

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed." —Albert Einstein

5757
5771
14
YEARS

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IN THIS ISSUE

MASEI	1-3
2 EVILS	1,8
EINSTEIN	4
HIS FAITHFULNESS	5
WISDOM & REASON	6
LETTERS	9

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Weekly Parsha

Masei

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Role of Prophecy in Deciding the Law

These are the commandments and regulations that Hashem commanded Bnai Yisrael through Moshe on the Plains of Moav, on

(continued on next page)

Weekly Parsha

Haftoras Masei: 2 Evils

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

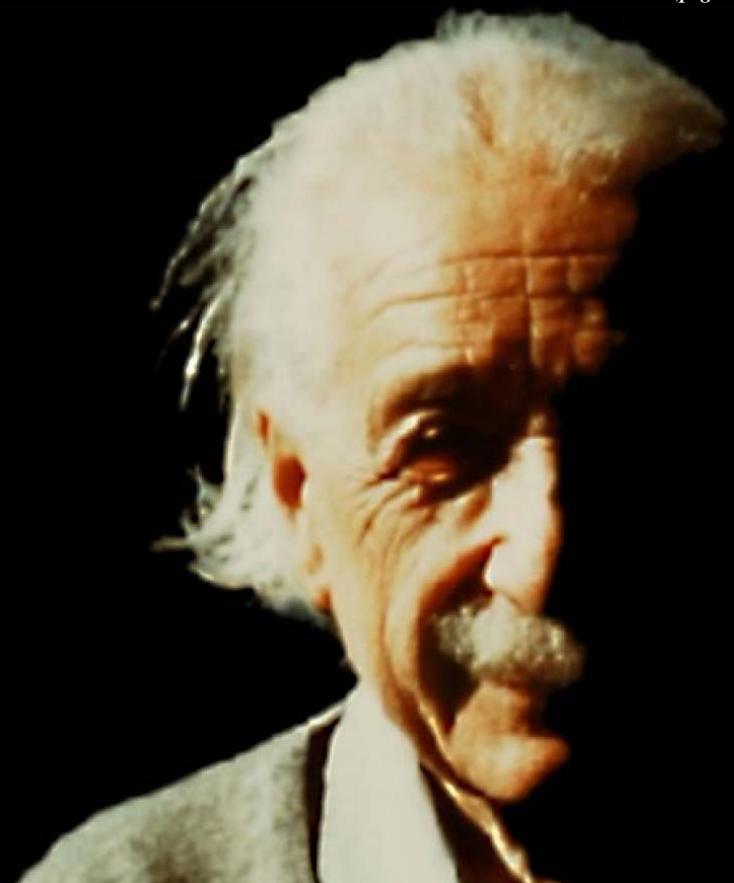
Typically, the haftarah read after the Shabbos laying reflects some relevant theme in that particular week's Torah portion. However, after the Fast of the 17th of Tammuz, the themes of the haftarah change, shifting from being tied to the parsha to taking on elements of the unique period of mourning and consolation that begins with the fast. Clearly, the intent of Chazal was to study each one, assisting us in both understanding the evil acts we have engaged in, as well as the nechama offered by Hashem as we move away from the day the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed. Looking at the second of these special readings, we see some important insights into our destructive behavior.

(continued on page 8)

Thought

Still learning from Albert

(page 4)



(Masei cont. from pg. I)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought

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the Yarden (Jordan River) opposite Yericho. (Sefer BeMidbar 36:13)

These are the commandments that Hashem commanded Moshe for Bnai Israel at Mount Sinai. (Sefer VaYikra 27:34)

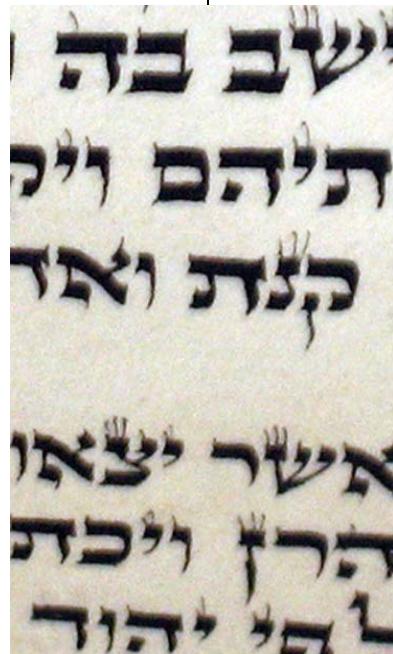
1. The similar endings of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar

This first of the above passages is the final passage in Sefer BeMidbar. The passage is very similar to the second passage which is the final passage in Sefer VaYikra. The passage in Sefer VaYikra is the source of an important lesson. The Sages explain that the passage teaches us that a prophet is not authorized to add to the commandments of the Torah. Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel actually includes this lesson in his rendering of the passage. He renders the passage: These are the commandments that Hashem commanded Moshe and it is not possible to create within them any new element etc. Apparently, he maintains that the phrase "these are the laws" indicates that these alone are the laws and that no new laws can be attributed to revelation.

