

250TH ISSUE

Dedicated to my Rebbeim for their decades of devotion to Torah and courage to speak the truth. May I successfully imbue others with the enlightenment, joy and attachment to Torah truths that you have instilled in me.
Thank you, Moshe Ben-Chaim

1997
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of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

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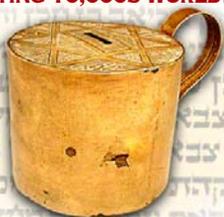
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Boston	7:20	Moscow	7:40
Chicago	7:25	New York	7:28
Cleveland	8:00	Paris	8:40
Detroit	8:08	Philadelphia	7:31
Houston	7:37	Phoenix	6:49
Jerusalem	6:57	Pittsburgh	7:52
Johannesburg	5:24	Seattle	7:56
Los Angeles	7:14	Sydney	5:03
London	7:56	Tokyo	6:05
Miami	7:31	Toronto	7:55
Montreal	7:36	Washington DC	7:37

Weekly Parsha

Kedoshim

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“Do not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block before the blind, and you shall fear your G-d: I am Hashem.” (VaYikra 19:14)

The passage above prohibits placing a stumbling-block before a blind person. What activity or activi-

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Letters: April 2007 THE Impostor תורה

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Alberto: Shalom. I wish to understand better about the Jewish soul theory, since this idea can be found in most of Jewish Literature published today, and also in most Jewish web sites. In the article below, Rabbi xxxx xxxx from Chabad.org answers this, and his explanations “seems” logical. Titled it “Multiplicity from HaShem’s Unity”, Rabbi xxxx says if God wants Absolute Unity, He should not have created the world like He did - in multiplicity. As far as I can see, is only you (the Mitnagdim) who don’t agree with this, and I want to know why. Please, if you can, tell me the sources so I will search about the bases of your opinions.

Thank you very much for your time,

Alberto Rodrigues

Here is Rabbi xxxx xxxx’ answer about Jewish soul theory:

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(Kedoshim cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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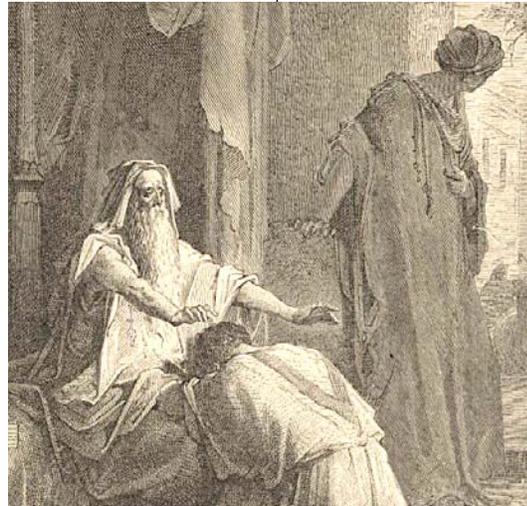
ties are prohibited by this mitzvah? The Talmud discusses this prohibition in a number of contexts. Maimonides summarizes the Talmud's conclusions. He explains that this mitzvah prohibits two activities. First, it prohibits willfully misleading a person by providing the individual with poor advice.[1] Maimonides does not provide specific examples. However, presumably this aspect of the mitzvah prohibits giving a person harmful financial or personal advice. Maimonides summarizes this aspect of the mitzvah by rephrasing the prohibition as a positive requirement. When someone seeks your advice you are required to provide a response that is appropriate for the person seeking your help. The second element of the mitzvah is a prohibition against "strengthening the hands" of those who violate the Torah. In his code of law, Mishne Torah, Maimonides does not provide a specific

example of an activity that would be prohibited by this aspect of the mitzvah. However, in his Sefer HaMitzvot he does provide an example. The Torah prohibits both borrowing money and lending money with interest between Jews. The borrower and lender violate a specific mitzvah prohibiting their participation in this loan. In addition to the violation of these mitzvot, the borrower and lender violate the prohibition against placing a stumbling-block before a blind person.[2] Each enables the other's participation in the prohibited loan. Therefore, each is responsible for "strengthening the hands" or enabling a person's violation of the Torah.

It is notable that in his discussion of the various means by which this mitzvah is transgressed, Maimonides does not mention the most obvious means. He does not indicate that the mitzvah is violated by performing the activity identified by the literal translation of the passage. He does not say that one violates the commandment by placing a stumbling-block in front of a blind person. Of course, that does not mean that Maimonides maintains that it is permitted to place obstacles in the path of blind people. But, he does not indicate that this activity is a violation of this mitzvah.

Most authorities contend that Maimonides does not include within the mitzvah a prohibition

against placing an obstacle before a blind person. Minchat Chinuch provides an interesting proof for this interpretation of Maimonides' position. The most common punishment administered by the courts for the violation of a mitzvah is lashes. In general, this is the default punishment in instances in which the Torah does not indicate an alternative punishment. Maimonides provides a detailed list of commandments for which the punishment for their violation is lashes. He does not include the mitzvah of placing a stumbling-block before a blind person.[3] The apparent reason for the exclusion of this mitzvah from the list is that lashes are only administered for a violation that is committed through an action.[4] In halacha, an action is defined as a concrete, specific performance. Providing misleading advice or enabling the violation of mitzvah does not meet this standard. Therefore, the court does



not administer lashes for the violation of this mitzvah. Minchat Chinuch argues that the activity of placing an obstacle before a blind person certainly meets halacha's standard for an action. Therefore, if this activity is included in the prohibition, it is an instance in which lashes would be administered. The exclusion of this mitzvah from the list of mitzvot that are subject to lashes indicates that, according to Maimonides, the activity of placing an obstacle before a blind person is not included in the prohibition. [5]

