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GOD'S CURSES Why so Severe?

Erring
Angels?

When Gentiles
See the Truth

A Purpose of
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Shavuot's Dual
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Shavuot: A Mountain
Over Their heads?

Was Isaac sacrificed
or was it all a vision?

Hallel: Part II



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Erring Angels

Sarah views Hagar's son Ishmael as an improper influence on her son Isaac. She relates this to Abraham, and God supports Sarah's view that Hagar and Ishmael should leave. God tells Abraham to follow Sarah's counsel.

Abraham sends away Hagar and her son Ishmael. Ishmael cries out of thirst once the water was consumed. The angels said to God that Ishmael should be allowed to die of thirst, since his future descendant Nevuchadnezzar would hold

water from the Jews. Based on Ishmael's current righteous state, God accuses the angels for saying Ishmael should be allowed to die of thirst. God says Ishmael must not pay a price due to the sins of his future descendants. A man is to be judged as he is at present, "ba'ashare hu sham (Gen. 24:17)." The threat Ishmael will cause in the future is mitigated by

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**“Did God really write all these
curses found in Bechukosai?
I don't think so, they're too harsh.
I don't do well with the 'Behave or I'll
kill you' approach.” Anonymous**

**IN REVIEW:
BECHUKOSAI**

GOD'S CURSES: Why so Severe?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

How do we respond to this sentiment above? Is such a complaint justified?

Why didn't minds lightyears ahead of ours ever suggest these curses were not God's words? Moses, Kings David and Solomon, Maimonides, Radak, Rashi, and countless others of formidable intellectual stature accepted the entire Torah as God's word. Let us consider what motivated that acceptance.

(continued on next page)

What is unjust?

Had God not created food, this would be unjust, since he made our lives food-dependent. But as food exists, we would be unjustified to complain to God, if we became ill due to laziness and did not eat of it. As Creator, He makes a being as He sees most benefits that being. Food dependency directs our minds and hearts to thank the Creator for our lives and the means to sustain it. We are thereby constantly directed to God's existence. God is to be mankind's focus, explaining why we alone possess the faculty of intelligence essential to appreciating the Creator and His wisdom. Requiring our daily bread, we are ever-aware of God, the Creator of all food.

If, however, we were totally independent, we might lose sight of the Creator, as did Adam and Eve. They did not need to toil for food. All was readily available. And they rejected God's command not to eat of one tree's fruit. Their freedom from any need to work allowed their abundant unused energies to become attached to their

instincts, and reject God. God then punished Adam, making him toil for his bread (Gen. 3:19). As Rabbi Bachya, author of Duties of the Heart states, this engagement in labor redirects much energy away from the instincts, preventing future sin. We realize the necessity and benefit in such toil, to address Adam's sin, and protect us who are made in Adam's design. Therefore any complaint by one who is lazy and starves, is not a justified complaint. For food is both available, and attainable, and labor is a good for us.

Similarly, God created man with an intellect, and the means to satisfy it. We are most fulfilled when when our minds are engaged and we witness wisdom in the universe and in the Torah. And if we follow the Torah's morality, societies run smoothly with perfectly just and charitable laws governing all human interaction. But this is only for our Earthly stay. Living according to Torah, God grants eternal life to our souls. An amazing gift, and His ultimate plan for each one of us. How do the curses fit in?

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“God desires to avert us from the loss of our eternal life. He wishes that we each enjoy Olam Haba. If we set out on a path that will forfeit Olam Haba, it is beneficial that He dissuades us from such a path.”

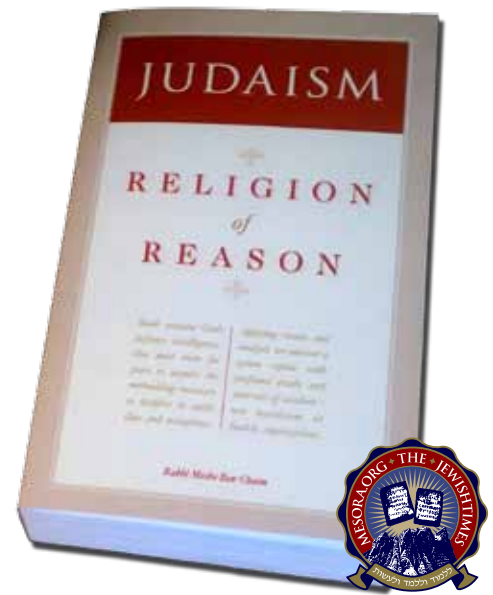
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RELIGION of REASON

by JewishTimes' publisher
Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN — Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively on Jewish philosophy for many years. His ideas are rooted in a rational approach. He follows the great philosophers like Rambam and Saadia Gaon. He is opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition and contrary to reason. This work covers a wide variety of topics, of interest to contemporary; insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the significance of many mitzvot. Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions as he is convinced that Torah is the Word of God and based on the highest form of wisdom. Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book.



RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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**“Any sane person
would agree:
murderers must
receive death.
No one wants his
child to be next.
So why isn’t the soul
more vital than our
Earthly lives?”**

We are bound to follow the Torah, or receive pain in another manner, akin to the pain of starving, and even worse. God desires our greatest good. He desires to avert us from the loss of our eternal life. He wishes that we each enjoy Olam Haba. If we set out on a path that will forfeit Olam Haba, it is beneficial that He dissuades us from such a path. And since man instinctually cleaves to his ways, only a harsh threat will work to stop him in his path. Man follows his emotions, so God uses emotions – fear and pain – to redirect us when we sin.

This explains the severity of the curses. For if our punishments are not severe, they might be viewed as natural occurrences, “keri” (Lev. 26:23), we will not view them as divine warnings and we will not improve our ways. The severity of God's punishments, which increases when we dismiss them as natural events, intends to reveal the truth of God's Torah warnings. Leviticus 26:43 explains the cause of the curses; it is our abhorrence of God's commands. We viewed a great benefit – Torah – wrongly. God intends to correct us.

The nations of the world too will benefit through our devastating punishments. For they will say it is our sins that God is punishing. (Deut. 29:23-26) However, if we suffer “naturally” through less devastating measures, our pain will not be viewed as divine, God's word appears unfulfilled, and His fame does not reach all humans, as is His will. For the Jew is not God's only creation. In fact, we are to serve the other nations by teaching them. And when they follow God, they share the same good that we share.

In fact, one is in a contradiction if he holds that God's punishments are "too harsh." For any sane person would agree that murder-

ers must receive the death penalty. No one wants himself or his child to be the next victim. However, this acceptance of the harshest measure – death – for murderers, questions why death should not meet with Torah deniers. Why should we condone death for murderers, but not for those who deny the Torah, or who violate it's tenets?

Most of us overestimate our physical existence. We don't view the soul as more important, so we think Torah infractions are not as evil as murder. However, the Rabbis equated Lashon Hara to murder. The reason being that a corrupt soul renders one equally unfit for Olam Haba. One who constantly engages in Lashon Hara, forfeits his Olam Haba. If on the other hand, we recognized the truth, that our soul can enjoy an eternity, we would value that over our physical lives. We would not say that God is too harsh by trying to redirect our sinful ways back towards Torah, which earns us eternal life. We would welcome such corrective measures, for all pain here is temporary. An eternal life is worth it.

Having said that, who could be worse than one who denies anything written in Torah, saying it is not God's authorship? Such denial also forces others off the path of truth, making them discount the truth of Torah. And when calamity befalls them, they too will not heed it as God's punishments, to help return them to the truth. One who denies anything in Torah harms not only himself, but others, and he forfeits his Olam Haba. (Tal. Sanhedrin 90a, Mishnah)

We can now appreciate why Moses, Kings David and Solomon, Maimonides, Radak, Rashi, and countless others accepted the entire Torah, viewing it as a just system, including the curses. ■

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SHAVUOT'S DUAL IDENTITY

Rabbi Bernie Fox

You shall bring out of your dwellings two wave-loaves of two tenth parts of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour. They shall be baked with leaven, for first-fruits unto Hashem. (Sefer VaYikra 23:17)

And the Festival of the Harvest, the first-fruits of your labors, which you sow in the field; and the Festival of the Ingathering, at the end of the year, when you gather in your labors out of the field. (Sefer Shemot 23:16)

1. SHAVUOT IS DESCRIBED IN THE TORAH AS A HARVEST FESTIVAL

According to tradition, the Torah was received by Bnai Yisrael on the sixth day of Sivan. Shavuot is observed on the anniversary of the Sinai Revelation. In the liturgy for Shavuot, it is described as “the time of the giving of the Torah”. However, the Chumash never explicitly associates Shavuot with Revelation. Instead, the Torah consistently describes Shavuot as a harvest festival. The above passages provide two examples. The first passage is found in the Torah’s most extensive discus-



sion of Shavuot. In these passages, Shavuot is described as the festival upon which “a new grain offering” is brought. This is a reference to a unique sacrifice offered on Shavuot. It is comprised of two loaves of leavened bread baked from fine wheat flour. This flour was milled from the wheat of the new harvest. This meal offering and the Omer meal offering of Pesach together express our acknowledgement that the life-sustaining bounty of the new harvest is a manifestation of Hashem’s chesed – kindness. The characterization of Shavuot as a harvest festival is even more explicit in the second set of passages. In these passages, Shavuot is referred to as the Festival of the Harvest.