It is not clear why Sefer BeMidbar requires a similar closing. However, the comments of Malbim may be relevant to this issue. He explains that the passage in the end of Sefer BeMidbar refers two categories of laws – mitzvot and mishpatim – that were taught to Bnai Yisrael on the Plains of Moav. Malbim explains that "mitzvot" refers to the various commandments that relate to our relationship with Hashem. "Mishpatim" refers to laws that govern our relationships with one another. In addition to the commandments that Moshe taught Bnai Yisrael when he descended from Sinai, Moshe expounded various laws of these two types on the Plains of Moav. Malbim further explains that our Sages dispute the origin of the laws taught to the people on the Plains of Moav. All of the authorities agree that these laws are rooted in the commandments that Moshe received at Sinai. However, they disagree over whether Moshe received the details

related on the Plains of Moav at Sinai or whether he received the details on the Plains of Moav. However, it seems clear that Moshe did not teach these laws to the nation until they camped on the Plains of Moav poised to enter the Land of Israel.

These comments suggest an explanation for why this passage is repeated at the end of Sefer BeMidbar. The passage at the end of Sefer VaYikra asserts that no prophet can add commandments or alter those that were revealed at Sinai. However, the laws that were expounded by Moshe on the Plains of Moav were not revealed to the nation at Sinai. They were first explained to the nation on the Plains of Moav. Therefore, the Torah explains that also these laws are not subject to a prophet's amendment or nullification.



In short, the message that emerges from these two passages is that the Torah is composed exclusively of the commandments that Moshe taught the nation – at Sinai or on the Plains of Moav. Hashem will not add to it or nullify any of its commandments. Any prophet claiming to have received a prophecy that alters the Torah is to be deemed an imposter and liar. This does not mean that the Sages are not entitled to interpret the Torah and to expound on its message. They have this authority. However, they must rely upon their own human knowledge and wisdom. They also have

limited authority to create decrees, new institutions, and establish practices. But they may not claim that these new laws and practices are part of the Torah revealed at Sinai. They must identify these new laws as their own enactments and creations. They may not interpret the Torah or legislate on the basis of prophecy.

For the commandment that I command you today is not hidden from you and it is not distant from you. It is not in the heavens and not across the seas that you should say, "Who will cross the seas for us and take it for us and make it heard to us and we will perform it." (Sefer Devarim 30:12-13)

(continued on next page)

(Masei continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha**2. The Torah does not reside in the heavens**

There is an additional passage in Sefer Devarim that is understood to communicate a similar message. Moshe exhorts Bnai Yisrael to observe the commandments. He tells them that the Torah is not in the heavens. The Sages of Talmud explain that the message of this passage is that questions of halachah cannot be decided by referring them to the heavens. We cannot resort to prophesy to resolve such question. Instead, we must rely upon our own wisdom and knowledge. In a famous discussion on the Talmud the Sages assert that even were we to receive an indication from the heavens – a miraculous wonder or a prophecy – regarding the proper solution to some halachic issue, the heavenly message is to be ignored and the issue must be decided on the basis of valid halachic debate and analysis.

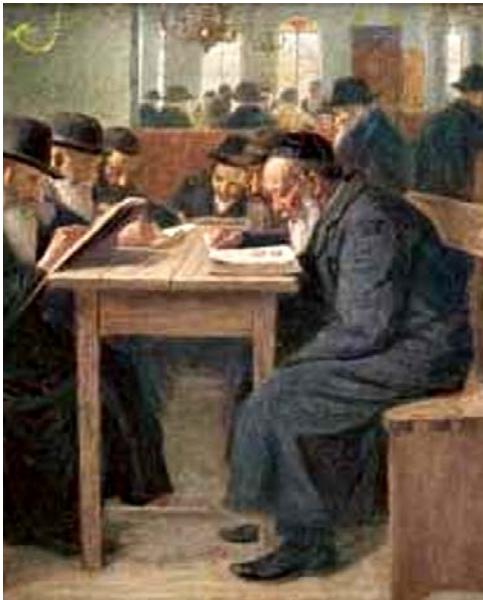
This raises an interesting question. Apparently, the Talmud relies on two different passages for the identical message. The passages at the end of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar indicate that a prophecy cannot be used to amend or nullify any aspect of the Torah. This seems to be identical to the message of the passage from Sefer Devarim. Why are both sources required?

