



# "Jewish" Idolatry?

Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

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## Weekly Parsha

# Ekev

RABBI BERNIE FOX

"The graven images of their gods you shall burn with fire; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it unto yourself, lest you be snared with it; for it is an abomination to Hashem your G-d.

(continued on next page)

## Idolatry

# IDOLATROUS FANATICISM

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Parshas Vaeschanan continues Moses' rebuke of the Jews. But not all of Moses' rebukes are so clear to grasp by the verses' simple reading. As always, one must "learn" the verses: not simply read them.

In verse 3:29 Moses recalls how the Jews encamped opposite the idolatrous Baal Peor. But we are left hanging as to the significance of this recollection. The next verse introduces a seemingly new idea regarding the prohibition of adding to and detracting from the Torah. For example, as Baalei Tosfos cite, one must not wear 5 tzitzis, create 5 species in the lulav, or add a fifth section in tefillin. Similarly, one must not add a third cherub on the ark, or a third box of tefillin. Conversely, one is also prohibited to detract from the Torah. Moses cites these prohibitions here in 4:2.

What catches our attention is the very next verse 4:3 where Moses reminds the Jews how God killed all those who worshipped Baal Peor. Why does Moses return back to Baal Peor? He should have completed discussing all issues pertaining to Baal Peor, end that topic, and only then commence a new topic as he did by introducing the prohibitions of adding to and detracting from Torah. The sequence is interrupted...or is it?

Stop. Think for a moment. What justification might Moses have for associating idolatry and altering the number of mitzvahs?

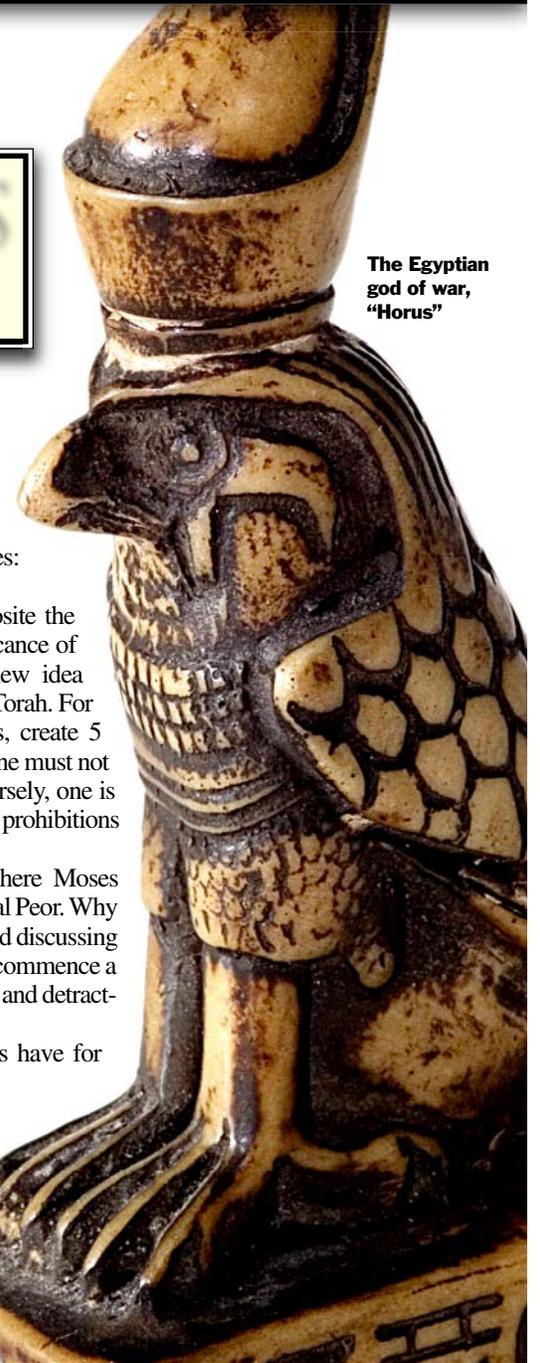
Stop. Think.

OK. Next step.

Where do we start looking for an answer? Well, since this is a rebuke, we must examine human nature, for this is precisely the rebuked villain. But not just any area of human nature: but our emotions. What's the next step?

You got it: stop and think!

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The Egyptian god of war, "Horus"

(Ekev cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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**And you shall not bring an abomination into thy house, and be accursed like it; you shall utterly detest it, and you shall utterly abhor it; for it is a forbidden thing.”** (Devarim 7:25-26)

Much of the Torah deals with prohibitions and admonitions against idolatry. According to Maimonides and most other authorities, three mitzvot relating to the destruction and rejection of idolatry are contained in the above passages. These commandments are the following:

1. We are commanded to destroy all idols and the facilities and items designated for their worship. This is a positive commandment.[1]

2. We are forbidden to benefit from the decorative gold or silver overlays and trim that are part of an object of worship. This is a negative commandment or prohibition.[2]

3. We are forbidden from bringing idols or associated objects into our homes and from benefiting from them. This is a negative commandment or prohibition.[3]

4. Many of the prohibitions in the Torah are stated more than once. For example, the first mitzvah in our pesukim was mentioned in the previous parasha[4] and is again reiterated in the next parasha.[5] There are a number of reasons for the repetition of a commandment. A commandment may be repeated for emphasis. Alternatively, the various iterations of the commandment may teach new details of the obligation or prohibition. However, these various iterations are all expressions of a single commandment among the Taryag Mitzvot – the 613 commandments. In other words, each iteration of the commandment is regarded as a repetition of a single mitzvah and is not counted separately among Taryag.[6] In order for the Torah's statement of a prohibition or obligation to be counted as one of Taryag, the statement must describe a unique prohibition or obligation that differs from the others. In other words, the Taryag Mitzvot are 613 unique commandments; each differs from the others. Also, it follows from this reasoning that one commandment cannot be subsumed within another. In other words, if an activity is prohibited by a more general commandment, it cannot be the substance and subject of a second more specific commandment.