The question raised by the Torah’s descriptions of Shavuot is obvious. Why does the Torah not describe Shavuot as the celebration of Revelation?

And He said: Certainly I will be with you. And this shall be the token unto you that I have sent you. When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve G-d upon this mountain. (Sefer Shemot 3:12)

2. THE STRANGE ORDER IN WHICH THE NARRATIVE OF REVELATION IS PRESENTED

Although the Torah provides a historical record of the development of Bnai Yisrael, its account does not follow a strict chronological order. Sometimes the Torah departs from a chronological presentation of events in order to preserve the continuity of its narrative. In other instances, strict chronology is abandoned in order to juxtapose events or themes and thereby, communicate a message. In other words, the coherence, the continuity of the presen-

tation, and other considerations take precedence over strict adherence to chronology.

Based upon this principle, the content of the chapters of the Torah’s narrative leading-up to the Sinai Revelation is surprising. Hashem explained to Moshe at their first encounter at the seneh – the burning bush – that Bnai Yisrael would be redeemed from Egypt in order to be brought to Sinai and there receive the Torah. Given that this was the stated objective of the nation’s redemption, it follows that after the Torah’s narrative of the exodus is completed, the narrative should proceed with a description of Revelation. However, the Torah concludes its account of Bnai Yisrael’s escape from Egypt with its description of the destruction of Paroh and his legions at the Reed Sea and Bnai Yisrael’s song of praise to Hashem. The narrative then describes a number of events that occurred during the interim between the nation’s redemption and Revelation. The only apparent justification for the insertion at this point of these events into the narrative is the preservation of a proper chronology. However, as explained above, this is a poor justification.

And the people murmured against Moshe, saying: What shall we drink? (Sefer Shemot 15:24)

Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim. (Sefer Shemot 17:8)

And Yitro, the priest of Midyan, Moshe’s father-in-law, heard of all that G-d had done for Moshe, and for Israel His people, how Hashem had brought Israel out of Egypt. (Sefer Shemot 18:1)

3. BNAI YISRAEL’S COMPLAINTS, AMALEK, AND YITRO – THEIR PLACE WITHIN THE TORAH’S NARRATIVE

The intervening material can be divided into three distinct sections. The first section records a number of occasion upon which the people complained about their lack of adequate provisions. This section culminates with a flock of quail descending upon the camp which provide the people with meat and the initiation of the falling of the mun – the manna. The mun continued to fall and to sustain the people throughout their travels in the wilderness.

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The next section describes Amalek's unprovoked attack of Bnai Yisrael. This section concludes by describing the defeat of Amalek and Hashem's pledge to utterly destroy this wicked adversary.

The final section describes the arrival of Yitro – Moshe's father-in-law. Yitro has heard of the wonders that Bnai Yisrael has experienced. He wishes to hear more about these wonders from those who experienced and witnessed them. After hearing these accounts, Yitro recognizes and praises Hashem. This section concludes with an account of the introduction of nation's first judicial system. This system was designed by Yitro and implemented by Moshe. The placement of this final section in this point in the narrative is the most difficult to explain. Rashi suggests that this section is not even in its proper chronological place. He explains that a careful analysis of the text suggests that Yitro arrived after Revelation.¹ The placement of this section in this point of the narrative certainly requires explanation.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l suggests an important explanation for the insertion at this point in the narrative of these final two sections. The following is based upon

his explanation. However, it expands upon the insight of Rav Soloveitchik and is not intended as a precise record of his thoughts.

And Hashem said to Moshe: I come unto you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever. And Moses told the words of the people unto Hashem. (Sefer Shemot 19:9)

4. THE REVOLUTION OF REVELATION

Rav Soloveitchik suggests that these two incidents are intended as an introduction to the Torah's account of Revelation. The ideas presented in the Torah were not only revolutionary in their content. They were also delivered in a novel manner. Prior to Revelation, one's choice of religion was completely subjective. Humanity's varied religions were the inventions of their worshipers. This led to the plethora of idols and deities. Of course, Avraham, his descendants, and followers had discovered truths that were not merely subjective products of the imagination. However, for most of humanity, these "truths" that Avraham and his followers promoted seemed to be no more established than

competing religious notions.

In this historical context, Revelation was revolutionary. It was the climax of Hashem's revelation of Himself before the entire nation. This process began with the demonstrations of His omnipotence in Egypt. It continued with the rescue of Bnai Yisrael from their pursuers at the Reed Sea and the drowning of Paroh and his army. The events of Sinai were the final and most awe-inspiring expression of Hashem's revelation. Bnai Yisrael's conviction in Hashem's existence and the authenticity of Torah was based upon their first-hand experience.