3. The two restrictions upon the prophet

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik discusses this issue and explains that the passages deal with very different issues. The passages ending Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar communicate that prophecy cannot add or subtract from the Torah. No new commandment can be added and no existing commandment can be revoked. The passage in Sefer Devarim is dealing with a different issue. It is discussing the appropriateness of deciding an issue in halachah based upon Divine messages. In such an instance the prophet is not adding or subtracting to the commandments. The prophet is seeking to resolve a difficulty within the detailed laws of the commandment based upon heavenly intervention.

An example will help illustrate this distinction. If a prophet were to suggest that Hashem no longer wishes for us to observe the Shabbat or that Hashem has commanded us to observe Shabbat for an additional day of the week, then he would violate the prohibition of adding or subtracting from the Torah's mitzvot. This is the prohibition associated with the passages at the end of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar. But what if the prophet merely claims that he received a prophecy regarding the number of meters in the Torah's

measurement of a cubit. He is not claiming to have received a new commandment or to have received a message cancelling a mitzvah. He is merely saying that he has received a communication from Hashem resolving an issue debated among the authorities. He has not violated the prohibition derived from the final passages of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar. However, he has suggested a resolution of a problem in halachah based upon heavenly communication. His ruling will be discounted because of the restriction in Sefer Devarim. The Sages are charged with the responsibility of resolving problems in halachah. We cannot resort to signs or other communications from heaven.



Rav Soloveitchik's explanation is supported by Maimonides' treatment of the issue. In the opening chapters of his code – the Mishne Torah – Maimonides explains that prophecy may not be used to add to or subtract from the commandments of the Torah. In order to fully appreciate Maimonides' message it is helpful to consider its context. Maimonides begins the chapter by explaining that the Torah tells us that its commandments are permanent. They were revealed to Bnai Yisrael through Moshe for all generations. After stating this principle, Maimonides explains that any prophet attempting to alter the Torah is known to be false because he is contradicting the Torah itself – as revealed to us by Moshe. Maimonides then discusses other laws regarding the prophet. After that discussion he returns to the prophet's role in establishing Torah laws and explains that the prophet cannot decide issues of halachah. It is interesting that Maimonides divides into two sections his discussion of the prophet's exclusion from any role in establishing Torah laws. However, according to Rav Soloveitchik this is completely understand-

able. Maimonides is dealing with two separate and distinct issues. First, he deals with the issue of creating new laws or nullifying laws based upon prophecy. Such prophecies are dismissed based upon the passages at the end of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar. Only later does Maimonides discuss the issue of resorting to heavenly arbitrations regarding questions that arise within the laws of the mitzvot. Relying on heavenly communication for such issues is inappropriate based upon the passage in Sefer Devarim.

4. A confusing discussion in the Talmud and its resolution

There is a mysterious discussion in Tractate Temurah regarding this issue. The Talmud explains that during the period that the nation mourned the death of Moshe 3,000 laws were forgotten. The nation turned to its new leader – Yehoshua – and asked him to restore the laws through prophecy. He responded that he could not do this and referred to the passage in Sefer Devarim. A latter generation appealed to the prophet Shmuel to restore these laws through prophecy and he refused. However, he based his response on the passages at the end of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar. Why did these two prophets refer to different passages in their responses?

Maharsha offers an interesting response to this question. He explains that Yehoshua and Shmuel were presented the same request. However, each faced different issues in determining their responses. Yehoshua had learned the entire Torah from Moshe. He had known all of its laws. However, he had forgotten a portion. The issue he faced was whether he could resort to prophecy in order to restore to himself information he had forgotten. If granted a response from Hashem, the prophecy would not be an addition to the Torah; it would be the restoration of the Torah that he had received from Moshe and forgotten. The passages at the end of Sefer VaYikra and Sefer BeMidbar were not relevant to this issue. Nonetheless, Yehoshua refused the request because of the passage in Sefer Devarim. Once given to Bnai Yisrael through Moshe, the Torah became our responsibility. The role of prophecy in halachah ended with Moshe.

