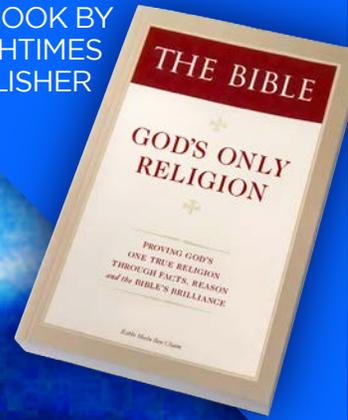


JewishTimes

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LETTERS

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that Talk?

TRUTH

To Share:
Not Hide

COEXIST

People vs.
Theologies

Moses &
Pharaoh

BIBLE

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RABBIS FOR JESUS



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Jan. 8

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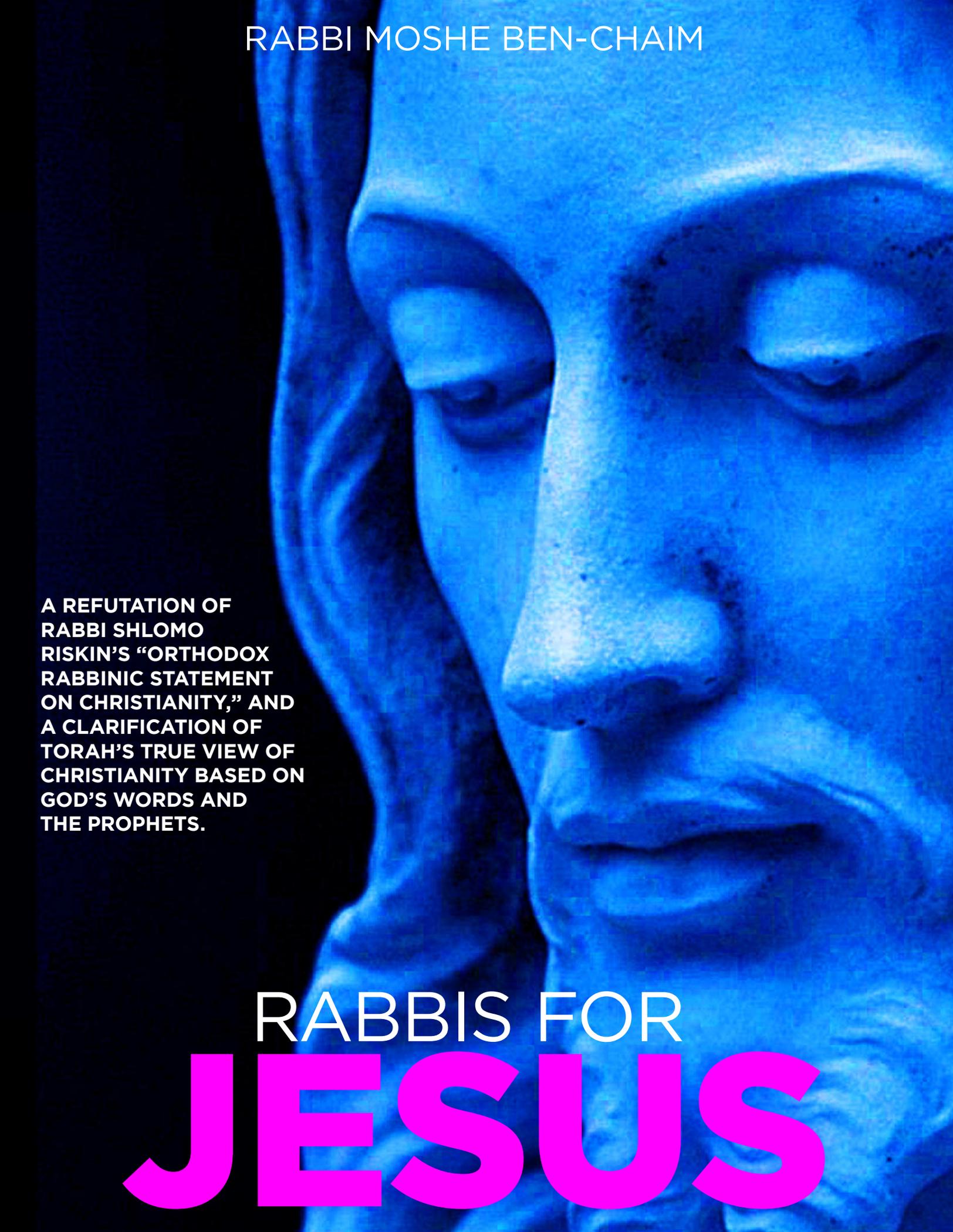
LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Do Animals Talk?

Saul: We read stories about King Solomon and also the talking donkey. Has God gifted the power of speech to animals? We read they "sing praises to God," is it to be taken literally? Please comment.