An example will help illustrate this second point. Thirty-nine forms of creative labor are prohibited on Shabbat. These 39 melachot – forms of labor – are not separate commandments. They are all subsumed in the general commandment to not work on Shabbat. Once an activity is prohibited by a general commandment – in this instance to not work on Shabbat, it cannot be the basis for an additional more specific commandment.

This raises a troublesome problem. The second two

commandments in our passages seem to violate this principle. The third commandment is a general mitzvah that prohibits us from benefiting from an idol or any object or substance associated with the idol. The second commandment is a specific prohibition against benefiting from the precious metal overlay that decorates a worshiped object. Maimonides acknowledges that these overlays are one of the various substances associated with idolatry.[7] This means that these overlays should be already prohibited by the more general commandment prohibiting benefit from idols or associated objects and substances.

Sefer HaChinuch's treatment of the prohibition against benefiting from these decorative overlays seems to address this issue. His comments require a prefatory remark. As previously explained, the Torah commands us to destroy all forms of idolatry. However, in order for this commandment to apply, the idol must be created – or fashioned by its worshipers – as an idol. For example, if a group of heathens designate a mountain or a tree as the object of their



Tibetan Buddhist temple

worship, this designation does not prohibit benefit from the mountain or tree. It is permitted to enjoy hiking on the mountain, to plant upon it and to benefit from it in every manner.

However, if these heathens overlay a portion of the mountain with gold or silver, this adornment is prohibited. One cannot take this overlay, or a portion of it, and fashion jewelry from the material. It is permitted to benefit from the mountain but the gold overlay is prohibited.[8]

Let us now consider Sefer HaChinuch's comments. He

explains that third mitzvah outlined in our passages prohibits benefiting from an idol or the objects and substances associated with it and used in its worship. However, in describing the second mitzvah listed in our passages, he explains that this mitzvah specifically targets overlays that adorn objects that are not in themselves prohibited in benefit. For example, this commandment prohibits the gold overlay used to adorn a worshiped mountain. The commandment communicates that the overlay is prohibited even though the object it adorns – the mountain – cannot be prohibited.[9] Minchat Chinuch explains that these comments seem to address our issue. Each of the commandments is unique and separate from the other. The final commandment in our passages prohibits benefit from an idol or objects associated with the prohibited object and used in its worship. This commandment does not extend to an adornment that overlays an object that is not itself prohibited. A separate mitzvah is required to prohibit such an overlay. The second mitzvah in our passages is the mitzvah that deals with this unique situation.[10] The following table summarizes the difference between the two commandments.

(continued on next page)

## Table of Mitzvos

Mitzvah (Sefer HaChinuch)	Text	Prohibition
#429	And you shall not bring an abomination into thy house.	Benefit from an idol and objects associated with the prohibited idol or used in its worship
#428	You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them.	Benefit from an overlay that adorns an object that is worshiped but is not prohibited.

These conclusions suggested by Minchat Chinuch are reasonable. However, they present another question. The general prohibition (#429) prohibits the idol and objects associated with its worship. Why does this prohibition not include the objects prohibited in the more specific mitzvah (#428)? In other words, why are overlays that adorn worshiped objects which are not themselves prohibited excluded from the general commandment?

It seems there are two reasons why an object or substance associated with an idol or worshiped object may be prohibited. First, the prohibition may be an extension of the prohibition to benefit from the idol. In other words, when the Torah prohibits benefiting from a worshiped object, this prohibition extends beyond the idol to those objects and substances associated with its worship. In this instance, these objects and substances are not inherently prohibited; their prohibited status is an extension of the prohibition upon the worshiped object.

Second, the prohibition upon an object or substance associated with idolatry may be inherently prohibited. Its very association with idolatry and its role in heathen worship render the object, or substance, "prohibited".

What is the practical difference between the two reasons? These reasons are differentiated by the case in which an object or substance is associated with an object that is worshiped but not prohibited. According to the first reason, this associated object or substance is not prohibited. Objects that are prohibited because they are worshiped "generate" a secondary prohibition that extends to substances or objects associated with it and used in its worship. According to the first reason, in an instance in which the worshiped object is not prohibited, no prohibition is generated that can be extended to secondary substances and objects.

In contrast, according to the second reason, the status of the worshiped object does not impact the prohibition against objects and substances associated with its worship. The mere association of these objects with idolatry renders them prohibited. The status of the worshiped object – whether it is prohibited or not – does not impact this association.