Minchat Chinuch expresses numerous reservations regarding this argument. Torah Temimah summarizes the objections. He explains that although it is common for the Sages to attribute to a passage of the Torah a meaning that is not literal, it is very uncommon for the Sages to disregard the literal implications of the passage. He explains that in this instance, the Sages interpret the passage to include a prohibition against misleading advice and enabling the violation of a mitzvah. However, this interpretation is not intended to exclude the literal meaning of the passage. Instead, the Sages intend to include activities within the prohibition, in addition to the activity prohibited by the literal meaning of the passage. He adds that if one placed an obstacle before a blind person he would receive lashes for the violation of this commandment.[6]

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Is there some indication in the passage that it should not be interpreted in the literal sense? There are two elements of the passage commonly suggested as the possible basis for not interpreting the passage literally. First the passage ends with the phrase “and you should fear your G-d.” This phrase is often used by the Torah as an admonition against the violation of certain commandments. These are commandments whose violation is not easily observable. Rashi explains that in this instance, the phrase is used because whether a person has violated the command is often determined by intent. For example, if a person gives someone poor advice, he can claim that his intentions were pure but he himself was mistaken. He intended to provide appropriate advice but committed an honest error. Similar claims can be made in an instance in which a person enabled an individual to violate the Torah. Therefore, the Torah admonishes us to fear Hashem. We may be able to deceive others regarding our true intentions but we cannot fool Hashem![7] Gur Aryeh argues that placing an obstacle before a blind person is an observable action and not subject to interpretation. Therefore, if this activity is included in the mitzvah, the phrase “you should fear your G-d” would not be appropriate. The passage does include this phrase. This implies that the activities prohibited by the phrase are only those activities that cannot be easily and objectively verified – providing misleading advice and enabling the commitment of a violation of the Torah.[8]

Second, the specific word in the Hebrew text for the term used is notable. The Torah uses the word *tetaim*. This word generally implies giving or delivering. If the intention of the passage is to prohibit providing misleading advice, this word is appropriate. However, if the *pasuk* intends to prohibit the placement of an obstacle before a blind person, the appropriate word is *tasim*.[9]

Torah Temimah acknowledges that these nuances of the passage are an adequate basis for attributing to the passage a non-literal meaning. However, they are not a justification for rejecting the literal meaning of the verse. In other words, these considerations do not justify rejecting the general practice of the Sages to accept the literal meaning of a passage.[10]

In summary, the Sages clearly indicate that the mitzvah prohibiting placing a stumbling-block before a blind person includes providing a person with inappropriate advice and enabling the violation of the Torah. However, the authorities differ over whether the activity indicated by the literal meaning of the *pasuk* is prohibited by the mitzvah. Maimonides contends that it is not included. Others argue that the Sages do not intend to exclude this activity from the mitzvah. They merely intend to include these activities

among the behaviors prohibited by the passage.[11] These authorities argue that in general the Sages do not reject the literal meaning of a *pasuk* and there is no reason to assume that our passage is an exception to this practice. This would seem to be a compelling argument. Why should the literal meaning of the passage be rejected?

There is a fascinating contradiction in the translation of Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel to the Torah that seems to resolve this issue. In his treatment of our passage, Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel seems to provide a literal translation.[12] In Sefer Devarim, the Torah outlines a number of activities that are accursed. One of these activities is providing misleading directions to a blind person. Rashi interprets this passage as referring to the mitzvah in our passage. In other words, the Torah is pronouncing a curse upon a person who provides misleading advice.[13] Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel translates the passage in Sefer Devarim as referring to misdirecting a traveler.[14] In other words, both passages refer to taking advantage of a person’s blindness to mislead and harm him. Presumably – as conformed by Rashi – both passages refer to the same prohibition. Yet, Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel translates our passage as referring to a blind person. But he translates the passage in Sefer Devarim as referring to a traveler.

Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel inserts an important comment into his translation of the passage in Sefer Devarim. He comments that the traveler is figuratively blind.[15] This brief comment resolves the apparent contradiction in his translations. He is explaining that the Torah uses the figure of a blind person as an idiomatic reference to a person who is ignorant. In his translation of our passage, Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel preserves the Torah’s idiom. He translates the passage literally. This is not because he is suggesting that the literal translation of the passage is its true meaning. As he explains in Sefer Devarim, the phrase’s reference to a blind person is idiomatic. The simple – if not literal – meaning of the passage is that we are not to mislead the ignorant.

This resolves our question. Maimonides contends that our passage does not include placing an obstacle before a blind person. He is not suggesting that the Sages reject the simple or plain meaning of the text. Instead, he argues that the Sages maintain that the passage employs an idiom. It describes the ignorant person who is in need of advice as being blind.

Maimonides makes a strange comment that supports this interpretation. He explains that the commandment outlined in our passage includes two elements. It is prohibited to provide misleading advice. It is also prohibited to enable

a person to violate the Torah. He then adds that although both of these prohibitions are included in the mitzvah, the plain meaning of the passage only refers to the first element of the commandment – providing misleading advice.[16] On the surface, this seems to be an outlandish claim. The plain meaning of the passage is that it is prohibited to place an obstacle before a blind person! However, the above interpretation of Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel’s comments explains Maimonides’ assertion. According to Maimonides, the passage employs a common idiom. The plain meaning is not the literal meaning. The plain and simple meaning is that it is prohibited to provide misleading advice to a person who is ignorant. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach U’Shmirat HaNefesh 12:14.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Lo Ta’Aseh 299.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 19:1-4.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 18:2.

[5] Rav Yosef Babad, Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 232, note 4.