Rabbi: The only animals that spoke were the snake (Eve) naturally, and Bilam's donkey in a vision. It would appear God ended that species of talking snake, or perhaps that one individual snake alone spoke. If one might ask, "Didn't King Solomon talk to the animals?", our response is, "What did the Torah say?" If we review the Torah in connection with this claim regarding King Solomon, it states, "and he spoke 'on' the animals and 'on' the birds, and 'on' the creeping things and 'on' the fish (Kings I, 5:13)." This does not mean King Solomon conversed "with" animals, but that he spoke "about" or "on" the animals. King Solomon spoke about their greatness and their benefits to man; why the animal species is kosher via two signs, whereas birds are kosher with just one (ibid, Rashi, Radak). This verse intends to display the great wisdom God granted this king. Ignorance causes one to read this verse as man having dialogue with animals, where God said otherwise. Had animals the faculty of speech, this means that they too possess intellect, as speech is impossible without intellect. And this denies God's words in Genesis when He granted man alone the intellect, the Tzelem Elokim (Gen. 1:27). Furthermore, King Solomon was granted special intelligence by God, which surpassed all others, (Kings I, 5:9-11) and yet he did not suggest animals as possessing language. ■



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

A REFUTATION OF
RABBI SHLOMO
RISKIN'S "ORTHODOX
RABBINIC STATEMENT
ON CHRISTIANITY," AND
A CLARIFICATION OF
TORAH'S TRUE VIEW OF
CHRISTIANITY BASED ON
GOD'S WORDS AND
THE PROPHETS.

RABBIS FOR
JESUS

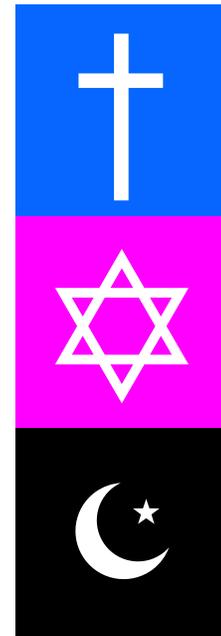
God equates with truth, and no consideration must obscure those truths. For by obscuring truth, we mislead ourselves, other Jews, and gentiles. Jews and Christians share a close relationship today built on honesty and openness. As religions conflict on core tenets, religionists agree that all religions cannot be God's word, for He does not contradict Himself. Only one religion is God's word. Intelligence alone will determine this.

In his "Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity" (<http://bit.ly/1XPZq2O>), Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin writes:

*"We acknowledge that Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations."
"Jesus brought a double goodness to the world."
"We Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption."
"We believe that G-d employs many messengers to reveal His truth."*

In defense of truth; i.e., God's Torah (Bible), His Prophets and our leading Rabbis, I respond as follows.

All peoples must respect one another's lives. We all must abstain from harming anyone, except those who physically attack us. However, today, this respect has grossly overgrown its borders to violate God's words. I refer to the current tide of mutual religious acceptance, and worse; the admiration of religions other than God's Torah, His Bible. Throughout the Bible, God warns against following other religions, altering His Bible, adding to it, subtracting from it, and deifying man. He also warns us not to lie, "From a false matter, distance yourself (Exod. 23:7)." These are perpetrated by all other religions, and today, by many Jewish leaders. God's Prophets discuss the corruptions of others nations and religions, their eventual rejection of their religions as lies, and their ultimate acceptance of the unaltered Bible, the Torah:



(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



RABBI RISKIN'S ACCEPTANCE OF JESUS AS "GOD'S WILL" IS HERETICAL. HE SUGGESTS GOD CONTRADICTS HIMSELF, AS JESUS/CHRISTIANITY VIOLATE GOD'S COMMANDS. SINCE CHRISTIANITY IS "GOD'S WILL," RABBI RISKIN ENDORSES ADDING TO GOD'S TORAH, TO WHICH GOD SAID NOT TO ADD. RABBI RISKIN'S VIEW LEADS TO ENDORSING A DEIFICATION OF MAN AND A GOD FIGURE, THE TORAH'S MOST FUNDAMENTAL SIN: IDOLATRY.

"Nations will come from the corners of the land and say, 'In truth, our fathers gave us an inheritance of lies' (Jer. 16:19)."

"Every thing which I command you to do, that is what you should be careful to do. Do not add upon, it and do not detract from it (Deut. 13:1)."

"And many peoples and mighty nations will come to inquire of the God of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat God's presence. So says God of hosts, 'In those days ten men of all gentile languages will grab on the shirt corner of the Jewish man saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you' (Zech. 8:22,23)."

Through His prophets, God informs us of the nations' future acceptance of the Torah, the Bible. Sadly, certain considerations are causing Jewish leaders to alter God's words, and Maimonides' words below. Such apologetics obscure the truth from the Jew and gentile alike. Maimonides writes:

"All the prophets spoke that the Messiah will redeem Israel and save them, and gather their dispersed and strengthen their mitzvot. But false prophets caused the Jews to be destroyed by the sword, and scattered their remnants and humbled them, and exchanged the Torah, and caused the majority of the world to err to serve a god other than the Lord. Nevertheless, the thoughts of the Creator of the world are not within the power of man to reach them, 'for our ways are not His ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts.' And all these matters of Jesus of

Nazareth and that of the Ishmaelite who arose after him are only to straighten the way of the king Messiah and to fix the entire world, to serve God as one, as it is stated (Zephaniah 3:9), 'For then I will turn to the peoples (into) clear speech, to all call in the name of God and serve Him unanimously.' How (will this come about)? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah, with words of Torah and words of mitzvos and these matters have spread to the furthest isles, to many nations of uncircumcised hearts, and they discuss these matters and the mitzvot of the Torah. Some say: 'These mitzvot are true, but were already nullified in the present age and are not applicable for all time.' Others say: 'Hidden matters are in them (mitzvos) and they are not to be taken literally, and the Messiah has already come and revealed their hidden (meanings).' And when the true Messiah stands, and he is successful and is raised and exalted, immediately they all will retract and will know that fallacy they inherited from their fathers, and that their prophets and fathers caused them to err (Maimonides, Laws of Kings, 11:10-12)."