Now, we can better appreciate the difference between these two commandments and the reason for which each is required. Commandment #429 primarily focuses on objects that are worshiped. It prohibits benefiting from these objects. This mitzvah extends this prohibition to objects and substances associated with its worship. However, the prohibition against these associated objects is a secondary prohibition; it

is an extension of the prohibition against benefiting from the worshiped object. Therefore, this commandment cannot prohibit benefit from a substance associated with a worshiped object that is not itself prohibited. A secondary prohibition can only exist as an extension of a primary prohibition.

In contrast, Commandment #428 prohibits overlays merely because of their association with idolatry. This mitzvah does not generate any prohibition against the worshiped object. It deals exclusively with the associated substance. This commandment prohibits an overlay even though the worshiped object it adorns is not prohibited. It does not prohibit the overlay as an extension of the prohibition against the worshiped object. It prohibits the substance because of its association with idolatry.

This analysis is relevant to another issue. In general, if a heathen performs bittul – he takes an action that indicates that he has abandoned worship of his idol – the idol he formally worshiped is no longer prohibited. Furthermore, objects and substances formerly associated with its worship become permitted. Minchat Chinuch raises an interesting question which he leaves unresolved. As we have explained, if a heathen designates a mountain for worship, then, although the mountain is permitted, its overlay is prohibited. If the heathen subsequently performs bittul in regard to the mountain then does the overlay become permitted?[11]

This question is a consequence of the above analysis. In the typical case, the prohibition against the associated substances and objects is a secondary extension of the primary prohibition against the worshiped idol. If bittul removes the primary prohibition against the worshiped object, then the secondary extension of this prohibition is also voided. However, in the instance of an overlay adorning a worshiped mountain, the prohibition against the overlay is not an extension of some other primary prohibition. Therefore, it is questionable whether bittul performed in regard to the mountain will impact the status of its overlay.

This analysis also explains another issue. Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno makes an interesting comment regarding the prohibition against overlays. He explains that the Torah prohibits these overlays lest they ensnare us. How might these substances ensnare or mislead us? He explains that if a person takes possession of this substance and then experiences an episode of unusual success, he may attribute his "good fortune" to the efficacy of the idol.[12]

Although this is a reasonable explanation for this prohibition, it seems unnecessarily complicated. The

more obvious explanation is that the Torah aggressively combats idolatry and therefore it prohibits benefit from anything associated with it. The Torah's objective is to stigmatize idolatry and to fashion a strong taboo against idolatrous practices. Why does Sforno resort to this less-than-obvious explanation for this commandment?

However, Sforno's comments are more reasonable when viewed in conjunction with the above analysis. Sforno is responding to the specific formulation of the prohibition against overlays. As explained above, this prohibition focuses on instances in which the adorned object is not itself prohibited. Sforno reasons that this commandment must reflect a different concern than the prohibition against idols and associated substances and objects. He reasons that the general prohibition (Commandment #429) is designed to stigmatize idolatry. However, such an objective is only fulfilled when both the worshiped object and its associated substances and objects are prohibited. Any stigmatization is undermined if the worshiped object is permitted. Therefore, Sforno suggests an alternative reason for the prohibition of an overlay that adorns an object that is itself permitted. He suggests that the prohibition is not designed to stigmatize worship of the mountain. This will not be effective; the object of worship – the mountain – is permitted. Instead, the overlay is prohibited for a different reason. If the person takes possession of the material of the overlay, he may wrongly attribute any subsequent success to the powers of the idol formerly adorned by the metal. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 185.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Lo Ta'aseh 25.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Lo Ta'aseh 22.

[4] Sefer Devarim 7:5.

[5] Sefer Devarim 12:2

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Principle 9.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avorah Zarah 8:7.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avorah Zarah 8:7.

[9] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 428.

[10] Rav Yosef Babad, Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 428, note 1.

[11] Rav Yosef Babad, Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 428, note 3.

[12] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim, 7:25.

(continued from page 1)

## Idolatry

If we are seeking to explain the shared rebuke of idolatry and altering mitzvahs, we must first define their common denominator. What is common to both? Let's take the easier one first. What is the primary human error in idol worship?

Idol worship is man's attempt to be religious, but doing so with invented practices. This means that man is seeking a religious experience, but he does so by fantasizing baseless new methods or practices. What must be our next question? What motivates man to invent new religious expressions, instead of following what God prescribed in the Torah? There is only one answer: emotions. It cannot be intellect, for this capacity tells man NOT to project powers onto stone and wood idols. And man has only two capacities: his intellect and his emotions – the Yetzer haTov, and the Yetzer haRa. (Literally, the inclinations towards good and evil.) Our answer is staring us in the face...

One who adds or subtracts from the Torah is akin to an idolater since he too seeks religious expressions – performing mitzvot – but has an emotional need to make the religious expression conform to his likes and dislikes. Both individuals have emotions that fight the Torah's commands. But instead of changing themselves, they change the Torah. The crime in both cases is man's estimation that HIS mode of fabricated expression is justified, since he feels a certain way. But God tells us that this exact thinking is punishable: "I will have peace [and not receive God's curses] for I go in the path of my heart...", "...then God's anger will smoke against that man...". (Deut. 29:18,19) God addresses this very phenomenon of one trusting his own feelings as being the sole arbiter of reality. One thinks that since his heart felt "right" about something, then it "must" be right. Of course, this is a very distorted person, for such a person would never decide to inject a fluid in his or her veins, regardless of how right he or she felt. They would seek a specialist. This exposes man's foolish dichotomy. He values his temporal body, over his possibly eternal soul.

