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LETTERS

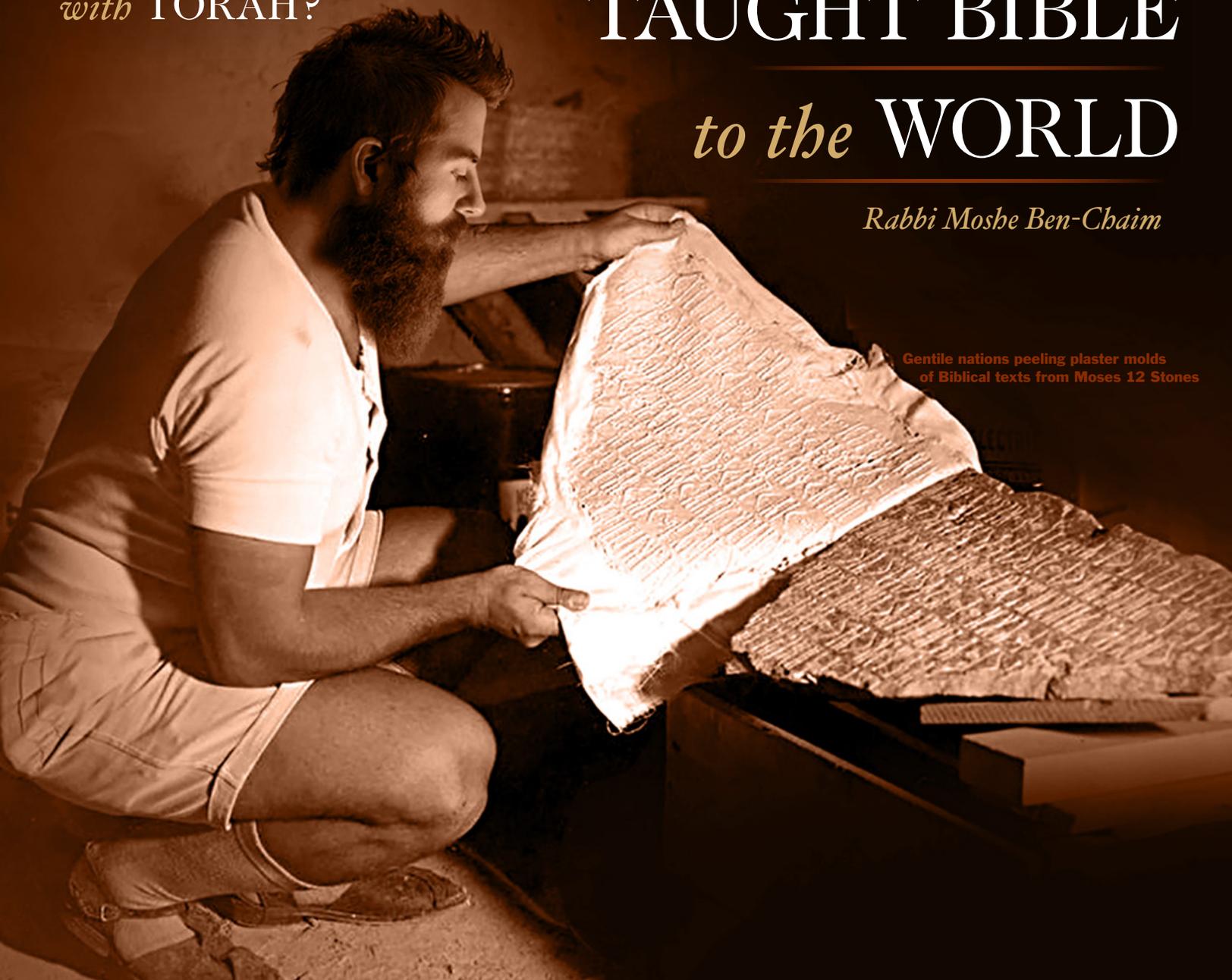
A RABBI
DISAGREEING
with GOD?

DOES SCIENCE
CONFLICT
with TORAH?