[6] Rav Baruch HaLeyve Epstein, Torah Temimah on Sefer VaYikra 19:14.

[7] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 19:14.

[8] Rav Yehuda Loew of Prague (Maharal), Gur Aryeh Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 19:14.

[9] Rav Baruch HaLeyve Epstein, Torah Temimah on Sefer VaYikra 19:14.

[10] Rav Baruch HaLeyve Epstein, Torah Temimah on Sefer VaYikra 19:14.

[11] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), pp. 296-297.

[12] Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel, Targum on Sefer VaYikra 19:14.

[13] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 27:18.

[14] Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel, Targum on Sefer Devarim 27:18.

[15] Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel, Targum on Sefer Devarim 27:18.

[16] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Lo Ta’Aseh 299.

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



(continued from page 1)

“The idea that all souls are the same is one of the biggest mistakes of modern spirituality. We are so used to thinking that definitions create barriers and barriers cause hatred that we are convinced that to be spiritual means to have no borders. From a Kabbalistic perspective, this totally misses the point of existence. Before creation, G-d had unity. G-d was all there was; there were no borders, definitions or distinctions. If unchallenged unity is what G-d wants, He had it already. He would not have created the world.

Creation was an act of making borders. From unity came multiplicity. Ours is a world of divisions: body and soul, male and female; as well as the divisions of nations, families and individuals.

Why did G-d create multiplicity? Doesn't that go against the oneness of G-d? No, it doesn't. Because the deepest unity is unity found within diversity. If we are all the same, then unity is no big deal. So G-d gave us all particular souls, each with its unique and

diverse characteristics. When each individual as an individual, and each nation from within its own culture and perspective, recognizes the same G-d, that is real unity.

In other words, a unity that is challenged by diversity yet emerges from that very diversity is an invincible unity. That is something G-d “couldn't” have without a world like ours.

To blur the boundaries between nations, genders and individuals is to avoid facing the challenge, which lies at the very heart of God's purpose in creation -- to find unity in our differences.

For the unity of humankind we need one G-d; but for G-d's unity to be complete we need human diversity.

Jews should be Jews, non-Jews should be non-Jews, men should be men and women should be women. And every individual has to be himself. Only then can we learn from each other the wisdom that we ourselves lack.

The majesty of G-d is revealed when each individual and community connects with Him from his/her/their unique vantage point. There is a contribution that only you can make to G-d's master plan. That's why you were born as you are -- a Jew, a male, and the other distinctive spiritual characteristics that make you.”

Mesora: Rabbi xxxx makes many errors. He first states, “If we are all the same, then unity is no big deal”, and, “Jews should be Jews, non-Jews should be non-Jews”. The Rabbi fails to note that we all descend from Adam and Eve. We all share the exact same design. God's original plan was that all mankind follow the exact same system. It was only due to Abraham's perfection – not a change in human design – that God gave his descendants the Torah system. Only Abraham's descendants would adhere to those monotheistic values. And due to our identical design, God gave only one Torah, which even the convert will follow: “One Torah and one statute you shall have for yourselves, and the convert who dwells among you.” (Numb. 15:16, Exod. 12:49) In contrast, Rabbi xxxx offers no Torah source. Therefore, his view is not a Torah view. Nor is his view reasonable. For if non-Jews are to remain as non-Jews, then he accuses Ruth and all other converts of violating God's will. Yet...God selected her, her grandchildren King David, King Solomon and Moshiaich to be leaders. A gentile most certainly gains more by becoming a Jew, although we do not seek to convert others.

His second error is the following statement: “That is something God ‘couldn't’ have without a

world like ours. For God's unity to be complete, we need human diversity”. Rabbi xxxx suggests God relies on human diversity to be a true unity. This imputes three heretical notions: 1) that God has needs, and 2) that God's unity was not complete prior to the creation, and 3) that God experiences any change. The Prophet Malachi states, “I am God, I do not change.” (Mal. 3:6) This makes sense, since God is perfect so nothing affects Him. And any change in something must make it more or less perfect, both equally inadmissible to God. If we take care to study Maimonides Yesodei Hatorah (1:3), we read: “And if we would entertain the idea that nothing else would exist except for God, He alone would exist. And He would not be diminished due to their diminution. For all existences need Him. And He – Blessed be He – does not need them...not even one of them. Therefore His truth is unlike the truth of any of them [other existences].” Maimonides makes it clear that God does not depend on anything: Again Rabbi xxxx offers no Torah source. Please forward to Rabbi xxxx my words.

Alberto: As you advised me, I asked about the Jewish Soul Theory to Orthodox Rabbis who agree with this, and sent to them your answer to this theme. Some of them, like a Rabbi from Chabad of the city of Salvador, Brazil, did not answer me, and then asked me if the Rabbi who does not agree with this theory (you) is a true Orthodox Rabbi...I answered “Yes, of Course!” I did not know that this issue cause so great rivalry among Jews.

Then Rabbi xxxx xxxxxx, from Chabad.org, sent me an email with his answer to this theme. First he gave me a brief explanation about “God” and “Godliness”, saying that we must differentiate between one another, and then gave me a link from his web site with a text about the ARI, and his discoveries. That text in accordance with his answer, made me think that Judaism (in his view) accepts the Jewish soul theory as a kind of differentiation between Jews and gentiles, like between all humanity and animals as between all biological being and unanimated matter. I mean, not about superiority and inferiority, but simply “different” missions or goals.

Mesora: But this view that human souls are different from each other is not found in Torah. The Rabbi continuously suggests his ideas, or those of others, yet none are found in Torah. While the ideas I suggest are based in Torah verses, or in the words of Maimonides. Furthermore, there is reason in the Torah and Maimonides, and that is what an intelligent person should follow.