### A Vital Lesson

Moses teaches us that adding to or subtracting from the Torah is a severe corruption, on par with idolatry, and precisely why Moses inserted it in his rebuke of Baal Peor. Altering the Torah – even in the name of religious Judaism – shares the same perversion as idolatry. Moses teaches this by including adding and subtracting in the address of Baal Peor. In truth, Moses did not leave Baal Peor and return to it...he never stopped discussing idolatry when he mentioned adding and subtracting from Torah.

To be clear, the primary corruption in idolatry is man's acceptance of his imagination, instead of accepting what is real and proven. He is psychotic, defined as "impaired contact with reality". This accusation equally applies to one who changes God's commands, regardless of motive. He too accepts his own feelings, over reality...i.e., God's words.

### Current Violations

Do we add or subtract today in the name of Judaism? Radak cites a few views on the prophet Tzefania 1:8 where God punished Jews for sinning by "wearing strange garments". Radak's final citation is of an opinion that says the Jews' sin was this: "dressing to look more righteous than other Jews". This is the interpretation of "strange clothing"...strange when compared to the clothing of their peers. And Radak calls this "evil". So does the prophet.

Those Jews attempted to parade their piety. Their insecurity forced them to seek the applause of their peers, so they dressed in certain garments that were understood back then as being "pious". But in truth, clothing cannot be pious: only people are pious. It matters none how we dress, provided we are modest. There are no laws in the Torah about a dress code, unless we are priests. There-

fore, is it not wrong – and prohibited – to "add" to the Torah by dressing a certain way in the name of Jewish piety? Are we not violating Moses very words? Doesn't God know better than us? Since He did not command us in a style of clothing, nor did the Rabbis, then we must not use clothing as a means of religious expression. This shares the corruption of idolatry, as we are adding to what God commanded us. One might respond in defense, that this is not "adding" since no one says it's a "mitzvah". Regardless, it is viewed as a "right thing to do" by those who wear different clothing than the majority of Jews. And it matters none that the majority of Jews are not observant.

This criticism is applicable to all Jews who seek to publicize their piety. The prophet Micah (6:8) says we are to "walk humbly with God". Humility demands that we do not draw attention to ourselves. Yet the religious costume so prevalent in Judaism – the black hat and suit, beard, and white shirt – is not only baseless in Torah, but it leads to tragic repercussions. (I exclude this critique for those who grow beards based on halachik reasons.)

Young men and women, who actually value this costume, take it to extremes. They base their dating choices on this costume. Funny thing is this: couples that marry based on this costume...also get divorced. Evidently the costume failed. And even that doesn't wake them up to realize the absurdity in seeking a costume, more than a person. If the prospective match doesn't wear the costume, they will reject that person. Sadly, they would reject Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all others, as they didn't wear black hats, suits, etc.

Another crime is the "pious" desire of young men to sit and learn for a few years once married, literally demanding the wife's father support them. Again, "thinking" is absent. First of all, the wife's father too must learn, so it is wrong to ask him to sacrifice his Torah study for his son-in-law. Also, haven't these young men learned Pirkei Avos? "If there is no flour, there is no Torah". This euphemism stresses the need to have a livelihood. For without it (bread) one will not be able to learn. "Good is Torah study with business; for with the labor of both, one will not sin".

Over recent centuries, Judaism has been distorted into numerous movements. Each one has their own "new prescriptions" which God evidently forgot. Their philosophic crimes of adding and subtracting run the gamut from permitting driving on Sabbath, altering the Siddur, human deification, consulting the dead, violating Moses and the prophets, creating new "halachos", suspecting others of flaws based on clothing, viewing beards as holy, assuming God is subject to division by saying "part of Him is in each of us", viewing gentiles as a lesser creation than the Jew...the list goes on. And if you think about all these stupidities, one emotion is to blame: ego. The corrupt movement is overconfident in their position, it views others lower than themselves, or they seek applause to justify their egos so they make changes in Torah that are public, i.e., dress, and communal law alterations.

Thinking has become a lost art.

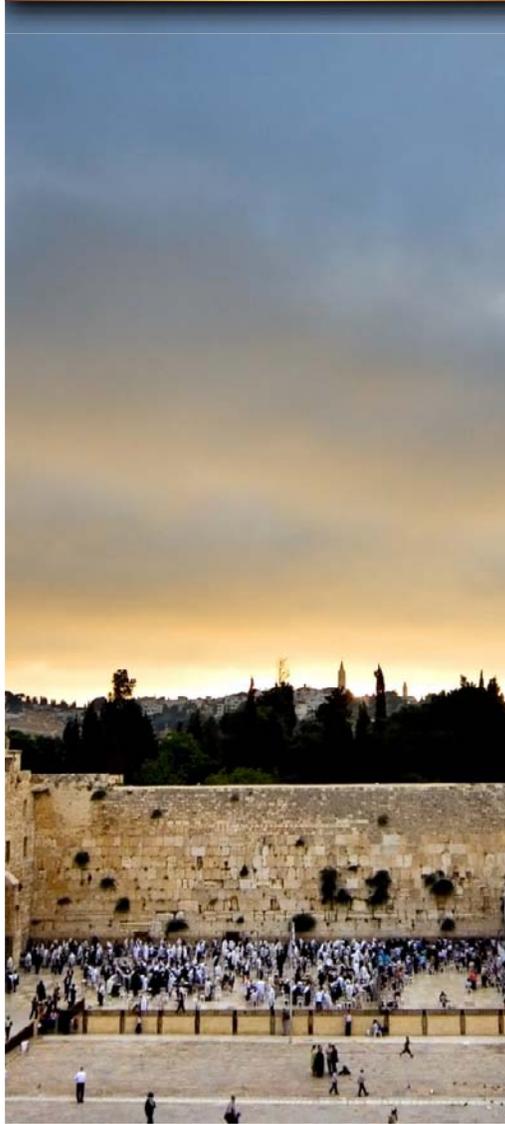
Torah study has been replaced by following the blind masses.