However, this revelation that began in Egypt and achieved its climax at Sinai was not relevant to only Bnai Yisrael. For the first time, humanity had been presented with a revealed religious doctrine authenticated by the testimony of an entire nation present at its revelation. The evidence of an omnipotent Creator Who interacts with humanity and the authentication of the Torah as a revealed truth was directed and relevant to all of humanity. Every human being who heard of the wonders that Hashem preformed in Egypt and His revelation at Sinai was challenged to respond to these authenticated truths.

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5. TWO RESPONSES TO REVELATION

Rav Soloveitchik explains that the account of Amalek's attack upon Bnai Yisrael and Yitro's acceptance of Hashem are inserted at this point into the narrative in order to demonstrate the two universal responses to the message of the Egypt redemption and Revelation. These responses are rejection and denial or acceptance and embrasure. Amalek exemplifies the first response. Rather than consider the message communicated by Bnai Yisrael's miraculous redemption from Egypt and the utter destruction of their oppressors, Amalek fled into denial. Amalek could not tolerate the message communicated by redemption. It responded by seeking out Bnai Yisrael and acting out its fantasy of denial. It attacked Bnai Yisrael – bent upon undermining the message of redemption through destroying the newly redeemed nation.

Yitro exemplifies the alternative response. Yitro understood the significance of redemption and Revelation. He understood the evidence these provided of an omnipotent Creator and a revealed Torah. With this realization, he came to the camp of Bnai Yisrael in order to learn more of a truth he now sought to embrace and make his own.²



6. RECALLING REVELATION – A DOCTRINE OR A COMMANDMENT?

Rav Soloveitchik's comments provide insight into a dispute between two great Sages. Nachmanides maintains that we are required by a commandment of the Torah to not forget – even for a moment – the episode of Revelation. We are to remain continuously aware and cognizant of the events of Sinai.³ Maimonides demurs. He agrees that our conviction in the authenticity of Revelation is a fundamental element of our religion.⁴ Yet, he does agree that this doctrine is the material of a specific Torah commandment. Why does Maimonides reject Nachmanides' seemingly reasonable contention that a fundamental element of our religion should be the subject of one of the Torah's commandments?

Based upon Rav Soloveitchik's comments, Revelation emerges as not merely an important or even pivotal historical event. It is the distinguishing characteristic of the Torah. It is the foundation of the authenticity of the Torah and it differentiates Torah from other subjective religious doctrines. Perhaps, for this reason, Maimonides contends that conviction in the authenticity of Revelation cannot be the subject of a commandment. It is the foundation of every single commandment. Every commandment is

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performed as an expression of our conviction in the authenticity of Revelation. In other words, our conviction in the authenticity of Revelation is implicit in the performance of each and every commandment.

7. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHAVUOT AND REVELATION

Aruch HaShulchan suggests that for this reason the Torah does not refer to Shavuot as the celebration of Revelation. With every commandment that we perform, we confirm Revelation. No day is needed to remind us of Revelation or to memorialize the event.⁵ It is true that our liturgy refers to Shavuot as the time of Revelation. However, the intent is not to suggest that Shavuot memorializes or moves us to recall Revelation. Instead, we are merely declaring that the anniversary of Revelation is worthy of celebration as a day of thanksgiving.

An analogy will help communicate Aruch HaShulchan's perspective. A husband and wife should appreciate each other and love one another every day of the year. It would be ridiculous to have just a

single day of the year devoted to appreciating one's wife or husband. This appreciation should be present and expressed every day. Nonetheless, the date of a married couple's anniversary should be special to the husband and wife. This day is the anniversary of one of the most important events in their lives. Even though the husband and wife appreciate and cherish one another every day, this day deserves special acknowledgment. Similarly, we express our conviction in Revelation with every mitzvah we perform. However, Shavuot – the anniversary of Revelation – deserves special acknowledgment as a day of awesome significance.

According to Aruch HaShulchan, the Torah does not explicitly refer to Shavuot as a celebration of Revelation. Such a characterization could be easily misunderstood to suggest that some commemorative celebration of Revelation is required rather than its commemoration through observance of the Torah's commandments. Only in the liturgy is Shavuot referred to as the time of Revelation. However, the intention in this reference is not to suggest that our commemoration of Revelation can be relegated to a calendar date. The intention is to proclaim the day that is the anniversary of Revelation as a day worthy of celebration and thanksgiving. ■

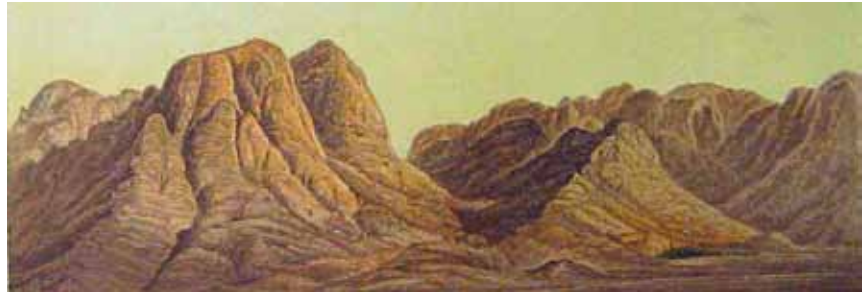
1. Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 18:13.