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Alberto: So I understood that God imputed different spiritual forces referred as “Godliness” in the created things to allow them to exist. As if to say, that God is not divided, but that what makes things exist is something spiritual, because the matter cannot come into being by itself, so God established “spark” of Spiritual forces or “Godliness” into all things, and that spiritual forces makes possible all matter.

Mesora: But God says that only in relation to man, does the spiritual exist: “In the image of God He created man.” (Gen. 1:27) Following God’s words, we learn that He created everything as physical substances. Only man possesses a spiritual element. So this theory of “sparks of spirituality” in anything but man is not what God said, nor does it make sense. Does it make sense to you that a pebble possesses some spiritual element? You have explained nothing with this statement. Is it permitted to destroy the pebble? Is this Rabbi suggesting the pebble possesses a soul? Am I liable to death for destroying a piece of wood, or even an animal? The Torah clearly commands us to kill animals for sacrifice, food or leather, and to make use of the Earth’s resources as we wish. Therefore, it is meaningless to suggest any spirituality exists in anything else besides man. Again, the Rabbi is not based on any Torah sources, so these notions are all his own imaginations, with no connection to reality.

Alberto: So I understood the Jewish Soul theory is talking about the spiritual force applied to the Jew to allow him to keep the Mitzvos...and the force into gentiles should be different because they must keep others laws or kind of laws.

Mesora: But now you must admit that since converts keep the identical Torah as Jews, that we are all created the same, with the identical soul. Rabbi xxxx’ opinion is false. No change takes place when a convert becomes Jewish. In fact, the perfection of the convert takes place while he or she is “still a gentile”! That is when he or she realized God’s Torah as truth. To suggest, “the force into gentiles should be different” is a denial of the Torah system – and God – who demands equality between converts and Jews. We are to follow one Torah system. Thus, gentiles and Jews have the identical design.

Alberto: I am sending you the Rabbi xxxx xxxxxx’s words below. So please, if you did not know this text before, take time to read it. Once again, thank you to answer me about this very important theme of Jewish knowledge.

“Dear Alberto, It’s very important we distinguish between “God” and “that which is Godly” (Godliness). Let me explain Godliness: All of the creation is sustained by God’s will and wisdom. However, in our world, 99.99% of the time, it is in a very disguised and hidden fashion. Often it comes to the point that one of those beings continually sustained by Godly light will deny the very God that sustains it! How this is possible is beyond the scope of what I am writing here. The Kabbalah describes a process of “tzimtzum” or contraction of light in addition to concealment and encoding of the information that light carries—comparable perhaps to the way an email or an image might be encrypted and encoded when sent over the Internet. What is relevant to our issue is that in some instances that concealment does not occur. The signal may be weak, but the source of light shines through nonetheless. These are the instances within creation we call “kedusha” (holiness); instances that point to their Creator and communicate to us His will and wisdom: Torah, mitzvahs, the tzadikim and any person who is carrying out God’s will on earth. The doctrine of hidden sparks simply states that in fact, every creation must contain some glimmer of holiness—or else it could simply not exist. Our mission on earth is to reveal that spark within each thing. In many cases we do that by using it for a mitzvah. In other cases, that is not possible and the only way to reveal that spark is by withstanding the challenges this article of Creation may pose. Each spark has its particular path to be revealed which corresponds to the path of the soul that comes to earth to live in a human body and find that spark and reveal it.”

Mesora: These words correlate to nothing in Torah or in the observable world. The Rabbis speaks of sparks, yet he has not proved they exist, or what they are. He speaks of “concealment”, “weak signals”, “hidden sparks”, etc. These words tell me nothing about the universe: I have no idea what he speaks of, nor does the Rabbi understand what he says. If someone wishes to teach others truth, he must talk about what is real, and what is in existence...something that can be proved. Maimonides teaches in his Letter to Marseilles, that we are to accept as truth, either: 1) what we observe; 2) what reason demands must be so. Now, all the spark, concealments, et all that Rabbi xxxxxx suggest, are neither 1) observed, 2) proved by reason, nor 3) taught by the wise. He

alone, or maybe others in his group speak such things.

Rabbi xxxxxx says, “the doctrine of hidden sparks simply states that in fact, every creation must contain some glimmer of holiness—or else it could simply not exist”. He first refers to this blind faith as a “doctrine”, which in fact, is no doctrine of Judaism. No authoritative Rabbi or source – such as Talmud, Mishna or Tanach – suggests this belief is Jewish doctrine. You must be careful not to fall prey to alluring phrases and false titles like “doctrines”. This falsely gives the sense that the Rabbi is communicating fundamental of Judaism...when in fact he is without any proof or support. Rabbi xxxxxx is no authority to determine what are the Doctrines of Judaism. Maimonides and other Rishonim and Tannaim already addressed that for us with intelligent words that make clear sense. (In fact, the Tannaim demanded that we do not like Rabbi xxxx, that is, discuss what occurred prior to creation. See Tal. Chagiga 11b)

This theory Rabbi xxxxxx utters above in no way explains any observable or proven truth. These are words are meaningless...regardless of the emotional appeal the reader senses, assuming he now understands “deep matters”. The Rabbi says, “...every creation must contain some glimmer of holiness”. However, the Torah says only certain objects possess holiness, while all other do not. Objects and animals dedicated to Temple worship; the Temple, and its vessels, possess Kedusha, holiness. This means all else has no holiness. The Rabbi has no Torah source...and furthermore, the Torah actually refutes his position.

