God. Moses sent Aaron to make atonement for the Jews. What was this atonement, and how did it entitle the Jews to be saved from God’s current plague?

The Jews saw Aaron with this incense offering, standing at the place where the last Jew dropped down in death; the plague progressed in a domino fashion. And the Jews now saw that no more Jews were dropping down dead, due to Aaron’s presence with the incense. They were now perplexed: they

accused Aaron and Moses as murderers, but Aaron was now healing, and not killing as they previously assumed. This perplexity is what the Rashi described metaphorically as “Aaron seizing the Angel of Death”. Aaron was now correcting the “opinion” of the people, which made them deserving of death, as if he seized the cause of their death, i.e., the angel. The peoples’ opinion was in fact, their “Angel of Death”. This means that the angel is not a real, separate “being”, but the cause of death is man’s own distance from God. And these Jews were distant from God when they imputed murder to Moses and Aaron.

Now, as they were now questioning, but not completely abandoning this false view of Aaron and Moses, the plague stopped, but only temporarily, reflecting their temporal suspension of their accusation, while they pondered the truth. So we may interpret Aaron as “seizing the angel of death” as his correction the false notions the Jews maintained that Moses and Aaron were murderers of Korachian revolutionaries. “Seizing the Angel of Death” means Aaron retarded the cause of death in the remaining Jews; he corrected their false notions, for which, others perished at God’s hand in this plague.

The Jews were confused, and rightly so, when they saw Aaron standing between the living and the dead with incense, apparently causing a halt to the deaths: Aaron is Moses’ messenger, but the plague was clearly from God. So, how could Aaron and Moses overpower God? How could Aaron on Moses’ mission halt a plague from God? This is what Rashi means when metaphorically the Angel of Death tells Aaron, “I am the messenger of God, and you are (only) the messenger of Moses”. The Angel in this metaphor personifies the “false opinions of the people”, which caused death. But with a corrected opinion, God will not kill. So the Angel talking in this metaphor, really represents the Jewish people’s corrupt opinion - which in fact causes death. (Sometimes, false views can be so wrong that the follower of such a view deserves death.)

Returning to the Rashi, Aaron replies to the Angel one last time, “Moses says nothing on his own accord, rather, (he says matters only) through God. If you do not believe me, behold Moses and God are at the Tent of Meeting, come with me and ask”. At this point, the plague was temporarily stopped, as the Jews were entertaining the idea that Moses and Aaron were not murderers, as Aaron was atoning, trying to keep them alive. Their perplexity about whether Aaron and Moses were following God had to be removed if they were to live permanently. This is what is meant that when Aaron returned to the tent of meeting

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Education

Midrashim: Not Literal

CHANANYA WEISSMAN

(Numbers , 17:15) the plague was terminated completely: as the Jews witnessed Aaron, Moses, and God “together”, they now understood that Moses and Aaron were in fact followers of God. The metaphor depicts Aaron as ‘seizing’ the corrupt views of the people which demanded their death, allegorized by seizing an “Angel of Death”.

This Rashi is yet another of literally thousands of examples where the Rabbis wrote in riddles, as King Solomon taught in Proverbs 1:6. When we learn from one as great as Solomon, to whom God gave knowledge miraculously (Kings I, 3:12) that riddles are a means of education, we must continue to look for the hidden meanings in the Rabbis’ words, which seem bizarre. We must not take amazing stories literally, as this practice is causing many Jews to become idolatrous. There are no demons running around earth, no angels of death, no powers of segulas that protect. God is the only power, and He created the Earth and heavens and all they behold, with distinct, limited physical properties and laws. Physical creation cannot exceed its design: a piece of twined wool with a scarlet pigmentation does not suddenly get transformed into a device, which wards off God’s punishments. It is unfortunate that we have become so backwards.