2. These comments are based upon a recorded lecture of Rav Soloveitchik Zt"l.

3. Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Critique on Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot -- Negative Commands that Maimonides Neglected to Include.

4. Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Meseket Sanherin 10:1.

5. Rav Aharon HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chayim 494:2.



With the Mountain Hanging Over Them

RABBI REUVEN MANN

On the Holiday of Shavuot we celebrate the most significant event in the history of mankind, G-d's revelation to an entire nation which had gathered to "witness and hear" on Mt. Sinai. Judaism is the only religion which is not founded on simple faith. There is no case in history of an entire nation attesting that they witnessed undeniably supernatural phenomena and heard a voice from heaven proclaiming moral and ethical commandments. All the other religions cannot provide any proof or evidence of their fundamental theological claims. They rely on the ability of a charismatic individual to convince others to accept his claims without subjecting them to the test of reason. Rationality must be put aside to make room for the demands of faith. Judaism, alone, requires that a person use his mind, to the best of his ability to "know" G-d and keep His Torah because it is the most reasonable thing to do.

As we celebrate the magnificent event of the Revelation we may ask, did the Jews accept the Torah out of their own free will or were they forced to do so? There seems to be some ambivalence in the classic sources. The story as recorded

in the Torah says that Hashem delegated Moshe to ascertain whether they were desirous of receiving the Torah. G-d's message was, that if they would accept His mitzvot and observe the covenant they would then be Hashem's most treasured nation i.e. a "kingdom of priests and Holy people." In response the entire people told Moshe, "All that Hashem has said we will do." It seems clear from this that no coercion was involved in the decision to become the chosen nation. The benefits were spelled out by G-d and presented to the people. It was up to them to decide and they reacted favorably.

There is, however, a Midrash which appears to communicate a different interpretation. Commenting on the verse "They stood at the bottom of the mountain", the Rabbis say, "It teaches that Hashem held the mountain over them like a barrel and said, if you accept the Torah it is fine but, if not, this will be your burial place." This astounding statement contradicts scripture and implies that the Jews only accepted the Torah under the threat of death. Moreover, the Rabbis teach that before giving it to the Jews Hashem "offered" the Torah to the other nations. Each one wanted to know what was contained in it. Upon hearing the list of Thou Shalt Not, eg. murder, steal, commit adultery, etc. they all summarily refused. In contradistinction, the Jews unconditionally accepted. What is the meaning of the strange Rabbinic teaching that G-d threateningly held the mountain over them?

To answer this question we need to understand the complex nature of human motivation. There is no doubt that as scripture states the Jews committed to the Torah willingly and, even, enthusiastically. No mountain hung over them as they proclaimed their desire to do according to "all that Hashem spoke." However, we must ask, what is it about

the Jews that made them so different from the nations that spurned G-d's offer refusing to relinquish their freedom to live as they pleased? Was it because of some innate superiority possessed by these descendants of the Patriarchs? There is no question that we benefit greatly from the "merit of the Fathers." The tradition of respect for learning, pursuit of justice, and practice of compassion have done much to shape our national character. However all of this was not enough to account for our willingness to accept the Torah. The Rabbis are saying that on an unconscious level other factors were at work. We are not so different from any other peoples. We possess the same instincts, desires and lusts for worldly gratifications. Thus we needed the mountain to be held threateningly over us. This means there was an element of fear which influenced our decision. We had witnessed G-d's awesome might and His absolute control over all that existed. The mightiest armies of Pharaoh were reduced to hysterical, paralyzed victims at the Hand of Hashem. The people then proclaimed, "Hashem is a Man of War, Hashem is His name." They alone had recognized the absolute might of Hashem who now offered to make them His people, His chosen treasure from all the nations. This was the mountain of pressure which hung over them. What choice did they have? How could such an offer be refused? All generations of Jews owe a debt of gratitude to our ancestors who stood up and said "yes" to Hashem's offer. We must appreciate the great gift of Torah and constantly strive to understand and cherish it. We must elevate our Divine service from that of fear to the exalted level of love, for Hashem, His Torah, His people and His land, Eretz Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Shavuot Sameach. ■

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God's justice that views the "here and now" alone. Ishmael had not yet sinned. The relative consideration of the Jews being harmed by Ishmael in the future does not outweigh Ishmael's absolute status at present.