We cannot suggest that God desired Christianity to arise. God desires no other religion than Judaism. In the Jewish year 2448 upon Mt. Sinai, God revealed Himself to man once. 2.5 million people witnessed this event. God publicly instructed man in only one religion: Judaism. God gave a Bible that includes prohibitions against altering His word. This is perfectly clear. Maimonides does not indicate that God desired Christianity's existence. This directly opposes God's Bible.

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All Maimonides says is that God's plan will not be altered by the rise of other religions. The fact that Christianity spread knowledge of the Mitzvos, is not equivalent to saying God desires Christianity. The nations will ultimately see all other religions as false, as the quote says:

"...immediately they all will retract and will know that fallacy they inherited from their fathers, and that their prophets and fathers caused them to err."

What is more preferable; that Christianity would never had existed, or actual history? God's will is the former, stated quite openly. However, now that Christianity exists, Maimonides indicates it cannot compromise God's plan:

"Nevertheless, the thoughts of the Creator of the world are not within the power of man to reach them, 'for our ways are not His ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts'."

We cannot fathom God's plan. Christianity violates God's words, but can in no way compromise God's ultimate plan, as these events were not thwarted by God. A negative may be utilized for a positive.

TO SAY THAT CHRISTIANITY "CONTRIBUTES" TO GOD'S PLAN, IS MUCH DIFFERENT THAN SAYING IT "DOES NOT COMPROMISE" GOD'S PLAN. THE FORMER SUGGESTS IT IS AN INHERENT GOOD, WHILE THE LATTER RETAINS ITS TRUE STATUS AS VIOLATING GOD'S WORDS.

"And all these matters of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the Ishmaelite who arose after him are only to straighten the way of the king Messiah and to fix the entire world, to serve God as one."

Maimonides does not suggest in one breath that Christianity is and is not God's will. So let us understand Maimonides words:

"How (will this come about)? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah, with words of Torah and words of mitzvos and these matters have spread to the furthest isles, to many nations of uncircumcised hearts, and they discuss these matters

and the mitzvot of the Torah. Some say: 'These mitzvot are true, but were already nullified in the present age and are not applicable for all time.' Others say: 'Hidden matters are in them (mitzvos) and they are not to be taken literally, and the Messiah has already come and revealed their hidden (meanings).' And when the true Messiah stands, and he is successful and is raised and exalted, immediately they all will retract and will know that fallacy they inherited from their fathers, and that their prophets and fathers caused them to err."

Maimonides suggests that God's allowance of man's free will, expressed in the rise of man-made religions, can be used to distinguish the true Messiah from impostors:

"Immediately they all will retract and will know that fallacy they inherited from their fathers, and that their prophets and fathers caused them to err."

God will turn a negative into a positive. When the true Messiah arrives, and teaches Torah, all other religions will compare his wisdom to the fallacies of the religions they inherited.

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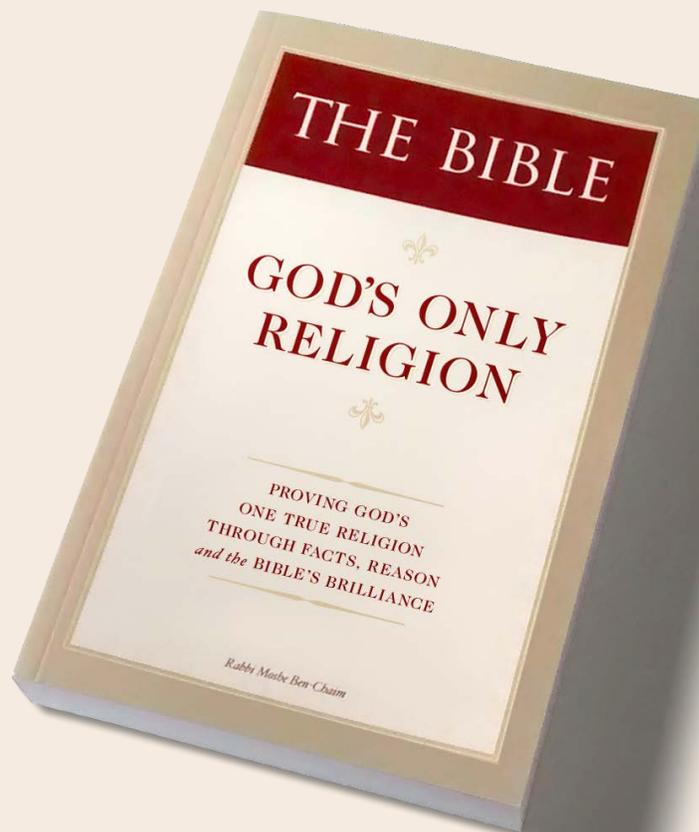
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A NEW BOOK BY
JEWISHTIMES
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R. MOSHE
BEN-
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Religions conflict; they all can't be God's word. How do we choose which is God's true religion?

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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



Published
Dec. 2015

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Rashi quotes a Rabbinic statement:

(God said) "By their lives, I will give them an opportunity to err with the words of the spies so they don't inherit the land of Israel (Num. 13:2)."

This would seem like a vindictive statement. But as God is devoid of emotion, how do we understand it?