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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



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of Biblical texts from Moses 12 Stones

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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

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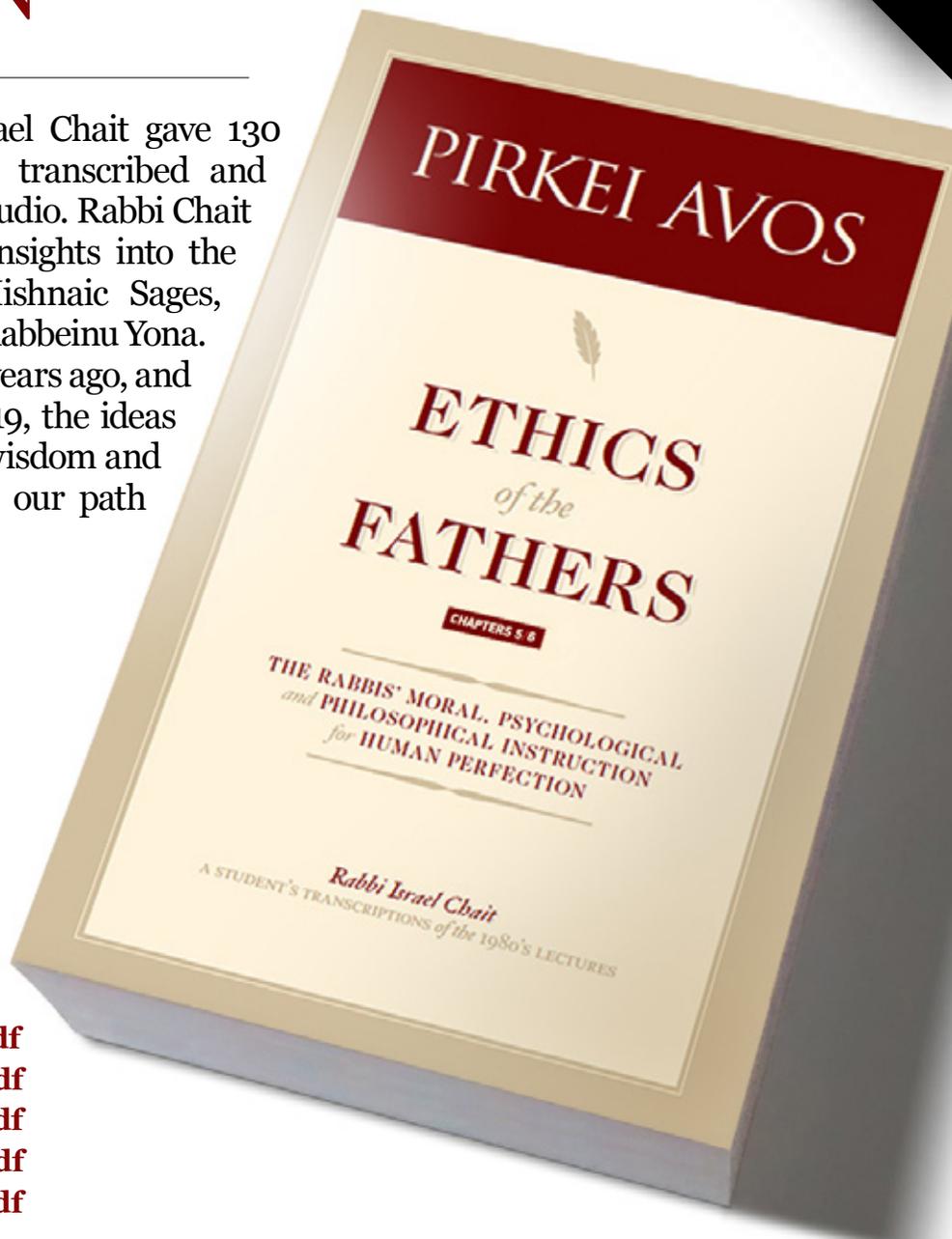
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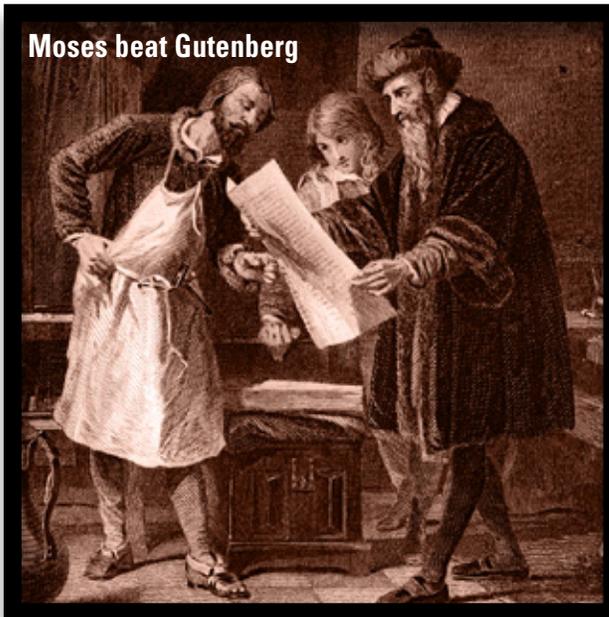
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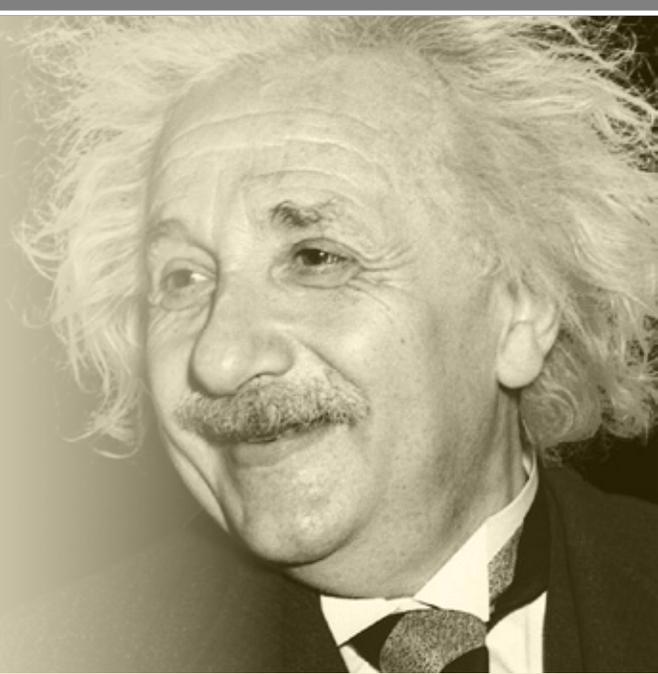