At the Reed Sea, now that Israel's enemy Egypt was destroyed, the angels wished to sing praises to God. Here, God says, "The works of My hand are drowned, and you wish to sing?" The relative (the Jews being saved) is not to be valued more than the Egyptian deaths. Now God says the "absolute" loss of the Egyptians outweighs the relative safety of the Jews.

We learn that Ishmael's current innocence, an "absolute" truth, overrides the "relative" consideration of his descendant ultimately harming the Jews. God does not punish someone who is innocent, regardless of his offspring's sin. That is unjust. Regarding Egypt, the absolute loss of the Egyptian army drowned is weightier than the relative salvation of the Jews. Although justice demands punishment of sinners, the loss was great, not something angels should sing about. The Jews, however, live within the world of the relative; the Az Yashir song was therefore appropriate since God saved their lives, despite the Egyptian deaths. Again, Moses looked prophetically into the future before killing the Egyptian (Yonasan ben Uzziel), perhaps he might produce a righteous descendant. In all cases, true justice considers all variables; what we call "absolute" justice.

Angels are God's means of relating to this physical universe, from Creation and forward. God employs angels to manage worldly affairs, including mankind. Rav Chaim Ozer Chait quoted Ibn Ezra who explained that the creation of angels is to accomplish this objective in the universe. If this is true, then angels will value only what is in connection with man, and God's prized people, are the Jews. This explains why the angels favored the Jew in both cases, for it is the Jew who is the chosen among men, since the Jew received God's Torah so as to teach mankind. "God correcting the angels" need not be taken literally, as if there were some discussion. What it means is that even angels cannot possess God's absolute understanding. ■



Haftoras Bechukosai

First, the gentiles say their ancestors bequeathed lies to them. This refers to those ancestors' "transmission." It was a lie. This is a condemnation of the ancestors.

The gentiles comment further that this transmission was futile in itself. This is an evaluation of the "content." Finally the gentiles say the transmission "does not help." Here, the objective of the gentiles' ancestors to bequeath a religion missed the mark. Their religion offered no help to mankind.

The Navi adds in the next verse, "Can man make for himself a god? [In truth] it is no god!" Here, the Navi offers a perfect ridicule of idolatry: it is man-made! What can be a better rejection of a god that is made to help man, when that very god required man to make it? ■

Akeidas Yitzchak: Vision or Earth-bound Event?

In his Guide (p 237 Friedlander ed.) Maimonides states that Torah accounts that mention angels are visions, and not Earthly occurrences. And this applies even if the angel is only mentioned at the end. This is sensible, since angels are not physical beings, and man's dialogue/interaction with them must be on a metaphysical plane.

However, Maimonides also states Abraham's devotion to God was demonstrated through his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son. If this sacrifice was a vision, does this detract from Abraham's perfection? I would think so. Therefore, as Abraham was addressed by an angel during the sacrifice, how do we make sense of Maimonides' apparent contradiction?

I am wondering if the rare phrase found twice in the Akeida, "God's angel called, from heaven..." are meant to distinguish the angel's calling from the rest of the event. The rest of the event was not "b'shamayim; metaphysical." Abraham's sacrificial attempt, his perfection, was Earthbound. It was only the angel's call to Abraham that was "min hashamayim; from the heavens." This explanation preserves Abraham's devotion to God as a true example of human conduct, i.e., in our waking state. This rare term of an angel "calling from heaven" might be the vital clue that resolves the contradiction. This clue tells us that Abraham's entire 3-day journey to Mt. Moriah and his attempted sacrifice were Earth bound, but the angel's 2 calls alone were metaphysical interruptions taking place in Abraham's mind. We thereby maintain Abraham's perfection as physically willing to sacrifice his beloved son.

Another clue might be Abraham's naming of the place of this vision as "on the mount God appeared." Meaning, "while upon this mountain, a metaphysical event occurred." The very naming of this "place" (makom) indicates the sacrifice was Earth bound.

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And I wonder if Abraham's "rising" (Gen. 19:27) regarding Sodom, is a similar method Torah uses to distinguish Earthly events from the preceding vision of Abraham and Lote. Meaning, we are told that Abraham "rose" as in waking, to indicate here is where the narrative of Earth bound events continue. But the prior narrative of the angels' visiting Abraham and Lote, were both visions. This explanation follows Maimonides' explanation. ■

God's Distinction: Seen in the Commands

"If you understand the fundamental of the universe, then you will understand the principle of the firstborn, and the tenth. And behold, Abraham gave a tenth, as did Jacob our father peace be upon him (Ibn Ezra, Lev. 27:34)."