Had God not permitted the spies to spy out Israel, they would have harbored an incorrect notion about God. That is, their desire to send spies displayed their disbelief in God's promise that they will successfully conquer Israel. If this disbelief in God was not brought into the open, they would remain with this false notion, and this is not tolerable by God. What is meant by "God gave them an opportunity to err?" It means that God gave them an opportunity to act out this notion in reality so it can be dealt with. God's goal was not their loss of Israel. Giving them "a chance not to inherit Israel" is God offering those Jews a generous chance to realize their emotional conflict (they desired Israel, but denied God's promise). "God gave them an opportunity to err" means that God's allowance of the spies' mission enabled the Jews to face their mistake.

GOD PREFERS MAN DOES NOT SIN, BUT HE CAN USE THAT SIN FOR A GOOD.



I believe this is also the case with God allowing false religions to rise prior to His delivering the true Messiah. God certainly prefers that the false religions never existed, but He allows man free will.

Rabbi Judah taught, "Rav said, 'Why does the Torah teach, 'Lest you lift your eyes to the heavens and see the sun, moon and stars, all the hosts of heaven, and you turn aside and prostrate yourselves to them and worship them which God has smoothed them out for all nations under the entire heavens (Deut. 4:19)'. " Rabbi Judah continued, "This teaches that God made their ways smooth so as to remove them from the world" (Tal. Avoda Zara 55a).

What is the meaning of "God made their ways smooth so as to remove them from the world?" What type of divine justice is this? Do we not also read, "Do I truly desire the death of the wicked, says God? Truly, I desire his repentance so he may live (Ezek. 18:23)."

"God made their ways smooth" teaches that God designed man with freewill. God does not desire that man be forced to accept any view. For example, if a man couldn't speak evil about another

person due to the repeated sudden onset of illness, he would not be abstaining based on an effort to curb his viciousness, but from adverse reactions. Internally, he still desires to mock the other person. In this scenario, man does not obtain the opportunity to perfect himself through his free will and intelligent mastery over his instincts. Similarly, Rabbi Judah is teaching that God did not create the world where idolatrous activity is immediately met with death, lighting, etc. For this would cause man to refrain from idolatry for the wrong reasons. God's gift of the intellect is precisely that we engage it, and determine that idolatry is ineffective. Wooden and stone gods, or men viewed as gods, possess no powers. Claims of Jesus' miracles too are baseless: this was never witnessed by masses. But only later, its belief was demanded. God wants man to agree to this with his senses and his mind. The meaning of "God made their ways smooth so as to remove them from the world" means God allowed man to exercise his free choice, with no impediment, what God means by "smooth." God designed man with the choice to project smooth and emotionally appealing interpretations and err, or to use reason and abstain from lies and fallacy. To "remove them from the world" is not God's goal, as we see from

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Ezekiel above, "Do I truly desire the death of the wicked, says God? Truly, I desire his repentance so he may live (Ezek. 18:23)." God's goal is that man chooses between what satisfies his emotions, and what is right according to his mind. This is the plan for mankind, explaining why we have both; instincts and intellect.

Maimonides teaches that God allowed Christianity and Islam to arise and endure, for He does not force a man or a people to abandon false religions or any poor decision. God desires man engages freewill.

Eventually, "Nations will come from the corners of the land and say, 'In truth, our fathers gave us an inheritance of lies' (Jer. 16:19)." Nations will abandon their religions and accept Judaism. Messiah will be wiser than King Solomon. His words will penetrate the ears and hearts of nations who previously accepted falsehood and fantasy. The world will recognize the unparalleled brilliance contained only in Torah, dismissing incomprehensible notions like a trinity and baseless claims of divine origin.

**THE WORLD WILL
RECOGNIZE THAT
TORAH ALONE OFFERS
A PROOF OF DIVINE
ORIGIN. BUT THIS
CANNOT HAPPEN
WHILE JEWISH
LEADERS ACCEPT
OTHER RELIGIONS AS
EQUALLY DIVINE.**

Jewish leaders need not wait until the Messiah to correct Christians and Muslims in their

errors. Man, and certainly leaders must not lie, and certainly not lie to other religions. This hides from them God's word through His prophets, as stated above, where God endorses His Bible alone. The Jew's interest must be God's interest: that all peoples equally benefit by living according to God's one religion. We must desire the good for all other peoples.

I have conversed with many intelligent Jews and Christians wishing to live reasonably and lead a religious life based on truth and proof. They reject unproven religions, and grasp the brilliance of God's Torah...but only because it was shared honestly. When asked, Jewish leaders must share with other religions Judaism's logical explanation for not accepting other religions: no proof exists for their claim to divine origin. Secondly, other religions violate God's command not to alter Torah and they reject God's prophets. Additionally, Jesus and Mohammed do not qualify to be the Messiah, a man of Davidic lineage. Further arguments on these religions are found in Deut. 24:16 where God says one man does not die for another man's sins, and in an intelligent reading of Isaiah 53.

The Messiah serves a primary goal: to unite all peoples in God's worship. God knew how history would unfold, that Judaism would be fragmented into numerous branches, and deviations in levels of observance would arise. A cure to this problem was necessary. The Messiah is this cure. Since all members of Judaism accept the coming of Messiah, all Jews will follow Messiah's teachings. Judaism will return to its pure, original form, hopefully soon, to be taught by the Messiah, God's

true messenger. This is not only true regarding various Jewish factions, but also regarding all religions, as Jeremiah teaches above. Messiah has become the center of religious difference. Upon his arrival, not only will all Jews unite in one practice, but all other religions too will abandon fallacies, accepting Judaism as the one, true word of God.