Why aren't You Consistent?

Reader: Regarding the recent post about the universe's age [you maintain it is 14 billion years old], if you're going to follow the scientists, why not follow them fully? They've also proven that the global Flood was a myth and that the Exodus did not occur. So, based on the Rambam you quoted, those stories are also not intended to be literal. And then the entire Jewish religion stands on nothing.

All the best, Yosef. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: We don't follow "people" [scientists], we only follow truth. A scientist—any person—holds no monopoly on truth. While the scientists are correct about the universe being quite older than 5780 years, they err in other areas. Furthermore, when the Torah tells us a history occurred, these are God's words, and He trumps a human's theories, every time. Nothing natural contradicts Torah, as God created both science and Torah. Thus, scientists rejecting the Flood are wrong as we have God's authority that it occurred. And nothing in nature conclusively denies the Flood: all that the scientists have are theories. And the 5780-year-old age of the universe is not a matter of Torah law. From Adam, yes: we count lifespans and arrive at 5780 years from Adam until today. But the 6 days prior to Adam were not 24-hour periods. Torah does not say this. ■



When he learned, in subsequent decades, that the universe is actually expanding, Einstein supposedly exclaimed "Then away with the cosmological constant!" — his now debunked former theory.

A Rabbi Who Disagrees with God

Reader: A certain Rabbi holds that killing everybody is wrong. For the Scriptures says that God (HaShem) has mercies, which in Hebrew designates as plural to mean "never ending mercies." Bless be He, King of the Universe.

Shalom, Shmuel

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: "Never ending mercies" are only for those deserving. The rabbi broke the first rule of Torah study: "God alone determines reality and truth." God's Flood engulfed all humans, and He commanded sinners of all ages on many occasions to be killed. As God wishes the best for man, if man corrupts himself beyond a threshold of sin, he loses his right to life, which he has received only conditionally. There is a "point of no return" which Pharaoh crossed, which Amalek crossed, the 7 Nations and others crossed, where God determined that they die, as they were no longer redeemable and they would also corrupt others.