And what this leads to, is the children of such superstitious parents finding Christianity as proper to this new “magical, pop-Kabbalistic” Judaism. Jews fail to see the difference between a superstitious Judaism, and other religions, so they convert. And they are accurate in this equation: there is no difference between a Judaism that preaches segulas, and Christianity.

What parents, teachers, and leaders must do is teach that, which for some reason has left the Torah curriculum: I mean Judaism’s Fundamentals. If Jewish children were taught the “What’s” and “Whys” about God’s unity; that He is not physical since He created all physical things; that He created everything and nothing possesses powers but Him alone; that we cannot know what He is; that His Torah is correct; that He rewards and punishes...and if students were taught the proofs behind these ideas as Maimonides teaches in his Laws of Fundamentals...then there would be no room for students to err. However, these Fundamentals are not being taught. Although important, classes in Hebrew language, grammar and electives, are secondary to classes in Torah Fundamentals, and Comparative Religion.

Maimonides formulated his 13 Principles for a reason; they are essential. Make sure your children and students, and yourselves, know them inside out. ■

Far be it from me to speak on behalf of others, but I feel a need to respond to Zechariah Porter’s criticism of Rabbi Rosenthal’s article on properly approaching Midrash and of Avi Goldstein’s supportive letter.

Mr. Porter begins by accusing Rabbi Rosenthal of determining the hashkafah of his school by how he’d be viewed in a college class. This is a disingenuous remark; Rabbi Rosenthal’s point was that Jews who relate to Midrash in a simplistic way and take all Jewish legends as literal historical truth will make laughingstocks of themselves and the Torah they hold so dear. No one is arguing that we should change anything about Judaism to garner the approval of secular intellectuals, but that a primitive understanding of Midrash is bound to create needless personal embarrassment and Chillul Hashem when confronted with obvious, penetrating questions. Judaism is not mindless dogma, and it’s a shame that it has been reduced to that in much of the religious community.

Mr. Porter goes on to “prove” that it’s not far-fetched to believe that Bisyah’s arm literally stretched, since it was a time of open miracles. Again, no one is doubting that Hashem could have caused this miracle as well if He so desired, only that there is little compelling reason to believe that He actually did so, a literal reading of the Midrash notwithstanding.

In fact, I daresay that it is ludicrous to believe that the Midrash should be taken literally. Imagine that you were Bisyah swimming in the river, and you saw a basket floating in the distance. Would any rational person stretch out her hand for it when it was clearly well out of reach? Of course not. The Midrash as literally written makes only slightly more sense than taking Hashem’s “outstretched arm” literally!

As for Mr. Porter’s thought-stymieing question of “who has the authority to decide which Midrashim are allegorical and which are literal truth”, I submit that it is our obligation as Torah-studying Jews to raise ourselves to the level where we are all capable of making such a determination, where in fact doing so would become almost second nature. Is not one of the goals of all learning to achieve higher levels of knowledge, understanding, and intellectual capacity? Is learning Torah an aimless pursuit, meant merely to occupy our spare time while an ivory tower of “Gedolim” does all the thinking for us? Should we think just enough to write letters to the editor that squelch anyone else who would dare

use his own mind for more?

And I throw Mr. Porter’s question right back at him: who had the authority to decide who is qualified to do the thinking for us? How is one nominated as a Gadol who is now capable of thinking for himself and others? If this is determined largely by the masses, then what gives the masses the intelligence to determine who is qualified to be a Gadol and shape the world of Jewish thought? Besides, don’t we expect our Gedolim to be so humble that they don’t consider themselves worthy of thinking for others? What nonsense!

Nearly 10 years ago I asked Rabbi Hershel Schachter how one should relate to the more difficult-to-believe stories in the Midrash. He responded with a Mashal. Imagine that archaeologists one thousand years from now find an old newspaper from our generation. The headline reads “Yanks Bomb the Red Sox”. The archaeologists would scratch their heads and wonder why northerners are bombing red socks, and come to all kinds of wild theories about our society. Of course, someone from our generation immediately understands the real meaning of this headline.