If people would study, they would have learned Tzefania's warning against using clothing as a means to feed their egos. They would know about Moses' command not to add or subtract from the Torah.

If people thought, they would realize a better marriage choice is when you marry a person, not his or her outfit.

Thought: use it to regularly determine if what you follow are the masses, or God's commands. If Moses realized the need to address Jews who witnessed Sinai not to add, we must not feel we are any better, and do not fall prey to this idolatrous corruption. ■

## Israel



# My Trip to Israel

HOWARD SALAMON

I haven't been to Israel in 25 years and was really looking forward to the trip from an emotional and intellectual prospective. The planning started a year ago and we had all the bases covered: a tour with a group and touring on our own. We did all the regular stops: the Kotel, Yad Vashem, Massada, the Dead Sea, Tsfat, etc. just to name a few. It was really very nice to be with so many Jews in one place: from the bus driver wearing a kippah to many taxi drivers, storeowners, and street cleaners.

Israel was not a backward country as I remember it. The infrastructure that has been built, the highways, tunnels, and apartments are being rebuilt. It was emotionally very satisfying to me, and I'm sure to the rest of my family. In America, if you see a person wearing a kippah at work you are very surprised. I started feeling "Wow!", these people that live here in Israel...they have it made. I could really see myself living here, maybe not getting on the next flight to move, but maybe sometime in the future!

After many days of touring I started thinking a little bit more about some of the things I have been seeing, hearing and experiencing...from an intellectual basis...the Kotel for one...

By the way, does anyone know the importance of the Kotel (the Western Wall)? I always thought it was the remaining wall of our holy Temple. Well, it's not. Nechemia and Ezra built our second Temple and King Herod built the outer walls to make the Temple grander. This Kotel is Herod's wall which remains standing for more than 2000 years. So why is it so important to all Jews? Because it's closest to where the Holy of Holies was when we had the holy Temple standing. (If you have sources concerning the distinction of the Kotel, please email them. See end of article for contact)

I am not so sure that Hashem better receives one's prayer at the Kotel as opposed to davening in another place. Hashem says in Parshat Yitro (Exod. 20:21), "In any place that I permit my name to be mentioned I will come and bless you". This seems to say that Hashem hears us in any place that He permits, and not just the Kotel. I went there on two occasions. One was for a Bar Mitzvah on a Thursday morning to hear a boy c from the Torah; the other was on a Friday night. This was a chiyuv (an obligation) as so many people have told me: "You must go there on a Friday night to see it, it's unbelievable. The singing, the dancing. Everybody goes there!"

## The Bar Mitzvah

Do you know what its like to try and have focus (kavana), hear a Bal Tfila and a Bar Mitzvah boy's reading at the Kotel when you have another minyan every 10-20 feet away from yours, and of course other people doing their own customs, singing, dancing, photographers snapping pictures during davening?

I recall a Mishnah in Brachot (chapter five) which says, "A person is not allowed to pray, except with a heavy head". Rashi says this means humility. Rambam (Hilchot Tfila 4:15) states, "All prayer that does not have focus is not prayer, and if one prays without focus he must repeat the prayer." Re: The Shliach Tsibur, he is supposed to lead the people in the praying and the people are supposed to follow along with him to respond to his prayers and also to join in with some of his prayers. Rambam (Hilchat Tfila chapter 8) says, "What is the case of a prayer of the many? Each one prays in a loud voice and everybody hears him." This also gets a little bit difficult when you cannot hear the Bal Tfila.

What about Torah reading? Rambam (Hilchat Tfila 11:1) says, "Moshe our teacher decreed that the Torah should be read with the multitude on Shabbat, and also on the second and fifth day of the week in the morning so that three days should not go by without hearing Torah. I know it must have been very exciting for people to be at the Bar Mitzvah, but I do not think everybody could hear the reading.

## Friday night at the Kotel

From an emotional prospective it was at first, very enjoyable: lots of dancing and singing. However, after so many people kept coming and coming, it just seemed that they would never end. We became packed, like sardines. Then the enjoyment started to dissipate. In terms of the davening, it was very similar to my Thursday experience. Many people, many minyanim, and too much noise. It was also a big social scene: "Do you see who's here? Who's there?" Not a very meaningful davening intellectually. Of Course I won't even mention the practice of putting letters into the Kotel walls, as if Hashem needs my letter for him to hear my prayers! Besides, what's wrong with prayer as we are commanded to do? Obviously putting paper in the Kotel is more meaningful for the person. In general there seemed to be a lot of mysticism going on at the Kotel as well as other parts in Israel, like this is "Gods home" and I am standing next to Him.