When the same question was presented to Shmuel the situation had changed. Shmuel and his generation had not received the Torah from Moshe. The Torah they had received from their parents did not include the laws that were long ago lost. For Shmuel, these laws would be new and an addition to the Torah. Therefore, Shmuel responded that prophecy cannot add or subtract from the Torah and he referred to the passages ending Sefer VaYikra and BeMidbar. ■

Still learning from Albert

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIN



Gabriella: This is a wonderful quote from Einstein:

"Every one who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble."

Rabbi: Here's another very similar quote from Einstein:

"My religion consists of a humble admiration of the immeasurable Superior Spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind."

I wonder what new points Einstein adds in the second quote.

In both quotes, Einstein expresses the demand for our humility as man pales in comparison to God.

However, in the second quote, he adds 3 new points in this phrase: "...who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive..."

1) "reveals Himself": God "intends" knowledge of His wisdom be perceived by man. He intentionally reveals His wisdom to man, for the purpose of our discovery.

2) "slight details": God does not overtly expose Himself. Wisdom is revealed only in "slight details". Man must examine the universe beyond its bold appearance, and seek out those "details". (A point worth pondering further) Einstein attests to the depth of wisdom and the need to search it out.

3) "we are able to perceive": Meaning, He designed man with the "ability", or the purpose of perceiving the knowledge He imparts through those details.

In quote #2, Einstein adds that God 1) has specific intent; 2) uses a means of subtle disclosure; and 3) that man's purpose is to discover God's wisdom. Einstein's wisdom bears our King David's opening remarks to Psalms. There (1:3) King David says that one who desires God's Torah, will "give his fruit in its time, and his leaves won't wither." What is this metaphor of fruit and leaves?

A tree produces these two elements. However, one is more central. Fruit sustains, and leaves do not. Fruit is the primary product. Man too gives forth fruit. As intelligence is our unique faculty over all else in creation, this must be the focus of King David's praise. Thus, giving forth fruit in its proper time must refer to man's expressed intelligence, shared only when it will be received as intended. The wise man knows there is a time to be silent. So his shared wisdom is the "fruit" in King David's metaphor. This is man's primary produce. If so,

to what do leaves refer? This must refer to man's mundane speech: just as leaves are inferior to fruit, mundane speech is inferior to Torah discourse. But even here, the man who desires God's Torah is never divorced from his intelligence. Even in mundane matters, the intelligent man's wisdom is expressed. He approaches all matters with wisdom, as God desires. For the entire universe and all man's actions are in fact expressions of the Creator. Thus, these is wisdom to be share in all

matters. The Torah teaches that "King David was wise in all his ways (Sam. I 18:14)."

In our case, Einstein is "giving forth fruit," as he is not addressing what is mundane, for he is describing God's relationship to man. Alternatively, one might suggest that as he is not addressing Torah, his quotes above would be considered "his fresh leaves" or his marvelous mundane speech. In either case, Einstein's words contain more than surface information.

Ironically, Einstein himself was one of the "slight details" in which God "revealed Himself" to mankind. Maimonides says regarding Moses [1] that God "created" him. Meaning, Moses was an intentional aberration created by God to educate mankind. Perhaps this equally applies Einstein. ■

[1] Laws of Star Worship, end of chap. 1

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HIS Faithfulness is Eternal



RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Masei, begins with a listing of all the places where the Jews camped during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. That bleak period of Jewish history was coming to an end and they were poised to cross the Jordan and conquer the land. Still it was deemed necessary to meticulously enumerate all the journeys that they had taken on their trek to the promised land. The question raised by many commentators is, why is it important to cite the various places where the Jews tarried in the Midbar?

Many people go through periods of difficulty and struggle at some point in life. In order to achieve worthy goals one must be able to work hard, persevere, and endure setbacks and rejection. When people achieve success after a long period of struggle and disappointment, there is a tendency to focus on their newfound happiness and block out the negative experiences of the past. The memory of failures is painful and at odds with a new self image of being a "winner."