God preferred that man never deviate from Torah, be he Jew or gentile. And even though man has deviated by creating false religions, his actions cannot compromise God's plan. But God uses man's error for an ultimate good. Better that man does not err, but thankful are we that God utilizes our errors and implements corrective measures for all humanity.

Rabbi Riskin's acceptance of Jesus as "God's will" is heretical. He suggests God contradicts Himself, as Jesus/Christianity violate God's commands. Since Christianity is "God's will," Rabbi Riskin endorses adding to God's Torah, to which God said not to add. Rabbi Riskin's view leads to endorsing a deification of man and a god figure, the torah's most fundamental sin: idolatry.

Jews and Christians agree: Both Judaism and Christianity cannot be God's word, as they possess opposing tenets. Each person must use his or her mind to determine what is true and God's word, and what is not. All peoples must respect all others, treating each other as we all wish to be treated. This does not mean we agree with all theologies. But it does mean we cultivate harmony and abandon all aggression, protecting the rights of each fellow human being to engage free will as God desires, and freely live as he or she sees fit. ■

The following Rabbis reject Rabbi Riskin's statements and endorse this essay's author's view of Christianity, Judaism's unique role as God's only religion, and the teachings of the Torah, Prophets, Writings and Maimonides:

Rabbi Robert Kaplan
North Miami Beach, Fl.

Rabbi David Fischbein

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Rabbi Mark Salamon

Rabbi Rodney Feinerman

Rabbi Darrell Ginsberg
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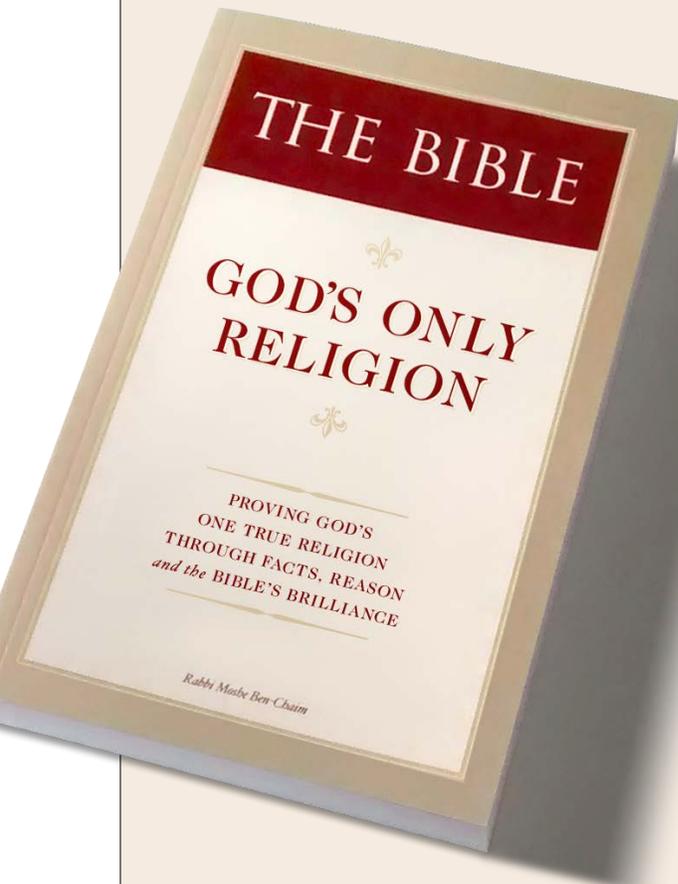
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Senior Director
Manhattan Jewish Experience

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Rabbi Ari Ginsberg

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Head of School
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RELIGION

Speak the TRUTH

THEOLOGY

Rabbi Howard Bald

I read with great interest the recent statement entitled, Dabru Emet (Speak the Truth), published as an ad in major national papers and signed by one hundred and sixty rabbis. I am not an authority about Christian theology nor for that matter about any of the other religious systems that comprise the multitude of approaches to the spiritual, but I have had the great privilege of learning and imbibing the Torah teachings from some of the greatest Torah scholars. As a fortunate recipient of our tradition (mesorah), I do feel qualified, albeit with limitations, to state briefly some basic views about Judaism.

Our Torah demands of us to practice lovingkindness to both Jew and Gentile. Even to an idolatrous gentile, we are obligated to visit their sick, bury their dead, and provide charity for their poor. Whether a person acts rationally or irrationally in their spiritual approach does not change the obligation to extend kindness. No matter how absurd or primitive their belief system may be, the Jew must practice ways of peace toward that individual or group.

But here an important distinction must be stated. The demonstration of

lovingkindness to others is not to be confused with an acceptance of their theological views. Mutual respect should not be confused with theological acceptance, and hence I believe that if the representatives of different religious systems desire to engage in discussions that go beyond the promoting of world peace and justice, i.e., real theological dialogue, they must be prepared to take no offense at the most serious of disagreements. Religious leaders who believe in the truth of their religious approach should never compromise their religious truths for even as noble an objective as peace. And if theological dialogue is not possible then let us simply live as loving neighbors agreeing to disagree.