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## Israel

**Our Guided Tour**

When we were passing by certain places or visiting certain graves, the guide kept saying "Legend has it that this war happened here, that rebellion happened there, or this one was buried there or that one was buried there. This mountain is Har Gilgal that we read in the Torah." One other thing he mentioned was that Adam and Eve were sleeping at Abraham's tent. I do not remember the whole story, but thinking that this is a contradiction to our Torah. We know that Adam and Eve already died before Abraham was born. I started thinking. The word "legend" he used doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. If you look up the word at dictionary.com it means "a non historical or unverifiable story handed down by tradition from earlier times and popularly accepted as historical." What am I hearing? Why should this legend be different than those purported by other religions? Why should I or anyone else believe this legend? It may be true, or not. I thought that many other people listening might also have this question. It actually renders Judaism similar to other religions. How does one determine if this is fact or legend?

I went over to this gentleman and told him my problem. I asked him what the source was for some of the "legends" he quoted. He mentioned that they were Midrash. What other word should he use? I explained to him that if they are Midrash or expositions or parables, that he should say that. The word legend does not give truth to the story. Besides, Midrashim were written by Rabbis to give over true ideas in a concealed manner. If the Midrash makes sense in a literal fashion then one can take it literal. Keep in mind that 95% of this tour was orthodox, and the tour director was also orthodox. This presentation of "legends" must have caused the others to doubt what they heard. Lets move on to another part of my experience.

I davened in the morning at a small Shul that was close to where we were staying. This Minyan was like the new Verizon Fios speed on the Internet. If you are not into computers, I mean fast. I befriended one of the people living there. He said to me, "I bet your Minyan in New York cannot keep up with us?" I felt that his feeling of praying to Hashem was just as corrupt as that of many other people. It's a rote action, just to fulfill and obligation. It's a quantity factor, not a qualitative factor. "When can I finish and get out of here?" Not being used as a means of getting closer to Hashem: reading the words, internalizing the ideas etc.

One of the things I heard was very disturbing. Geula and Maya Sharim are places where extreme Orthodoxy is to be found. A lot of Chassidus is very predominant there. I heard that there were some religious girls walking around on the street, maybe not dressed as modestly as to be expected for a Torah observant Jew. Some of these people went over and spat at them. Another story I heard was the Chassidim spraying some dye on the girls' clothing. This will get these girls to follow all the laws of the Torah? I don't think so. What is the difference between these people and extremist Moslems? Why are they any better? How about desecrating Hashem's name in public? We just read in Parshat Vaeschanan (Deut. 4:6) "And you will keep and do them because this is your wisdom and knowledge before the eyes of the nations, that they will hear these laws and they will say, 'How wise and understanding is this great nation'." These Chassidim, behaving like this...is this the "wisdom" that the other nations will see and hear?

**Good Experiences**

I had seen much kindness being demonstrated by so many Jews. From being in a soup kitchen and working with the volunteers, being at the Jerusalem headquarters of Magen David Adom and meeting with a 19-year-old girl from Yeshiva of Flatbush volunteering for the summer in an ambulance. She was required to take a 10-day course there to learn about all the equipment...only because she wanted to do something meaningful before she embarks onto college.

We were at the second bus attack 30 minutes or so after it happened. Seeing all the Hatzolah and Zacha volunteers working there. Of course the regular Israelis as well. My hat's off to all of you! It was very moving for me. There are more stories but maybe for another time.

So, what did I come back with from Israel?

Israel is the place, which Hashem gave us to perfect ourselves and have a relationship with Him...but only via knowledge of the Torah and Hashem. This will all eventuate into a love of God, to be drawn to Him...wanting to learn more ideas in the Torah, the Universe and Him. Israel is the means of how we are to attain this relationship. This is why He gave us the Torah. As it says, "The learning of Torah precedes everything". There are many other verses that confirm these ideas, but for



the sake of time I will not mention all of them, only a few. In our Alanu Prayer we say 3 times a day, "And you should know today and ponder in your heart that Hashem is God in the heavens above and the Earth below". This "And you should know" is a command from the Torah: "In all of your ways, know Him".

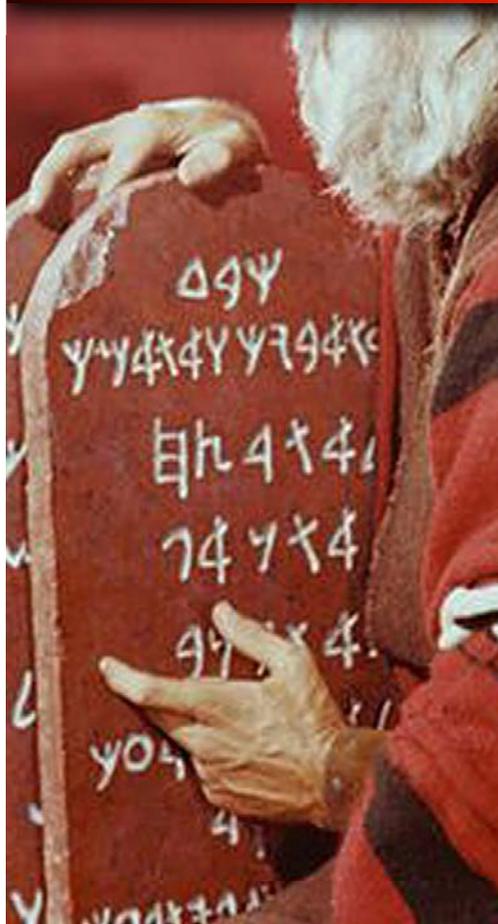
Some people think it's the land Israel that perfects a person, and our actions and ideas are secondary. As I greeted a former New Yorker who moved to Israel, I said hello to him. He said "Welcome Home". It's not the land that magically perfects us. As Hashem tells us, if we do not keep the Torah with its ideas, then the Land will vomit us out. What perfects us? It's all the ideas that we obtain and internalize from the Torah. And it's not just to do the laws with no meaning by rote...but by internalizing the ideas. It doesn't make a difference where a person lives. If a person feels that Israel will help him to reach this longing for Hashem through knowledge then he should move there. If this longing can be reached in New York, let him live here.