Judaism maintains that while legitimately earned success is a good thing it can, however, go to one's head and have negative spiritual consequences. Indeed we live in a culture in which many people are ruined by great success. According to the Rambam the most important virtue is humbleness. In describing the greatness of Moshe it says, "And Moshe was more humble than any man on the face of the earth." It is very important for "successful people" to retain a proper perspective and not overestimate their abilities. They should always remember the past and revisit the days of failure and disappointment. They should also acknowledge that they did not "make it" all by themselves. If they are honest they will acknowledge all the people and institutions that lent a helping hand and provided meaningful assistance. This type of remembering is vital for it will prevent a person from assuming a feeling of "my power and the strength of my hand has acquired for me all this wealth." We should develop an attitude of Hakarat Hatov (recognition of the good) and be thankful to all who have helped us along the way. We should appreciate all who have contributed to the molding of our character

and development of our mind. Most of all we should always be grateful to Hashem for His Goodness which is beyond comprehension and His mercies which constantly surround us. We can now understand why Moshe recorded the stations at which the Jews had lodged, precisely on the eve of their entry into Eretz Israel. Every place mentioned recalled some aspect of their behavior in the wilderness, bad as well as good. Remembering the forty year journey would give them a realistic sense of their shortcomings as well as their virtues and, most important, an absolute sense of gratitude to Hashem for His eternal faithfulness to them despite their provocations.

This teaching has great relevance for us as we observe the three weeks. The dominant theme of the period is mourning for the destruction of the Temple and the lengthy and painful exile we have endured as a result of our many sins. The lesson of the stations is that we can overcome our flaws and return to Hashem who will then redeem us, for His Faithfulness is Eternal.

Shabbat Shalom ■

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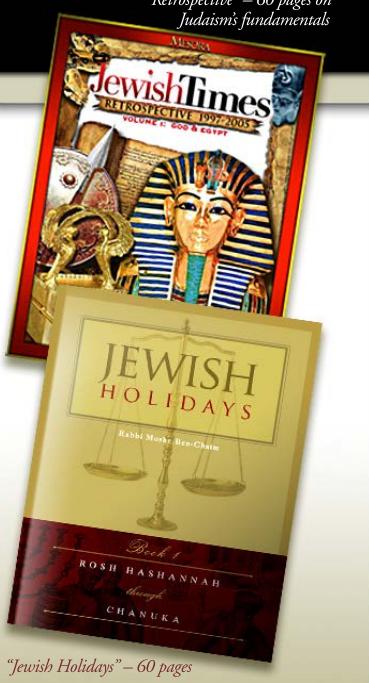
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WISDOM & REASON

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

"The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge..." (Proverbs 1:7) "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God..." (Psalms 111:10) Kings Solomon and David make it clear: knowledge must eventuate in an appreciation of God.

If gaining knowledge of God is not our goal when we study, then all we learn is false. For example, a scientist might harness the Earth's resources and create amazing technologies. But if he does not view these materials and laws as created by the Creator, then his knowledge false. For he lacks the most primary understanding – the "existence" of the phenomenon. In fact, matter exists only because there is a Creator who willed it to be from nothingness. Matter cannot create itself. All matter possesses form, weight, color, dimension, etc. But most central to matter, is its existence...that the thing "is." Errors concerning why something is narrow or green, are not as crucial as the error of how it exists. If the theories of Aristotle or Plato are followed, where matter always existed in some form, one denies God as "creator." All studies will then be in vain.

If our discoveries do not imbue us with a great awe for the Creator, we have failed our mission in life. The multitude of creations, and their remarkable designs, enables man to continually discover new truths, and impress him with God's wisdom. Knowledge of the world is not to end with the phenomena we study. If it does, and we walk away from a biology class impressed with the great design of the body, but we don't view the body as evidence of the Creator and His wisdom, we do not truly understand the body. For the body has a purpose only in relationship to a life where God is central.

This being said, we must pursue truth over all other concerns. We must not cower to reputations, accepted norms, masses, fear of rejection, or anything else. If we understand something as false, we must treat it that way. The only path to living in line with truth, is reason. Belief has no place in this search for God's wisdom. God granted each person the faculty of intelligence, so that "each" of us might engage this amazing tool to determine what is true and what is false. We are not to follow a Rabbi and rely solely on his words. Rabbi Bachya ben Josef ibn Paquda (author of "Duties of the Heart") makes this point:

"Whoever has the intellectual capacity to verify what he receives from tradition, and yet is prevented from doing so by his own laziness, or because he takes lightly God's commandments and Torah, he will be punished for this and held accountable for negligence."

"If, however, you possess intelligence and insight, and through these faculties you are capable of verifying the fundamentals of the religion and the foundations of the commandments which you have received from the sages in the name of the Prophets, then it is your duty to use these faculties until you understand the subject, so that you are certain of it - both by tradition and by force of reason. If you disregard and neglect this duty, you fall short in the fulfillment of what you owe your Creator."