Same with Midrash. The darshanim of former times had a unique style of making a point that was readily apparent to their audience. We study their words a thousand years later and often wonder what they really meant. It is tempting to take the easy way out and just interpret everything literally. But what seems like the safe route is really the most dangerous of all. We miss the original point of the Midrash. We shut off our minds and feel threatened when others challenge us. We cling to nonsense instead of truth, and instead of being an am chacham v’navon we become an am naval v’lo chacham. We may be unable to uncover the intended meaning of every allegory, as we no longer have access to the culture and references of the time, but whatever we manage to discover is another diamond for us to treasure.

In addition, it’s well known that Chazal often couched their messages in allegory to avoid trouble with the Romans and their sympathizers.

All this has nothing to do with emunah in Hashem or Chazal, but emunah in ourselves to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, who were not afraid to study Torah with an active, inquisitive, truth-seeking mind – right up until this wayward, cowardly, superficial generation that learns Midrash either not at all (why even bother?) or strictly on a first-grade level.

The Midrash and Torah in general will not be threatened by being studied in a sophisticated, intellectually mature fashion. They will only be enhanced, and their lessons will be brought to the surface, instead of being buried under the rubble of intellectual cowardice and primitive dogma posing as frumkeit. ■

Catastrophe:

God or Nature?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

A close friend recently asked if I could offer a brief explanation as to whether we ought to view tsunamis and the abnormally many hurricanes as Divine punishments, or merely nature at work. I feel the explanation is within our grasp, and that this question is asked due only to our ignorance of God's Divine justice, and not based on any evidence. Surely, minds like Einstein admittedly only "scratched the surface of natural law", which is at least, an "observable" science. How then shall we – who are mindless when compared to Einstein – suggest that we know the more abstract, metaphysical laws of God's justice, and make baseless claims that tsunamis and hurricanes are God's punishments? We cannot explain astrophysics, and yet, we dare to explain the Creator of astrophysics?

There exist many areas of natural law. One of which is thermodynamics, including heat-induced expansion. Examples are erupting volcanoes and hot dogs plumping on the grill. We are convinced that natural laws are consistent, and we too should be consistent in our convictions. We grab aspirins for headaches on Tuesdays, just like on Sundays. Why? Because we experienced a phenomenon that worked, even though we cannot explain it. If we are consistent in all areas of our lives, why should we deviate, when catastrophes occur? Why don't we relate to those events as causal relationships, like taking aspirin? True, tragically, many die in hurricanes, but this should not cause our denial of what we have learned: natural law is consistent. "Law", by definition, refers to a repeated phenomenon, when circumstances are consistent. And when the Earth's plates shift under the sea floor due to heat and expansion, the overlying water will also shift, due to laws of displacement, motion, and gravity. Waves are formed, and in magnitude, will forcefully push away lighter objects, including homes and people. This is all natural. And if we examine more deeply, we will learn that the Earth plates truthfully had no option but to shift when and where they did, based on all causes leading to that event. Similarly, it is impossible that I should toss a burning match onto a fuel-doused BBQ, and it should not ignite. It must ignite. So too, the tsunamis and hurricane recently endured had to occur. And since God told no one that He caused

this directly, man is foolish to stand at his podium making claims of Divine punishment. Such claims only reveal another natural truth: man seeks to bolster his ego, if and when he can. And with the possibility of greater fame, he grabs quicker at such opportunities to get noticed for his "righteous" words. Again, man cannot explain how the universe was created, but his arrogance launches him to expound on even greater matters, like what God is thinking right now.