The most fundamental statement of Judaism and reflective of its foundation is “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” What is the full implication of “the Lord is one”? Why is this concept so important to the Jew?

“The Lord is one” means: (1) that there exists a being who is the source of the entire universe, who is the creator and cause of all that exists and yet His existence cannot in any way be compared or related to anything created; (2) God cannot be

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construed in a physical manner. It is an anathema to a Jew to construe God in physical terms. It is true that we and the Torah speak in the “language of man” but we are constantly mindful that God is far beyond any human description and that no terms or attributes are applicable to God. It is no more possible for God to make Himself physical than it would be for God to destroy Himself; (3) God is not subject to change. The very notion of “the Lord is one” means that there cannot be two descriptions of God – God is truly one. Through prayer and mitzvot (system of commandments), the human being changes – never God. To apply to God emotions or changes in emotional states, is nothing more than mere illusion stemming from the human being’s desire to mold a god in the human image.

Jews throughout the world recite the Song of Unity (Shir haYichud) on Rosh Hashana, where it states: “You will be forever unchanging... Gladness and grief do not apply to You nor do the semblance of any creature...Physical things do not affect You nor can You be likened to anything with a soul... Therefore You need nothing...”

This is the God of Israel. No other notion of God is acceptable according to the dictates of our Torah.

As I stated at the outset, I am not in the position to be an arbiter of other people or of their religious systems. I am unclear as to what the personal beliefs are of many Jews, let alone Gentiles. I can only submit to you, the reader, that those who accept the above ideas believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of Israel and the Creator of the Universe.

Let me conclude by stating my willingness to teach the ideas of Judaism to anyone interested and to continue this conversation with those whose interest has been sparked. I can be contacted here: hald@hillelyeshiva.org

May we merit to live in the time prophesied by the Prophet Zechariah, “God will be King over all the world – on that day God will be One and His Name will be One.” ■

PARSHA

Va'era: Disability

BEING HUMAN

Rabbi Moshe Abarbanel

The Creator endows each person with ability and disability. One person may possess great analytical skills but poor athletic skills. Very often our disability will cloud many facets of our lives. We see in this week’s and last week’s Parshas. Moshe attains prophecy. According to Rambam only the most perfected people will attain prophecy. In his Guide for the Perplexed^[1] he writes, “It (prophecy) is the highest degree and greatest perfection man can attain. Yet, even though Moshe attains prophecy, and it should be pointed out he becomes the greatest prophet to live and no one will ever exceed him, he allows his disability to interfere with newly ordained mission.

“Moses replied to Hashem, ‘Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words, not since yesterday, not since the day before yesterday, nor since You first spoke to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech.’ (Exod. 4:10)”

It is amazing to consider how great Moshe’s fear gripped him. He rejects the Almighty’s command to go to Egypt because of his lifelong speech problem. Considering Moshe spent the last seven days convening with the Creator, this gives us a greater understanding into the difficulty a regular person will have in overcoming their issues.

Now if we reject the midrash that Moshe became “heavy of mouth” by a miraculous event in his childhood, this may have been challenge from birth. In fact, one of Ramban’s interpretations supports this view:

“In line with the plain meaning of Scripture, the purport of the verse is as follows: [Moses said] ‘For I am slow of speech from my youth on, and from time past, for I have been slow of speech from my youth on and all the more so now that I am old, and also now since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant, for Thou hast not removed the defect in my speech when Thou didst commend me to go to Pharaoh to speak in Thy name. How then can I go before him’ (Exod. 10:4)”

Regardless how a person attains their disability, whether natural or environmental, the challenge can interfere with many aspects of life. We attain an awareness of how difficult it is for everyone to overcome their disabilities. Moshe even complains again in Exodus 6:12. Ultimately with help from his brother Aaron, Moshe overcomes his fear and is given a way to compensate for his speech impediment. The Holy One gives Moshe advice of a non miraculous kind. God tells Moshe his brother Aaron will speak for him: “He [Aaron] shall speak for you to the people; and it will be that he will be your mouth and you will be his leader (Exod. 4:14-17).”

May God give us all the insight and strength to prevail over our personal disabilities.

Good Shabbos. ■

[1] Book II, chapter 36



PARSHA

Pharaoh's Last Chance

VAERA

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

The story of the plagues, described in the Torah portion of Va'era, is so much more than a display of miraculous events. Throughout the entire process, we are witness to the dialogue between Moshe and Pharaoh, an epic duel in philosophy, while simultaneously the idea of God as the sole power in the universe is demonstrated again and again. What is astonishing is Pharaoh's resilience; his nearly fanatical attachment to forbidding the Jewish people to leave. The second encounter between Moshe and Pharaoh serves as the catalyst to this "hardening of heart" exhibited by Pharaoh. As we will see, it is critical for us to understand Pharaoh's state of mind prior to the implementation of the plagues.