Devarim 17:8-10 states: "If a case should prove too difficult for you in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, between (leprous) mark and mark, or other matters of dispute in your courts...you must act in accordance with what they tell you."

The verse does not say simply accept them on the authority of Torah sages and rely exclusively on their tradition." Rather, (Scripture) says that you should reflect on your own mind, and use your intellect in these matters. First learn them from tradition – which covers all the commandments in the Torah, their principles and details – and then examine them with your own mind, understanding, and judgment, until the truth becomes clear to you, and falsehood rejected, as it is written: "Understand today and reflect on it in your heart, Hashem is the God in the heavens above, and on the Earth below, there is no other." (Ibid, 4:39)

Maimonides on the obligation to use reason ("Guide for the Perplexed", Book III, Chap. LIV):

"Our Sages further say, that man has first to render account concerning his knowledge of the Law, then concerning the acquisition of wisdom, and at last concerning the lessons derived by logical conclusions from the Law, i.e., the lessons concerning his actions. This is also the right order: we must first learn the truths by tradition, after this we must be taught how to prove them, and then investigate the actions that help to improve man's ways. The idea that man will have to render account concerning these three things in the order described, is expressed by our Sages in the following passage: 'When man comes to the trial, he is first asked, 'Hast thou fixed certain seasons for the study of the Law? Hast thou been engaged in the acquisition of wisdom? Hast thou derived from one thing another thing?' This proves that our Sages distinguished between the knowledge of the Law on the one hand, and wisdom on the other, as the means of proving the lessons taught in the Law by correct reasoning."

Ibn Ezra also expresses the vital role of thought and reason (Exod. 20:1):

"..The second category (of commandments) are commands which are hidden, and there is not explained why they were commanded. And God forbid, God forbid that there should be any one of these commands which goes against human intelligence. Rather, we are obligated to perform all that God commands, be it revealed to us the underlying "Sode" (principle), be it hidden from us. And if we find any of them which contradict human intelligence, it isn't proper that we should understand it as implied. But we should consult the books of the wise men of blessed memory, to determine if such a command is a metaphor. And if we find nothing written [by them] we [must] search out and seek with all our ability, perhaps we can fix it [determine the command]. If we can't, then we abandon that mitzvah as it is, and admit we are ignorant of it."

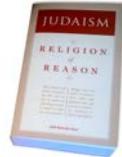
Radak (Samuel I, 28:25 towards the end):

"..although the implications of the words of the Rabbis - blessed their memory - indicate from the Talmud that the (idolatrous) woman resurrected Samuel, we do not accept these words when our intelligence tells us the opposite."

Radak rejects the notion that the woman idolater literally resurrected Samuel, as it violates all reason. Therefore, our reason is what we must follow, even when confronted with statements of the Rabbis which seem to imply the opposite. This lesson is most vital and even echoed by our greatest Rabbis. But it doesn't stop there. As we said, God created the human intellect. He desires we engage reason and proof. This was exemplified to the highest degree when He orchestrated Revelation on Mount Sinai. This was performed in front of the entire nation of 2 million people, to serve as proof for them and all future generations. God desires we only accept that which can be proved. Had God given the Torah privately to Moses, no proof of its Divine origins could be substantiated. It would be Moses' word against others, just like all other religions bereft of proof.

Reason has many methods; deduction, induction, a fortiori arguments, and so on. As we proceed, I intend to share many lessons in correct thought. In this manner, you may grow in your capabilities, becoming more adept at distinguishing truth from fallacy, and fact from metaphor, so you might sharpen your analytical skills and so you might decipher God's words and the words of His faithful followers – His Prophets – growing in your love of God. ■

"Religion of Reason": Chap. I.