In truth, God created, and guides nature. For the world could not create itself...nothing can. The world can also not sustain itself according to created laws, without a Guide: the universe possesses no inherent power to keep itself going. In this sense, one might ask, "Aren't natural disaster's due to God?" The answer is "yes"...but not how you think. God did create the world with all the laws we experience, and He did know that in His creation, certain events would transpire. But if He did not create water and gravity, which causes tsunamis, man could not exist. So although at times these two elements collide causing tragedies, their absence would be far worse. But God did not doom mankind: He also equipped each of us with intelligence, with which we can decide where to live. So homes built on volcano slopes, or even California slopes, are not wisely inhabited, as mudslides are also not uncommon, and are devastating. Living in area subject to flooding is also unwise, and if we remain, and do not build adequate levees, again, our ignorance and foolishness is to blame, and we need not claim "Divine Punishment". Of course, man cannot anticipate everything, but we are fully aware of all possible natural forces, and results.

If God does wish man to take a lesson, we know from world history that He does so with miracles: Egypt's Plagues, the predicted Flood, and other unnatural events and phenomena clearly point to God's dissatisfaction. When God wishes us to fear Him, He does not allow us to view His signs as natural, but He sends signs and wonders that cannot be explained according to nature. When He desires we view an event as "His" Divine sign, he never confuses us with a possible natural to explanation.

Tsunamis and hurricanes are natural, and therefore we should not view them as Divine. ■



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Korach:

What Moses Heard



On more than one occasion, the Jewish people beleaguered Moses in the desert, complaining vociferously about the lack of water and meat among other privations. Korach, however, was the first to challenge Moses' authority directly. Moses reacted in an unusual manner (16:4), "And Moses heard and fell on his face." What is the meaning of this reaction? What did he "hear"? Why did he "fall on his face"?

At first glance, the words "and Moses heard" are superfluous. Of course, he heard. After all, they were speaking to him. In earlier episodes of malcontents complaining to Moses, the Torah never tells us "he heard"; why does the Torah do so here? According to several Midrashic sources, (Sanhedrin 110a, Targum Yonasan, Tanchuma 10, Midrash Rabbah 18), the Torah implies that Korach slandered Moses with charges of adultery. Other sources and commentators, however, take the words at face value. If so, what did he "hear"?

Perhaps the most common cause of rift and rebellion is the feeling of being ignored and disenfranchised, the feeling that no one is listening. In fact, conflicts can very often be resolved by the simple act of attentive listening, even when no solutions are offered. People will tolerate partial or inadequate solutions, or even no solutions at all, as long

as they and their complaints are validated, as long as they feel their concerns are being taken into account. Revolutionary wars have been fought because people felt they were denied "representation."

When Moses saw the people were in revolt, his first response was to listen carefully to the complaints of Korach and his followers. He showed them that "he heard," that he understood their frustration. Regardless of the relative merits of Korach's complaint, Moses conveyed importance to Korach by listening attentively.

Then Moses "fell on his face" in response to Korach's criticism (16:3) that Moses had "exalted himself excessively above the congregation." The Ohr Hachaim explains that by falling on his face Moses expressed humility rather than fear. Had Moses really been driven by a desire for self-aggrandizement, even in a small way, he surely would have responded with arrogant anger. By his humble response, Moses demonstrated that personal ambition was not a part of his motivation. Although Moses failed to quell peacefully the only revolt that directly challenged his role as God's chosen leader, he demonstrated to all future generations the hallmarks of leadership in the face of dissension and rebellion. ■

RABBI MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Real Freedom

Reader: Rabbi, I have been thinking hard about the concept of 'freedom'. It seems from your articles (I don't remember which one) you hold that a truly free person is the man of Torah, a man of chachma. Now let's say such a man of Torah manages to become a navi, a prophet. Now let's leave that for a moment and go back to Sinai. The Rabbis have been quoted as saying; it was as if a mountain was hanging over the people's heads, so that the (God's) reality was so strong that they couldn't refuse the Torah. From what I see that was not an ideal way of doing things, but it was necessary for that time only. Am I correct?