May we all continue our learning in the proper manner: individually and as a people, and I am sure that we will have the merit of seeing our Beit Hamikdash rebuilt quickly. ■

**Comments are welcome:**

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## Weekly Parsha



# 40

## Days & Nights

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**“And the glory of God dwelt on Mt. Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days, and He called unto Moses on the seventh day from the cloud. And the appearance of the glory of God was like a devouring fire at the summit of the mountain in the eyes of the Children of Israel. And Moses came in the midst of the cloud, and he ascended the mountain, and it was that Moses was in the mountain 40 days and 40 nights.” [1]**

What is the importance of Moses’ 40-day stay on Sinai? In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Jews that he fasted during these first 40 days on Sinai. (The omission here is of interest) Ibn Ezra states that Moses’ fast of 40 days and 40 nights is a “great, unprecedented wonder”. [2] But we must learn whether this fasting was Moses’ idea, God’s command...or did it just happen? And what would be lost, had Moses not fasted? He would still have received the Torah, as it says “Ascend the mountain to Me and remain there and I will give you the Tablets of stone, and the Torah and the Mitzvah which I have written to teach them” [3]. What difference would it make, had Moses received the Tablets, without fasting?

Let us review the order of Moses’ ascensions on Sinai. Moses first received and wrote the Torah, commencing with Genesis and concluding with his present-day, the event of Revelation on Sinai located in Parsha Yisro. This means that all of the Torah subsequent to Sinai (Parshas Yisro) was not yet given to Moses at Sinai. [4] Moses then descends Sinai and informs the Jews of this Torah, which they accept. On the 7th of Sivan, Moses ascends Sinai for his first of three 40-day periods on the mountain, to receive the first Tablets. On his last day – 17th of Tammuz – Moses learns of the Jews sinning with the Golden Calf. He remains there on the mountain that last day, prays for the Jews not to be destroyed, and receives a favorable reply from God [5]. But keep in mind that during these 40 days until the Jews sinned, Moses’ abstinence from food was not on account of any sin, since no sin was revealed to him until day 40 [6]. On this 40th day – the 17th of Tammuz – Moses descends, breaks the first set of Tablets, punishes the wicked Jews, and ascends to pray for the Jews. He prays for 40 days and night, until the 29th of Av: although God rescinded His initial decree to kill the nation, the Jews still bore the sin [7] of the Golden Calf which Moses wished to remove during this second 40-day period. At God’s command to receive a replacement set of Tablets, Moses descends and quarries a new set of sapphire Tablets on which God will inscribe the original 10 Commandments. He then ascends for a final 40-day period dwelling on the mountain, and received complete atonement for the Jews on Yom Kippur, forty days after the 29th of Av. (Rashi)

When describing the actual events at Sinai in Exodus, the Torah omits any mention of Moses’ abstinence from food or drink, “...and it was that Moses was in the mountain 40 days and 40 nights.” Not a word of his abstinence. Why then does Moses tell the Jews about his fasting when he rebukes the Jews in Deuteronomy? The Torah is silent about his fast until this point:

**“And in Horeb you angered God, and God was angered with you to destroy you. When I ascended the mountain, to receive the Tablets of stone, the Tablets of the Treaty which God forged with you; and I dwelled on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights; bread I did not eat, and water I did not drink.” [8]**

During those first 40 days to receive the first Tablets, the Jews had not yet sinned. Why then did Moses include this ascent in his rebuke? Additionally, why now does he mention his abstinence from food?

Moses continues his rebuke, “And I beseeched God like at first; 40 days and 40 nights, bread I did not eat and water I did not drink.” [9] Here, Moses refers to his second ascent upon Sinai to obtain forgiveness for the Jews’ sin. But we wonder, why did Moses commence with the rebuke “And I beseeched God like at first”? What does Moses mean by the words “like at first”? We are surprised to read this, since we already proved that Moses’ first ascent was not for any sin of the Jews, but to receive the original Tablets at God’s command. This ascent predated the Golden Calf. So what is Moses’ equation between his second ascent to gain forgiveness, and his first ascent? We are forced to say that Moses’ abstinence during his first 40 days is somehow akin to his subsequent ascension and prayer for another 40 days after the Jews sinned, where he again did not require any nourishment. What is the equation?