We must note, that such approaches echoed by Rabbi xxxx and xxxxxx are bereft of any reasoning, or sources in Torah. They may feel Kabbalistic works support this view, but we do not accept such works if they contain incomprehensible statements. Written works on Kabbala (literally, “received” Torah transmissions) violate the edict not to commit oral transmissions to writing. Such writings, essentially, render it no longer “Kabbala”...a “verbal” transmission. Further, these works are not God’s words. And there is even a dispute as to the authorship of what people today refer to as Kabbala. So if we find Torah sources that contradict the above statements, we accept God’s Torah words over Kabbala, and we accept reason over incomprehensible, human writing. If in the Kabbala we found a statement that “an innocent person was hurt by God”, we would immediately and without hesitation dismiss it as a Torah violation. If Kabbala said, “2+2=5”, again we dismiss it since reason overrides falsehood. Calling an incomprehen-

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sible notion “Kabbala”, in no way makes sense out of that confusion. Calling something “Kabbala”, poses no obligation on us to accept it. We have only to accept the Torah, Prophets, Writings, and Shulchan Aruch.

Please review the Torah sources I have presented throughout, and please recognize the absence of “any” Torah source from these Rabbis. They suggest notions, expecting you to accept them, simply because they are popular, or written in books. But God gave us reasoning, and our reason unveils these approaches as without Torah sources, and without intelligence. God desires that both Jew and Gentile recognize Torah as a wise and intelligent system, as it truly is. I offer one final Torah source: “And you shall guard them [the commands] and perform them, for they are your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these statutes and say, “What a wise and understanding this great nation is.” (Deut. 4:6) Since the Rabbis words above offer no impression of intelligence, they cannot reflect God’s Torah at all.

Again, this last quote teaches that God equates other nations to the Jew, in that we can “equally” perceive Torah wisdom...Jews possess no superior soul. This also teaches that Torah must be based in reason, not incomprehensible beliefs. God gave man alone a spiritual element, unlike the Rabbi’s belief that all matter possesses a spiritual “spark”. Our Tzelem Elokim, our soul, can prove what is true, and what is false. God demands we engage this gifted faculty of reason to accept truths, and dispel fallacy. And through our resorting to the Torah’s words and use of reason, we have dispelled the notions you have been told, realizing them as an impostor Judaism.

God’s Torah system is comprised of hundreds of mitzvos, each one targeting some intelligent or moral perfection for men, women, and all mankind. These perfections are realized when we grasp the truths of righteousness, justice, charity, and all true ideas about God. The Torah system is not about talking in riddles where “concealment”, “weak signals”, “sparks”...and all other incomprehensible words parade as Judaism, and replace intelligent truths.

You must take care of your soul. Make certain you refuse to accept any idea unless it is found in the Torah, proved by reason, or observed by you. You have no obligation to accept as truth any idea, regardless of the transmitter. In fact, in His kindness, God did not design the human mind to reasonably accept that, which is not proven. So you will detect when an idea is rational and proven, and when a notion is baseless and does not correlate to what you know is reality. ■

Leprosy

Reader: In last week’s Torah portions (and this week), much time is spent on the details of leprosy and the leprous curse. We noted awhile back that the Torah also includes a huge amount of detail on the Tabernacle, and there are important implications of that. My question is the same around leprosy. Given all of the things that the Torah could focus on, are there some specific lessons or conclusions that we should draw from the fact that the written Torah goes into such great detail about leprosy in its various forms?

Mesora: Not an exact match to your question, but Rabbi Reuven Mann suggested the following: The “miracle” of leprosy as a response to tzaraas, as opposed to other sins resulting in miraculous punishments indicates something about evil speech: the cause of leprosy/tzaraas. All other instinctual involvements are limited: one can only eat so much or have so much sex...until he must stop due to pain or exhaustion. But speech can go on and on. Therefore, God causes another means of deterring one from over involvement in “this” sin: i.e., the leprosy miracle.

Reader: If I am visiting a home with Christians and having a meal with them, they may say a prayer or grace or blessing before the meal where they may ask that the food be blessed, and then they will end the blessing by saying something like, “we pray these things in Jesus’ name, amen.” I understand that there may be (but I am not certain) a prohibition for a Noahide in eating food that has been offered to idols. Do you know if this is true, and if so, does eating food under the circumstances in the previous sentence constitute a violation, even though I’m sitting there being silent and not agreeing with their “prayer”? One citation that may be related to this - given in the footnotes to The Path Of The Righteous Gentile - is Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, Chapter 3, Law 4. I don’t have that volume, but thought you might.

Mesora: Although you are eating food he blessed, or asked the phantom Jesus to bless...the food is not an offering to idols, or to Jesus. If it were, then you’d have an issue. But it is not. That is what Rambam addressed in the law you quoted. You may enjoy his food. ■

Superior Souls?

Marc: I have a question in reference to the last JewishTimes article about everyone’s soul being equal. Didn’t the Jewish people die after God stated the first two commandments at Sinai, and He had to breathe life back into the people? Wouldn’t this

somehow make the Jewish people or their souls different then the rest of mankind?

I also have this question from your section “Can God do anything?” You say that God can’t punish someone if they haven’t sinned but doesn’t He punish some people’s families for generations?

Mesora: The people did not die. Actually, they said, “Moses, you speak to us and we will listen; and let not God speak, perhaps we will die.” (Exod. 20:17) The Jews said “perhaps” we would die if we continue to hear God speak. And regarding punishments for generations, God only punishes for many generation...if those subsequent generations continue in the sins of their fathers: “...I remember the sin of the father on the children for the third and fourth generations, to those who hate Me”. (Exod. 20:5) God says He will remember and punish the children, only if they “hate Me”. But if they do not follow in their father’s sins, but follow God, God will not harm them at all, but will reward them. Judaism is a just and sensible system, since it is a creation of God who is just and follows reason. ■

Forgiveness

Omphile: I was studying the bedtime Shema (from Artscroll siddur) and was perplexed by a couple of points: 1. The one reciting seems to want to forgive everyone whatever he or she has done. This seems more so because he ends with “I forgive every Jew”. What I want to know is why is there no mention of the sinner asking to be forgiven...by those he offended? I was under the impression that God forgives us, only when we are repentant and we should try to emulate Hashem.