So going back to our man who happens to be a navi, one would say he understands the mitzvos very well and the ideas of Torah are even more real to him, than the physical world. When confronted with a situation, e.g. stealing a million dollars, he rejects such temptation immediately since he understands very well WHY such an action is bad for him. Contrast this to someone like us who will decide not to steal the money because we don't want to get caught and go to jail. My point is that the navi seems to have less freedom than the rasha (evil person). I came to this conclusion after hearing how the Rambam explained that we could never have a truly spiritual life on earth since the physical pleasures would not be appealing compared to the 'true good' (Torah). This will translate to no free will. The man of Torah of course is much closer to that state of no free will, as he is much more removed from the physical.

Unless of course the Torah has a different meaning of freedom, in which case I would like to hear it.

Regards, Omphile

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Omphile, "yes", the Rabbis do state that the Jews experienced coercion at Sinai, meaning, not the best of conditions for accepting Torah. This is because Sinai proved God's existence beyond any doubt. And as they could not deny God's existence, they were left with "no choice" but to accept the Torah, "as if" the mountain was suspended over their heads in coercion. The Rabbis actually say this: "God held Sinai over their heads and said, 'Accept the Torah, otherwise, this will be your burial place'." "Of course this is a metaphor. Sinai was necessary, as God desires man to use his intellect, and therefore, He provided man with a proof of His existence. Sinai's goal was not coercion, rather, a proof. However, coercion was unavoidable.

Regarding free will, one who sees the truth clearly, in a manner, has less choice: since the truth is so clear to him, he sees no other option, like Sinai. But understand, that free will is never removed.

We learn that God designed man in such a manner, that the good, the truth, is that which he gravitates towards, and feels compelled to select. In this respect, God is quite kind in His design of humans, forging our psyches I a way that we desire that which is beneficial. ■

Death of Righteous

Reader: What does it mean when a Tzaddik or a Gadol Hador dies? I heard that it is like the Temple was destroyed and that it atones for our sins. But at the same time we know of the Pasuk: "Each man in his own sin will die" (Deut. 24:16).

Is this then a contradiction, or a totally different idea?

Thank You, Heshy

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Heshy, the method for approaching the answer, is to first understand what "atones" means. When one is atoned for his sins, it means his previous flaw is gone; the necessity for a corrective measure is no longer required. This may be initiated in two fashions: internally through repentance, and externally, when one recognizes a value based on events witnessed, and then follows a new truth. When the righteous people die, what happens? We stop, and reflect on their lives. We recognize their values, and admire their devotion to truth. We are moved to follow in their footsteps, and we are then perfected in doing so. We are "atoned", as we no longer cleave to our flaws, thanks to the shining examples they set for us.

Similarly, we are told in a midrash, that Rachel exuted her tomb and prayed for the Jews when the Jews passed her gravesite during Nevuzaadraan's exile. Certainly, Rachel did not exit her grave and pray. But the Jew who literally did pass by her tomb, and reflected on her, could be likened to those for whom Rachel prayed: just as Rachel's prayer could effectuate atonement, so too, the Jews' reflecting on Rachel's righteousness at that moment had an effect on their values. ■

God & Emotions

Reader: Numbers XIV, sentence 34, "And ye shall know My displeasure." The Jewish Times, No.32, June 23, 2006, page 6 states, "God is devoid of human emotion."

I am having difficulty reconciling your statement "God is devoid of human emotion", when the Chumash uses the word "My displeasure." Pleasure and displeasure are descriptions of the human experience. God is not human. Does God need pleasure? "Vengeance is Mine!" sayeth the Lord. From these two examples, it looks like God is very emotional.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Maimonides explains in the commencement of his work, the Guide for the Perplexed, that such expressions are merely a means to educate man in his own language and terms. "The Torah speaks in the language of man." God's "anger" means His "disapproval". His "pleasure", refers to that which He desires. His "vexation" means that which goes against His will. "Smelling a sweet savor" means He approves of man's sacrifices.

God has no emotions, as emotions are His creations, and therefore, subsequent in time to His nature, by definition. ■

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