Ibn Ezra is hinting to the concept of a First Cause, what he refers to as the fundamental, or "sode" of the universe. This Cause – God – is the fundamental of the universe; the existence of the world is due exclusively to this First Cause. And this First Cause by definition, is only one.

Ibn Ezra says the laws concerning first borns intends to spread God's fame as the First Cause. Meaning, the significance of first borns is derived from the significance of the First Cause. Laws concerning first borns thereby recalls God's place in the universe as the sole cause. First borns are significant, only because they partake of the character of "first," which is God's distinction. Thus, Torah's institution of first borns spreads the fame of the First Cause.

Abraham too wished to spread God's fame, and did so by being charitable in sums that reflect the number one, referring to God who is one, and the First Cause. Abraham gave in tenths of his wealth. The number ten is the "first" of the next scale after the ones. 1 through 9 are multiples of the number 1. 10-90 are multiples of 10s. 100s and 1000s follow. But each jump in

scale still references the number one, explaining why we write the numbers as 10, 100, 1000, etc.

So when Abraham and Jacob were charitable, they wished to express that all wealth comes from the First Cause. The first, or the number 1, was reflected in donating in denominations of 1/10th of their wealth. Ten being the first of the tens scale. ■

Prophetic Imagery

God created the world - and man - in a physical design. Man is thereby able to engage his senses to perceive creation, and then use his mind to unravel the depths of God's wisdom displayed in all he sees, and understands. Without the universe, man would be left with no means to sense creation in all it's deep design, or God, which is the goal.

Perhaps then, prophetic visions offer man an even higher level perception of God's wisdom. How? Perhaps, as prophetic visions need not comply with physical laws, but can present supernatural images, man can thereby push the boundaries of wisdom limited by the physical universe. Jacob, for

example, sees a ladder with angels ascending and descending, something impossible to see in the natural universe. This extraordinary vision allows Jacob to leap forward in His knowledge of God. This is a purpose of a prophetic vision. ■

Why So Cryptic?

Reader: Why do many Torah lessons require careful study?

Rabbi: The Torah has many methods of conveying ideas. Sometimes, it's through juxtaposition. Sometimes, exaggeration. And sometimes, as with Saul and the witch, the Torah depicts a fantasy as a real event, in order to stress how real it was to Saul, thereby informing us of Saul's desperation.

So why not simply teach us the law in each case? God wants us to develop our intellectual capacity. For it is the trained mind that can see even greater insights. God wisdom is not surface-deep. The wiser we become, the deeper we can probe, and the more we discover. This is how God designed the universe and knowledge.

To help us arrive at greater understanding, God scripted Torah verses in a manner that require analysis. This is why He didn't simply tell us the law. ■





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Hallel

Having established the basis for Hallel being a different type of praise of God in perek 113, as well as the various parameters and limitations contained within such a praise, we move along to the next perek.

This chapter begins referencing the exodus from Egypt (Tehillim 114):

“1. When Israel left Egypt, the house of Jacob [left] a people of a strange tongue 2. Judah became His holy nation, Israel His dominion.”

We see Dovid Hamelech using some type of adjective to describe the uniqueness of the Jewish people; it is their language that serves to accentuate the distinctiveness of the Jewish people. One could ask, why this particular feature? After all, we are the nation chosen by God to be the “light unto the nations”, replete with a *derech hachayim* unlike any other. Why

language? No one would deny that the language a nation speaks does create some degree of differentiation. The answer might lie in how we initially perceive and identify a nation, rather than its more essential defining characteristics. Imagine first arriving in a foreign country, where nobody speaks your language. Immediately, you feel like an outsider, as if you have no ability to penetrate even the slightest bit through the strange sounds and words you hear. That state of mind could be what this verse is highlighting. The effect of this initial assessment is one of the most powerful in its perception of a nation. While it fails to ultimately reveal the inner workings of said nation (the German language does not necessarily preclude anti-Semitism), it does present the simplest and clearest contrast.

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*Rabbi Dr.
Darrell Ginsberg*



In the second verse, we see what would seem to be a further description of the Jewish people, as well as some type of “relationship” being established with God. The Redak looks at the verse as composed of two parts. The first, referring to the “holy nation”, means that God took the Jewish people from impure (tameh) to sanctified (kadosh). The second adds that the Jews became a sovereign people, no longer under the rule of the Egyptians. However, this independence is in reality subject to the “permission” of God. What point is the Redak making here? Why is their potential sovereignty such an important issue? It would seem Dovid Hamelech is highlighting two pivotal features in the transformation of the nation. The first involves the philosophical move from tameh to kadosh, a nation now guided by the derech Hashem. This gave the Jewish people a completely new identity. The second, though, involves an equally important change, albeit within the psychological composition of the nation. It would be impossible for the philosophical transformation to take hold if the Jewish people were still beholden to another nation. They needed to be independent, to break free from their psychological shackles, in order to truly accept their new status as an am kadosh. This is expressed with the institution of their new “government”.