Mesora: Yes, the sinner must make amends. But the “offended party” is being addressed here...not the sinner. And he that was offended should forgive all others since forgiveness is an act of perfection. When we forgive, even if not asked, we display humility, and this is one of the traits Maimonides states we should seek to emulate to the extreme. For with humility, we more fully accept God as the authority, and realize our place in the universe. We live in reality when humble, and when we demand apologies, it is indicative of a greater ego, which intervenes between God and us. I would also suggest, that perhaps with our forgiveness, we lighten the punishment of our offender, since punishment is given for two reasons: 1) because we offend someone, and 2) because we don’t repent. So by our forgiving of all others each night, we lessen the punishment of others. Yet, they still should approach us asking forgiveness for “their” perfection, and of course they must abandon their sinful ways.

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Letters

Omphile: Regarding the blotting out of sins of the past, I seem to remember you mentioning something to the effect that not even mitzvot can wipe clean our past transgressions. Can you please clarify?

Mesora: Yes. As Rabbi Mann taught, Deuteronomy 10:17 states that God does not “take a bribe”. Sforno states:

“The punishment of a sin will not be removed at all due to the reward of a mitzvah that this sinner performed. As the Rabbis taught, ‘A mitzvah does not extinguish a sin’. And all this teaches that one should not be confident that if he sins, that his sin is removed at all...except by complete repentance.”

This makes sense. My mitzvah cannot remove an evil aspect of my personality. The only way I am forgiven for my sins is when I identify the cause of my sin, I recognize the error, and I abandon my poor behavior forever. Simply ignoring my flaws, even by occupying myself with many great mitzvahs, in no way removes my flaws. “Let us search and examine our ways and return to God”. (Lamentations, 3:40)

Omphile: Why is the author concerned about his thoughts of his heart finding favor with Hashem? Hashem doesn't punish us for our thoughts...does He?

Mesora: Seeking favor from God for our thoughts, means that we seek to be in line with truth. We are asking to avoid false ideas. And no, God will not punish for a “thought” of sin, unless the thought is concerning sins relegated to thought. I refer to idolatry, which is a sin of accepting false notions about God, or denying God in place of imagined beings. Talmud Kiddushin 39b states that God might punish a person for thoughts of accepting idolatry. But all other laws relegated to speech and actions, can only be violated by action (hitting someone) or inaction (failing to fulfill positive mitzvot). In these latter two categories, thought alone is not punishable. ■

Morality II

Reader: Thanks for your response in last weeks issue. I'd like to follow up if we can. Regarding the quote from the Rambam, isn't it based on “after the fact” of developing a correct idea about God? Or, is it something that can be developed without first developing a correct idea about God?

My understanding is that, according to Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed), developing a correct idea about God comes first in order that we better understand why we need to act in the proper manner; which, you mentioned and quoted.

Mesora: This is correct. Without God, all our good intentions and our moral codes are of human

origin, without targeting knowledge of God as their objective. They are of no value.

Reader: I ask because many religionists are, as you know, now becoming more receptive of Judaism. If they are to see the complete authority of the Torah/Tanakh, they must first deal with a correct idea about who or what God isn't. If they don't first come to this correction, is it still OK for them to live in their ways just because they are able to live according to following these attributes?

Mesora: If one's idea of God is idolatrous, is entire life, and all “good” acts are of no value. The reason being, that this individual has failed to recognize the true Creator.

Reader: Many Christians, for example, do make it a point to live as righteously as possible, as with justice as they can, and are very charitable. Yet, the ideas about God by which they live by (in some circles) are far from being based on Torah. That is why I asked if Torah/Tanakh was only showing Israel how to live or socially improve; or, if it was for them to understand that they have to live this way because it is the way God wants them to live as well as all human beings.

Mesora: Yes, God desires all mankind to possess His truths.

Reader: I fully agree with your response in that we can't just have knowledge of God; but we have to live in action of that knowledge. However, it seems as though correct ideas about God come first, as per the example of Abraham. If we are to emulate the way God governs in our lives, how can anyone do that if they don't first get to “know” God by first developing a correct idea about Him? Otherwise, it seems, we would continue to see the lack of responsibility in the actions of people and the lack of understanding of those attributes and how it is what God “wants” in our lives.

Mesora: This is also correct. However, both pursuits – studying God and upholding His morality – are to be observed if we are to perfect ourselves. Without knowledge of God, we failed at life's objective, since the primary Cause of all that exists has not been apprehended. And without adhering to God's morality, we demonstrate a rift between our knowledge of God's ways, and our conviction – in action. ■

Respect

Aurora: What does it mean to respect a person? We are not supposed to bow down or stand up before anyone but God, so how can we show respect without falling in idolatry? We can we show respect,

while not feeling respect inside of us? It could be hypocrisy.

I think we feel respect for a person when we trust that person and we want to learn from that person, we want that person to do little physical exertion on our behalf, and when we want to protect that person.

When I feel respect for a person, I am some times afraid of that feeling. I don't want this person to become more important to me than God and I don't want to give to that person any power over me.

Is it important to show clearly the respect we have for others? Is the way we relate to a person we respect so important?