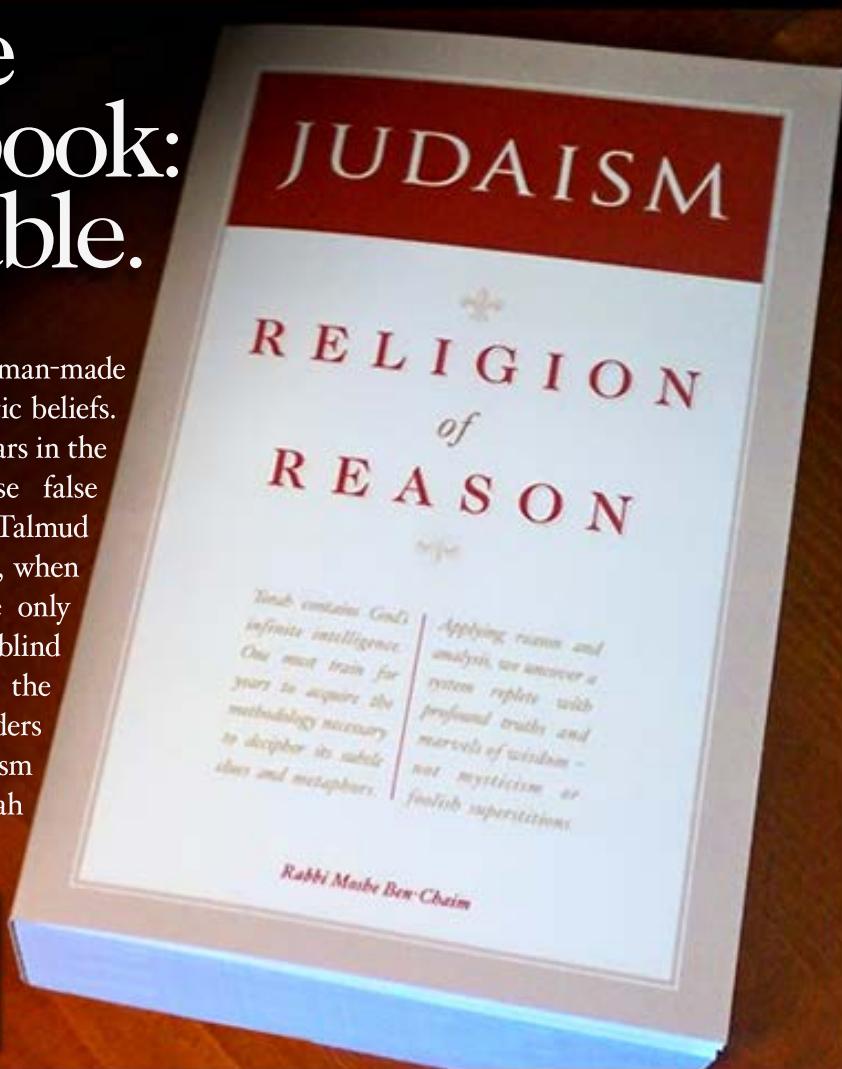
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(2 Evils continued from page I)

In the midst of presenting what was the current appalling state of the nation, Yirmiyahu focuses on what Bnai Yisrael did to bring themselves to this level(2:13):

"For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

No one can doubt the poetic beauty in such statements – yet, what are these two evils?

The Talmud takes a step in clarifying this verse (Taanis 5a-b):

"R. Nahman further said to R. Isaac: What is the meaning of the verse, For my people have committed two evils? Were they only two? Has he then ignored the fact that they were twenty-four? [as listed in Yechezkel] — He [R. Isaac] replied: There is one [evil] which is equal to two, and that is, idolatrous worship, for it is written, For my people have committed two evils they have forsaken me..."

While we now understand the subject of the sin, namely idolatry, the actual content of the verse is still quite obscure. Yet, there is an interesting concept that emerges from this explanation in the Talmud. While the sin is counted as one, is it comprised of two evils. How do we understand this in the context of idolatry? After all, one would assume that the evil consists of worshipping something other than Hashem. Why two evils?

Before tackling that question, let's first get a better understanding of the verse itself. The Radak offers a lengthy commentary of the above verse. He writes that the mashal of Hashem as the fountain of living water – a spring – refers to the good Hashem offers to those seeking him. How so? The Radak presents two unique features to a spring. First, a spring has no identifiable source for its water supply resulting in a seemingly independent flow of water. A river, by comparison, requires some type of external source to maintain it, whether it is rain or some other body of water. So too, Hashem is not dependent on anything else to supply the good – it comes from Him and no other. The second feature of the spring is its constancy. The water emanating is always a steady flow, no starts and stops, no increases or decreases. Obviously, the same cannot be said about other sources of water. We see this feature, according to the Radak, expressed in the good offered by Hashem, which is also a constant, without any type of fluctuation. Of course, this is in contrast to putting one's faith in a king (in this case, referring to the situation

with Yoshiyah and the king of Egypt), where the king's power is dependent on his army. Furthermore, putting one's faith in other gods is equivalent to the broken cisterns, where water fills them up, then quickly leaks out.