There is another small differentiation noted by the Redak in this verse. In the first half, the Jews are referred to as “Yehuda”, whereas in the second the term “Yisrael” is used. He explains that at the time of the exodus from Egypt, the tribe of Yehuda stood out from the rest of the Jewish people, as they were the natural leaders. They travelled in the front, and the Midrash explains that the nasi of Yehuda was the first to jump into Yam Suf. This tribe set the precedent of the rest of the Jewish people to follow; therefore, the term



“kadosh” is used to reference them. Furthermore, he writes that they took the lead in kiddush Hashem, warranting their identification as “kadosh”. The idea the Redak presents about Yehuda is self-explanatory. However, there is one subtle inference we can gather from his point. Without question, God transformed the Jewish people through the exodus from Egypt. However, this does not mean that the ideas God was to bring forth were not already existent to some degree among individuals within the nation itself. The idea of the sanctification of God was present in the tribe of Yehuda, demonstrating that individuals capable of achieving high levels of insights into God prior to the exodus.

The next set of verses demonstrate a transition:

“3. The sea saw and fled; the Jordan turned backward 4. The mountains danced like rams, hills like young sheep 5. What frightens you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn backward? 6. You mountains, that you dance like rams; you hills, like young sheep? 7. From before the Master, Who created the earth, from before the God of Jacob 8. Who transforms the rock into a pond of water, the flint into a fountain of water”

We see a number of interesting questions emerge from these verses. First of all, there is the vivid imagery being used here, with dancing mountains and fleeing seas. Is this merely a literary tool? We also see a strange question, “what frightens you...” – what is being asked here? What is the answer? And then we have the

final verse, another praise of God’s might, which seems to be adding no more than the first verses.

The Redak picks up on these issues. He points out the obvious use of “mashal”, describing the splitting of water by Yam Suf and the Yarden as if the water was running away out of fear. The mountains referenced here refer to those near Har Sinai at the time of the giving of the Torah. They “shook” as the Divine Revelation took place. Clearly, these are referring to great miraculous events performed by God, demonstrations of hashgachas Hashem. What then is the question being asked in the fifth verse?

The occurrence of a miracle is not merely about the supernatural; it is an opportunity to be introduced to new ideas about God. The miracles of Yam Suf and Har Sinai were events of just such a nature. The Jewish people now had a path open to inquiry and investigation. The question of “what frightens”, though, is the natural outgrowth of just such a quest for knowledge. Is it possible to understand to some degree how these miracles come about? Can we, in a sense, ask why this miracle at this particular time in this particular manner? We desire to know more about God and His ways. How much further can we go? The answer is the natural world operates by the will of God. As the Redak later writes:

“He is the Master over all, acts in line with His will, and if He wants the sons of Yaakov to cross the sea or the Yarden, they (meaning the waters) flee

and the waters split, as He is the Master.”

We can never know the rationale behind God’s will, what motivates Him. God is not subject to “motivation”, and His will is something that we can never predict or intuit. Yes, we can be recipients of His miracles, and therefore gain in ideas about God. But we cannot go further than this.

We now turn to the last verse, which ends with an even starker contrast between God and us. The miracles cited earlier were events that demonstrated God’s control over the natural world. And we also now understand how our knowledge predicated these events is an impossibility. We are then told how God can perform even “greater” miracles. What is this adding? The Redak explains that just like God can turn the wet to dry (meaning splitting the sea), He can turn the dry to wet, such as bringing water from a rock. What this demonstrates is how little we can actually understand about God’s actions. To us, each one of these miracles is a different phenomenon. However, there is no such “difference” when speaking within the realm of God. We are not to think that there is some type of different plan or effort involved when speaking of miracle A or B. This is a critical idea in how we view hashgachas Hashem, and serves to ensure we understand our inherent limitations in understanding God’s ways.

Taking a step back, we can see the overall thematic flow in this chapter of Tehillim. We see an evolution taking place here. First, there is the exodus from Egypt and subsequent creation of the nation. What activity does this nation engage in? We come to praise God, to recognize His greatness. How were we first introduced to God? Through the medium of miracles. That system of knowledge served then, and still does today, as a primary method of engaging in yediyas Hashem. Thus, the praise of Hallel emerges from this system of hashgacha. ■



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