Aurora

Mesora: Interesting question. As I read it, I first thought of the concept of honoring God's creations, or I Hebrew, “Kavod haBryos”. This refers to treating others with dignity. We must insure the well being of others in many manners, and one is how we relate to their self-images, and personalities. Allowing another person to express their personality, even if it means we compromise ours, is an essential ingredient for a society to function well. For if we all demanded to be treated as we liked, then no one would accommodate others, and society would crumble. This principle is called “Maaveer al Middosav”, or, going against our own traits in connection with how we relate to others. We also respect others in proportion to their connection with God. We therefore stand for our teachers, leaders, and our parents. Charity, kindness, not stealing, and an array of other commands address human respect.

Respect is an activity which is much more important for us, than it is for others. For when we respect a person, we are in fact recognizing God's will that he exists, or that he should be treated with kindness. In fact, all Torah commands have as their goal the true idea of God...in some fashion or another. So ‘our’ respect perfects our minds, whereas the respect we offer ‘others’, merely affects his emotions: man's lower faculties. But this is tempered, as I mentioned, by the level of perfection of that person: for we must not be kind to murderers. Just the opposite, we are to give them the death sentence. But other religions will medically treat the ill Arafats of the world, and feel their “physician code” is of greater weight than God's law. Their morality is blind to the bigger picture; of the innocents he will kill once healed.

Respect in no way leads to idolatry. No should you feel hypocritical. Rather, you should recognize the idea that God desires societies, so many humans are necessary, and that they should be happy. Your respect insures God's will. And as long as you recognize God's true role, I don't think you will ever let any man obscure this perception, nor will you allow him or her to control your thoughts or actions. ■

Subjective Justice

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Written by student

“Do not curse the deaf and before the blind do not place a stumbling block, and you shall fear your God, I am God.” (Leviticus, 19:14)

Why would a person commit these two sins, and what is the relationship between these sins, and the verse's conclusion, that we should “fear God”? Are we not to fear God as a reason for ALL of the commands?

We must appreciate why this person sins against the blind and the deaf. In both cases, no one else knows his sin: the deaf cannot hear his insults, and the blind do not know of his trap. But the flaw of such a transgressor is that he cares only about the social arena: if no man knows his error, he is content. He does not gauge his values based on God's approval or disapproval, but on man's. It is essential that our estimation of morality depend on objective truths, i.e., God's Torah, and not on social approval. For this reason, this area concludes with “and you shall fear your God.” Man must be reminded of He, who is the true judge, and to whom man must answer to.

“Do not be crooked in judgment; do not favor the poor and do not adorn the wealthy; with righteousness judge your people.” (Leviticus, 19:15)

What would motivate a judge – to whom this is addressed – to find someone innocent guilty, and vice versa?

Rashi says that a judge might be faced with a court case between a wealthy man and a poor man. And although the wealthy man is thought innocent by this judge, he may be prompted to consider that the wealthy man must give charity anyway, so he will invert the ruling, favoring the poor man – even though guilty – and he will force the innocent wealthy man to give the poor man money. We see that a judge may overstep his role – to seek exact justice – and feel he may play God. Since his role is justice, he may feel it is valid to achieve a good ends, through crooked means. But this is the lesson: a judge must act with justice, as the verse concludes, “with righteousness judge your people.” The judge has no rights to act outside of his designated role, and must be on guard to humble himself before God who

limits his actions to Torah principles, and go no further. It may be a good intent to assist the poor, but not through crookedness in judgment.

The next case is where one might feel he wishes not to defame a rich man, so he too might alter the judgment in his favor to save face. This too is corrupt. But we wonder, may we derive anything from the order of these two cases? I believe the first case is placed first, as it is a greater corruption. For in this first case, the judge feels what he does is actually a ‘good’: he feels that the ends justify the means, and that he is justified in stealing from the rich to feed the poor. This is far worse than a judge who knows he errs, but does so. The former actually corrupts his thinking, not only his actions. ■

Maimonides: Molech

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Maimonides' work, the Sefer haMitzvos (the Book of Commands) he classifies the 613 Positive and Negative commands. In the second section on Negative Commands, he commences with formulations of idolatrous prohibitions: "And the The first command of the negative commands is that we are warned not to believe in gods other than God.... And the second command is that we are warned not to make idols to worship....And the third command is that we are warned not to make idols for others....And the forth command is that we are warned not to make forms of animals from wood, stone or metal...".

But when Maimonides comes to the seventh command, regarding Molech, he writes, "And the seventh command is that we are warned not to give a little of our seed to the worshiped (thing) that was famous at the time of the giving of the Torah, that its name was Molech." Why such a lengthy description in contrast to the other commands? Why not simply say "...that we are warned not to give a little of our seed to Molech"? If that was the practice, then that should comprise the entire formulation of the prohibition. What does Molech's fame at Sinai have to do with its inherent prohibition? Let us assume that Molech was not famous at Sinai, does Maimonides' mean to say that it would not be prohibited? Clearly this cannot be. Such a practice of passing one's child through fire - certainly if the

child was to be burned - is definitely contrary to Torah, and even without fame, prohibited in nature. (Burning children is prohibited by many verses.) What does Maimonides mean to teach by his precise formulation? What does Sinai have to do with Molech? Additionally, if another practice was famous during Revelation at Sinai - and Molech was not - would Maimonides apply his formulation there, instead of applying it to Molech? It would seem so.

True, many other practices are prohibited, and assume forces outside of God, or they assume that there are sub-deities. However, it appears that Maimonides concludes that Molech is unique: It stands in direct contrast to God's Revelation at Sinai, and carries a unique new quality. Molech was popular during Revelation. Those who worshiped it then, or who worship it today, possess a unique corruption. What is it? Not only does a Molech practitioner subscribe to foolish beliefs, but additionally, he commits the following crime: He demonstrates that the Sinaic, absolute proof of God's existence is not within his "radar". He does not operate with the basic tools reason. This is the unique crime of Molech.