The Radak must be alluding to a deeper idea, as a cursory reading of his explanation certainly offers no clearer picture. One could also ask why it is that with all this "good" offered by God, how can Bnai Yisrael ever turn away? The answer lies in understanding the spring analogy as described by the Radak. In the first characteristic, Hashem is described as not being dependent on something else to provide the good to us. This would seem to be referring to Hashem as the Source of all, where He alone provides for us. We see this idea presented in the spring, where the spring itself is viewed as the source, rather than relying on some other body of water to supply it. It also means that the good we receive is never at the mercy of some other source. However, seeing Hashem in this way brings to light another stark reality – our existences are completely dependent on Him. To truly internalize this idea is to put aside any pretense of ego-centricity, a concept that not endearing to most people. Yirmiyahu is pointing out how Bnai Yisrael are uncomfortable with this truth, and thereby leave Hashem to put their faith in the king. The king projects an air of independence, as if he alone is the source of strength necessary to defeat the enemy. The nation identifies with this attitude, hopeful that somehow this will provide for them. Yet, as the Radak points out, such an attitude is folly.

In the second concept, we see the good as a constant when emerging from Hashem, lacking any type of ebb and flow. What is this referring to? The fact that the good is a constant must mean it is present at all times. This could be referring to the myriad means available to us to access Hashem. Whether it is through the system of mitzvos, the surrounding physical world, or the metaphysical truths about Hashem given over to us, the good is expressed through this constant state of accessibility. This does not necessarily have a natural appeal to the average individual either. We are much more impressed by the supernatural rarities than the norm. The irregular occurrence is what draws us in – the water enters into the cistern, where there was none previously. Yet, as the Radak points out, it is not capable of being stored.

This leads us to back to one of the original questions – what is the idea of idolatry being comprised of two evils, rather than simply one? From the standpoint of the non-Jew, the evil of idolatry is indeed solitary. He has no direction other than to follow his instincts, leading him down the road to idolatry. Of course, this does



not mean every non-Jew shares in this fate. It just means that there is no semblance of a choice, as the non-Jew has never been exposed to the true ideas concerning Hashem. The same cannot be said of Bnai Yisrael. The foundation of our faith lies in our understanding and acceptance of Hashem as the God of the universe, expressed through such truths as God as the Source and constant provider of good. When Bnai Yisrael take upon themselves the world of the idolatrous, they are in fact exercising a collective type of freewill, choosing to leave Hashem for something else. It is this choice that is the core of the two evils, and it is only through our unique knowledge of God that such a decision could be made.

An understanding of the power of the draw towards idolatry is not just a crucial point in the specific prophecy of Yirmiyahu, but is a reality we must confront constantly. As we slowly make our way towards that tragic day commemorating the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, we must be acutely aware of this recurring flaw. Our ability to understand this, and ultimately perform teshuva, will only help us bring about the building of the third Bais Hamikdash, bimhera biyameinu. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Rabbi, I want to thank you for your book "Religion of Reason". I've been dipping into it here and there, and you have written some magnificent things. They are quite refreshing. I'll admit that the Noahide Nations Conference for me was not so good. Many ideas were propounded which I found highly illogical. One rabbi taught that God is the source of everything, including the bad actions taken by others against oneself. Obviously, I cannot but hold such an idea to be tenable. Am I the center of the universe and everyone else mere puppets that God employs to educate me? Am I, besides God, the only free will agent? No, and if others have free will, then not everything they do is directed by God. He called this emunah, but I call it unthinkable.

Furthermore, I thought, many of the things which happen to me are my own fault, the consequences of my bad choices. I found so much of the teaching at the conference to be frustrating and so obviously untrue.

But then, I read your words, and it is refreshing. In your chapter on "Bashert" – ah, to see a good idea – the sheer logic of it is so pleasant to me.

Surely, Maimonides is right when he says that the vast majority of evils which befall us are from ourselves. And what comes from others also does not come from God. It is not destiny or fate. Thank you. Your words have been a great blessing to me. To see a true idea is all I ask.

—Your student

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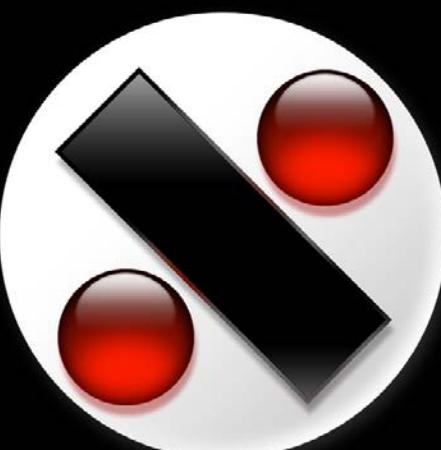
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