The Torah presents the second encounter between Pharaoh and Moshe & Aharon (Shemot 7:8-13):

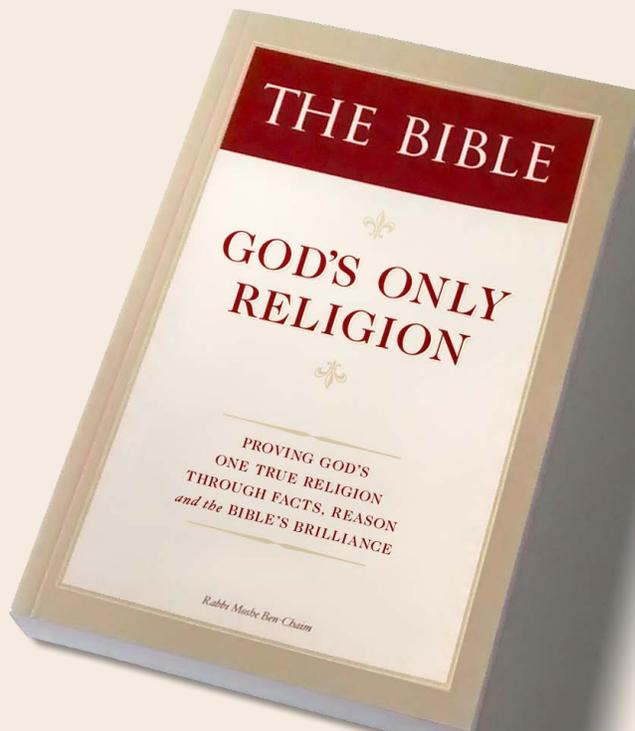
"The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 'When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Provide a sign for yourselves,' you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff, [and] cast [it] before Pharaoh; it will become a serpent.' "Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and they did so, as the Lord had commanded; Aaron cast his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Pharaoh too summoned the wise men and the magicians, and the necromancers of Egypt also did likewise with their magic. Each one of them cast down his staff, and they became serpents; but Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs. But Pharaoh's heart remained steadfast (v'yechezak), and he did not hearken to them, as the Lord had spoken."

When looking at a Torah scroll, one can see the next verse is separated from the previous one, indicating the beginning of a new theme. In this case, this initial verse introduces the first of the ten plagues (ibid 14):

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is heavy (kaved lev); he has refused to let the people out.'"

Taking a wide view and observing the arc of the story line, the placement of this encounter is difficult to understand. The Torah portion of Shemot ends with Pharaoh rejecting the rational arguments for the existence of God. He chooses to further the enslavement of the Jews, leading to Moshe's questioning of the unfolding of God's plan. The successive Torah portion of Va'era begins with a condensed review of the recent events, followed by a review of the genealogy of Moshe and Aharon. After one more clarification of Moshe's mission, God reveals to Moshe and Aharon how Pharaoh will ask for the sign mentioned in the above verses. In truth, one could argue that the placement of this second encounter should have been right after the first encounter at the end of Shemot. Pharaoh would be

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



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offered another opportunity to extricate himself from a potentially disastrous situation which is the direct result of the first attempts by Moshe and Aharon. Once this plan fails, God would then move to the plague option. In other words, the above encounter would appear to be more of a postscript to the first encounter, belonging at the end of Shemot, rather than immediately preceding the onset of the plagues.

A more detailed view reveals two momentous shifts concerning Pharaoh. The first is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The second is the reference to his heart being "heavy." It would appear that this state was necessary to bring about the plagues. Why? What was going through Pharaoh's head? We also see a strange Midrashic interpretation regarding the "heavy heart" of Pharaoh. The word "kaved" also means a liver. Thus, the Midrash explains that just like the liver lacks any ability of comprehension and insight, Pharaoh's "heart" (read mind) lacked the same qualities. What is this Midrash teaching us?

A closer look at the incident and Pharaoh's subsequent reaction to the event will help clarify this significant change. Pharaoh requested a sign, a method to ascertain if the God that Moshe and Aharon spoke of was truly powerful. Aharon's first act was not very impressive, as the magicians were able to duplicate it. Yet the second act was of a different nature. Rashi notes that the Torah refers to Aharon's "staff" swallowing the other staffs. It would appear that a greater miracle occurred here, where the serpents reverted back to staffs, only to have the lifeless inanimate staff of

Aharon acquire the power to swallow. Upon seeing this, Pharaoh hardens his heart. The Ibn Ezra notes that this occurred after seeing the duplication of Aharon's first act, as if the second act did not even register with Pharaoh. In the following verse, where Pharaoh is described as having a heavy heart, the Sforno points out that this occurred even though he had seen the clear difference between the duplication of the snakes and the swallowing of the staffs. All of these explanations point to one critical concept concerning Pharaoh. God presented Pharaoh with a final opportunity to exercise his freewill. The evidence undoubtedly indicated that his worldview, predicated on his synonymy with a deity, required, at the very least, some degree of modification. Clearly, there was a force that could breach the laws of nature outright. A reasonable person should have been willing to submit to this reality. It was at this moment that Pharaoh chose to exit the world of reason and cling to his belief, at all costs. He could not even "see" the miracle performed by Aharon. It did not register at all in his framework. He retreated to the security of his irrational beliefs, rejecting reality in order to preserve his worldview. There was no longer a normative rational method to convince Pharaoh of what was really happening. It was in this very state of mind that the first attempt at releasing the Jews from bondage concludes. Pharaoh was afforded multiple opportunities to accept the truth of God, and willingly chose to reject this clear truth for the sake of his warped belief. Now, the plan of the plagues was to be implemented.