Sinai was orchestrated to act as a solid proof for God's existence. One who follows Molech, which was popular at Sinai's era, has thereby made a selection of "something instead of Sinai." This is not so in connection with other practices, such as classical idolatry. With serving Molech, man clearly shows his inability to comprehend an absolute truth, via the absolute proof of Sinai. Such behavior is a sign of a man who is furthest from reality. Yes, when one serves an idol, he is corrupt, but he is not demonstrating a denial of Sinai. He is not saying, "my mind is useless in the most apparent of truths." Molech worship does say this.

This is what I believe to be Maimonides' concept. He means to teach that Molech worship contains this additional feature: Absence of the most fundamental reasoning. Such a person has reached a qualitatively new level of philosophical corruption, more than one who prostrates himself to a stone god. In the latter case, one may simply be pulled by an emotion, but if confronted with the proof of Sinai, he would not deny it. Molech worshipers display a mind bereft of base functionality.

In the most extreme contrast, how fortunate are we to have the Torah and teachers who continue to open our eyes to delightful marvels. May we be enabled by these teachers, to do the same for others. Shavuot celebrates the initial step in the transmission of Torah ideas. Continue to learn deeply, patiently, earnestly, and with great honesty and humility. Crystallize your ideas, and continue Shavuot's theme by sharing your ideas with others. ■

the Weekly Parsha:
Kedoshim

taken from
Windows to the Soul

RABBI DR. MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

Numerous prohibitions throughout the Torah address the sin of lashon hara (slanderous speech). One of the most famous appears in Parashas Kedoshim (19:16), "Do not walk about bearing tales among your people."

God created man and made him into a "living being," which Targum Onkelos translates (Genesis 2:7) as a ruach mimalela, a spirit that speaks. Speech is the interface between the physical and the intellectual. Man's ability to speak defines him. From a psychological perspective, speech can reveal the deepest, most carefully concealed attitudes of the speaker. Often, a person vents and gives satisfaction to his inner feelings through words. When a person speaks lashon hara, his malicious words allow him to gain a feeling of superiority. All the while, he tells himself he has committed no aggressive acts, that he is not a mean-spirited person. But this is self-delusion. Our Sages say that "the tongue holds the power of life and death"; lashon hara can destroy lives and often does. Ironically, perhaps no one suffers more than the frequent slanderer himself, who becomes steeped in his most primitive drives.

At the same time, there is a great opportunity in the internal battle against lashon hara. It brings a person face to face with his underlying pettiness or baser desires as he restrains his inclination to speak. A person who resists the lashon hara impulse delivers a powerful impetus to his own spiritual growth and development.

Because of their deep understanding of the dangers of lashon hara and the benefits of the struggle against it, our Sages shunned idle conversation and any type of utterance that may stem from underlying aggressiveness or other base instincts.

The Talmud discusses (Pesachim 3b) the lengths to which we must go in order to avoid



bad speech. For instance, our Sages counseled against being a bearer of bad news.[1] Several base emotions are satisfied by bearing bad tidings. Informing others about a death, for example, may give the speaker, at some level, a sense of control over death. He may also unconsciously be satisfying aggressive feelings toward the one who will be bereaved.

The Talmud tells an anecdote (ibid.) about Yochanan Chakukah, who had just arrived from the country. The Rabbis asked him if the wheat crop had been good. Careful to avoid being the direct bearer of bad news, Yochanan responded indirectly that the barley crop had been good. The Rabbis did not find this response about barley, which is used primarily for animal feed, subtle enough. "Go tell the horses and donkeys," they said sarcastically. What should he have said? The Talmud offers two suggestions. He could have said, "Last year's crop was

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good." Or else, "The lentil crop [usually eaten by humans] was good." These preferred responses not only avoided conveying bad news directly, they were also associated with something pleasant. This subtle but significant improvement reflects the Sages' understanding that speech is a window to the soul. Man gains tremendous advantage in the micromanagement of his speech.

Let us take a further look at the verse prohibiting lashon hara (19:16), "Do not walk about bearing tales among your people; do not stand upon the blood of your neighbor; I am God."

What is the meaning of "standing on the blood of your neighbor"? Our Sages derive (Sanhedrin 73a; Toras Kohanim) from this statement the obligation to rescue an endangered person and the prohibition against suppressing evidence in a court case. Both these laws, which prohibit causing harm through inaction, subtly connect to the first half of the verse. Yet the verse invites a further connection by its contrasting metaphors of "walking" and "standing."

Perhaps this language is also the source of our Sages' admonition that the crime of listening to slander is worse than the crime of speaking it. One of the more insidious features of lashon hara is that the speaker easily avoids facing up to the destructiveness of his aggressive act; he tells himself he bears no responsibility, that it was only words. Yet at some level, he knows he is acting out his aggressive feelings, albeit in a lesser way; he is a "walker." The one who listens to slander, however, has done nothing premeditated or deliberate. He usually has only a moment's notice before the slander starts to flow, and it is exceedingly easy for him to shrug off all responsibility for what was no more than passive acquiescence; he sees himself as a blameless "bystander." Therefore, the Torah specifically admonishes him in the starkest terms, "Do not stand on the blood of your neighbor, I am God." Listening to slander is the emotional equivalent of passive acquiescence to murder. ■

[1] It is appropriate that this discussion occurs in the Pesachim, one of whose etymological derivations is peh sach, the mouth speaks, a homiletic reference to the retelling of the story of the Exodus on Passover.



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