### Abstinence: Moses’ Lesson

What was Moses responding to with his second ascension on Sinai? The answer: the Golden Calf, the Jews’ sin of idolatry. What is this sin?

Idolatry is man’s attempt to gain goodness in his life, but does so through the misconception that animals, man, inanimate, or imaginary objects possess powers and can offer goodness. Humans are indeed dependent beings: we require food, clothing and shelter and have a myriad of insecurities. We sometimes become feeble, unsure that we can provide for ourselves, also in doubt about our future. Therefore, we succumb to hearsay regarding “powers” that can guarantee our needs. We create idols; seek out palm readers, even those as great as King Saul sought to resolve insecurities by inquiring of the dead [10]. Unless we arm ourselves with truths, we will be no different.

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## Weekly Parsha

Today's Parshas Shoftim clearly prohibits all such false practices, as Ibn Ezra says, "the Torah prohibits that which is false." [11]

This very need expressed in idolatry, is precisely what Moses emphasized, and desired to address. Moses teaches that we can obtain not only our needs, but so much more...but only with adherence to God. He tells the Jews that God "did one better" by removing any of his human needs. Idolatry attempts to secure the needs one has according to his natural disposition, that of an organism in need of food, clothing and shelter. And these, an idol cannot accomplish. In stark contrast, not only can God deliver those needs, but also, He can sustain man without needing to satisfy these natures...God can override nature. This is why Moses tells the Jews that he did not eat or drink, even during his first ascent, which had nothing to do with the Jews' sin. During that first stay on Sinai, Moses attachment to God and His system procured such Divine Providence, that his normal needs were obviated. Revealing this great wonder to the Jews, Moses wished to awaken the sinful Jews to the exact foolishness of their sin. As an educator, Moses decided to unveil the Jews' underlying notions that led to their sin: "You sought protection from gold which is inanimate, while God completely overrode my very needs. In this manner, Moses wished the Jews might realize their falsehoods, and abandon them. In this manner, they can truly repent. Informing the Jews that God removed his need to eat, Moses contrasted their idolatrous motivations, which never succeeded, to God's manifest

proof of His complete control over all. This should make an impression on those seeking security, that it could only come from God.

Earlier in Deuteronomy [12] Moses states, "And He afflicted you and hungered you and fed you the Manna that you and your forefathers did not know, in order to make known that not on bread alone does man live, but on all that comes forth from God's mouth does man live. Your clothing did not become worn from upon you, and your feet did not swell these forty years." Again, Moses teaches the Jews how God sustained them with a miraculous food, how their clothing miraculously never wore, nor did they show physical symptoms normally met with those who traveled for so long.

Moses' message is not that we should abandon natural law and rely on nature, for Moses himself would not do so. Moses' entire life was spent educating the Jews about a land that would provide sustenance, for the very reason that we must live in accord with our natural need for sustenance. So what was Moses' goal in mentioning all God's miracles, and his endurance with no food for 40 days and nights?

Moses' lesson is that while we witness natural law to be constant, we must have greater conviction in He who created and guides this law. If God says that Torah adherence will earn us all our needs, we must not abandon Torah because we feel this loss of work hours will lessen our income. We don't know how God will assure our needs are met, and truthfully, we don't need to know, nor can we know. God created this

universe...do you know 'how' He did so? No man ever did. God's knowledge and controls are unknowable, but His words are clear: He will provide, if we live the life He commands, for our own good. So if we are convinced that God exists, and that He does in fact control all, and that He promises to care for our needs if we follow Him, then other considerations must not take priority in our minds. Creating Golden Calves we assume will protect us, is an extreme illustration of the same falsehoods we harbor today: we work tirelessly, assuming everything we earn, is a result only of how much we work. God is not in our equations, just as God was not in the equation when the Jews created the Calf.

God addresses this insecurity in Malachi [13], where He says that we may test Him when giving our charity: "...and test Me please with this, says the Master of Hosts, (see) if I do not open up the storehouses of heaven, and empty out (for you) a blessing until you have more than enough". God is guaranteeing that by giving tzedaka, we assure for ourselves financial security, and not an average income, but "until we have more than enough". Our normal disposition is that when we part with money, we have less. But God teaches the opposite.

So what will you follow: human thinking based on natural law, or God, who created and controls those very laws?

Moses had no plan to abstain from natural law while on Mount Sinai. It happened that while there, engaged in prophecy and Torah study, God suspended natural law so that Moses endured for 40 days and 40 nights, awake, and not eating. Moses' attachment to Torah earned him God's providence. Our attachment to Torah will earn us the same. ■

[1] Exod. 24:16-18

[2] Exod. 24:18

[3] Exod. 24:12

[4] Rashi, Exod. 24:4,7. This is reasonable, since all subsequent events recorded in our Torah from Yisro through Deuteronomy had not yet transpired. And even if God had included these future events comprising the Jews' future sins in this version of the Torah, free will would be affected, which violates God's will.

[5] Exod. 32:14

[6] Deut. 9:11

[7] Deut. 9:18 states that Moses sought to remove the Jews' "sin", since he already obtained pardon from their destruction, as seen in Exodus 32:14.

[8] Deut. 9:8,9

[9] Deut. 9:18

[10] Samuel I, 28:7-19

[11] Lev. 19:31

[12] Deut. 8:3,4

[13] Malachi 3:10

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