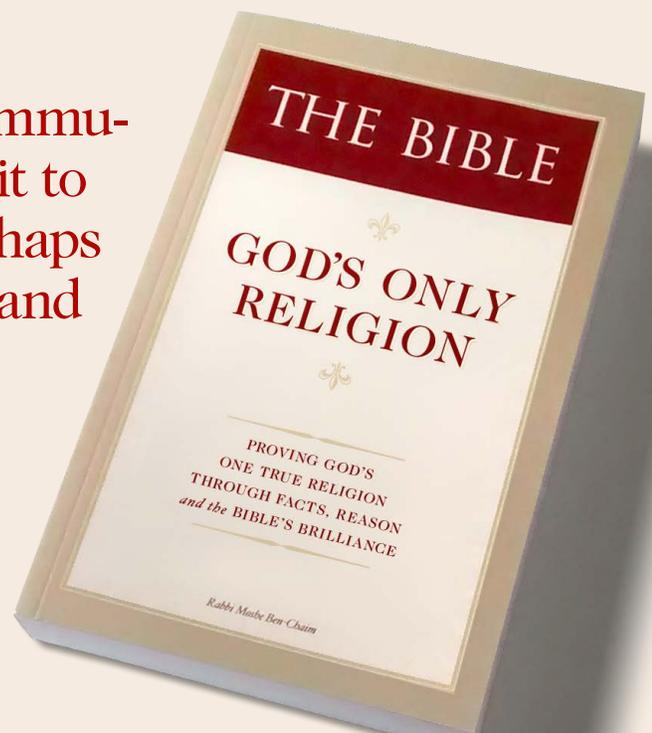
The Midrash can be understood quite well with this explanation. Pharaoh chose to exit the world of reason. He shut his mind off from the surrounding reality. His mind became equivalent to the liver – once he suspended his faculty of reason, his mind became functionless. In one sense, Pharaoh can be viewed as the exact opposite of Avraham Avinu. Avraham was raised in a world of idolatry, his reality one of illusion and projection. He thirsted for truth, and ultimately accepted the ultimate reality of God. He was willing to forego his system of belief as it did not conform to reality. Pharaoh was the exact opposite. Faced with clear evidence of the fallacy of his approach, he chose to cling to the torn fabric of his philosophy, watching the destruction of Egypt occur before his very eyes.

The message here is a pivotal one. Judaism is a religion rooted in rational thinking. We are not asked to enter into a pact of blind faith. We are not instructed to just believe for the sake of belief. As we see in the works of luminaries such as Saadya Gaon, Bachya Ibn Pekudah, Rambam, and others, we must use our faculty of reason first and foremost. Religious dogmas that profess a belief at the expense of rational thinking are in complete contradiction to what Judaism stands for. If a person is presented with a clear and cogent demonstration of reality, yet chooses to reject it for the comfort of his belief, rather than expressing some paradigm of religiosity, he is a fool. The Jewish people separate themselves from the Pharaoh's of the world in their pursuit of truth for the sake of truth. ■

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PARSHA

Faith Founded on Fundamentals

VAERA

Rabbi Reuven Mann



This week's parsha, Va'eira begins with a dialogue between Hashem and Moshe. G-d instructed Moshe to tell the Jews that He would keep the covenant He made with Avraham, terminate their enslavement, and make them His nation. He would then bring them to the Promised Land.

Why was it necessary for Moshe to reiterate G-d's promises at this time? These are the same themes that Hashem had expressed at the "burning bush." When Moshe first returned to Egypt, he communicated G-d's message to the elders and performed the miracles for them. Thus, he established his prophetic authenticity and, as a result, the people were convinced that the time of their redemption had come.

If the people already believed, why was it necessary to restate G-d's promises at this

point? To answer this, we must consider the phenomenon of disappointment and its negative impact on faith. When the people heard Moshe's message of deliverance, they breathed a sigh of relief, felt that their problems were over, and that all would go smoothly from there.

However, things did not work out that way. Moshe's initial mission to Pharaoh was a total disaster. The Egyptian king reacted with derision when Moshe relayed Hashem's command to allow the Jews to travel into the wilderness and worship Him. In retaliation, Pharaoh severely increased their workload by withholding the straw necessary to make the bricks. The people found it impossible to gather the straw and produce the same number of bricks as before, and this subjected them to severe punishment.

Moshe's failed intervention with Pharaoh had a profound effect on the Jews. They blamed him for creating the terrible condition in which they now found themselves. The worsened situation diminished national morale and undermined their faith in the promise of deliverance.

G-d addressed Himself to this problem in a new charge to Moshe. One cannot base his belief in the Creator and His promises on momentary occurrences. This, however, is our nature. When good things happen, the faith barometer shoots up, only to fall back down when we suffer setbacks.

This all-too-human approach is faulty. The Patriarchs demonstrated the path to an appropriate relationship with G-d: they were convinced of His absolute goodness and trustworthiness. They did not know when or how His beneficence would emerge, but they were categorically certain of His Providential closeness.

This was the essence of the new message to the Jews. They were told not to be affected by the shifting winds. Rather, they should be firmly rooted in the fundamental belief that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, with the power to control every aspect of the universe. G-d made a Covenant with their forefathers, and it is eternally binding. He has sworn to remove them from exile, to make them His chosen people, and to settle them in His special Land.

We, too, must base our relationship with Hashem on our adherence to the central truths expressed in our Torah. "He is a faithful G-d without injustice; Righteous and upright is He."

Hashem's word is absolute. Many strange things happen in the world, which we are not in a position to understand. We cannot allow these situations to sway or weaken us. G-d is the ultimate reality, who "is good and bestows good." That is the only thing of which we may be certain.

Shabbat shalom. ■

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