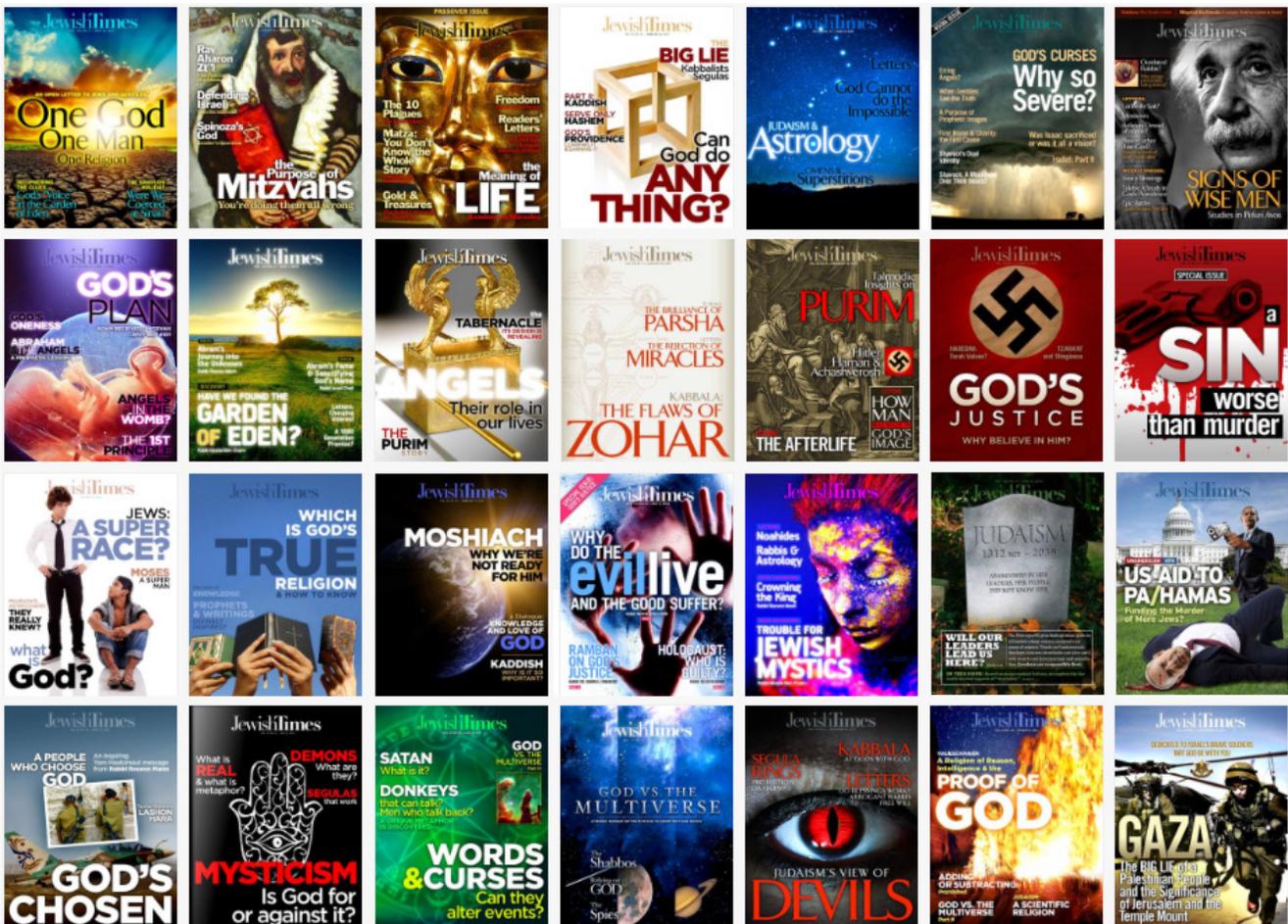
To argue on God is the height of arrogance and foolishness. It is also heresy and Maimonides says such a heretic loses his Olam Haba and we are commanded to destroy him (13 Principles). ■

"Bless Us from Heaven"

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: "Look from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our fathers" (Deut 26:15). One of Judaism's 13 principles is Reward and Punishment: God's blessings in response to our Torah adherence and His corrective measures for our disobedience. Nothing more is needed to earn reward than to live properly. Therefore, we wonder why in Deuteronomy 26:15, Moses tells the Jews that after bringing their first fruits and tithes that they should ask God to "look from heaven and bless the Jews and the land." Fulfilling the first fruit offerings and tithes alone should earn the Jews reward, without verbalizing this request for God's blessings. But there's a danger one faces after working the ground for a number of years. A person follows natural law to produce crops. This extended engagement in natural agricultural activities poses the threat of one forgetting about from where his sustenance truly emanates. One might be misled that the harvested bounty is a purely natural phenomenon. Therefore Moses tells the Jews that after this extended involvement in planting and reaping year after year that the Jews should not trust in the land, but in God who resides in heaven. This is why in this verse, "heaven" is contrasted to "land." Thus single verse contrasting heaven to earth, Moses made the Jews compare natural law with God's providence, their true source of sustenance. ■

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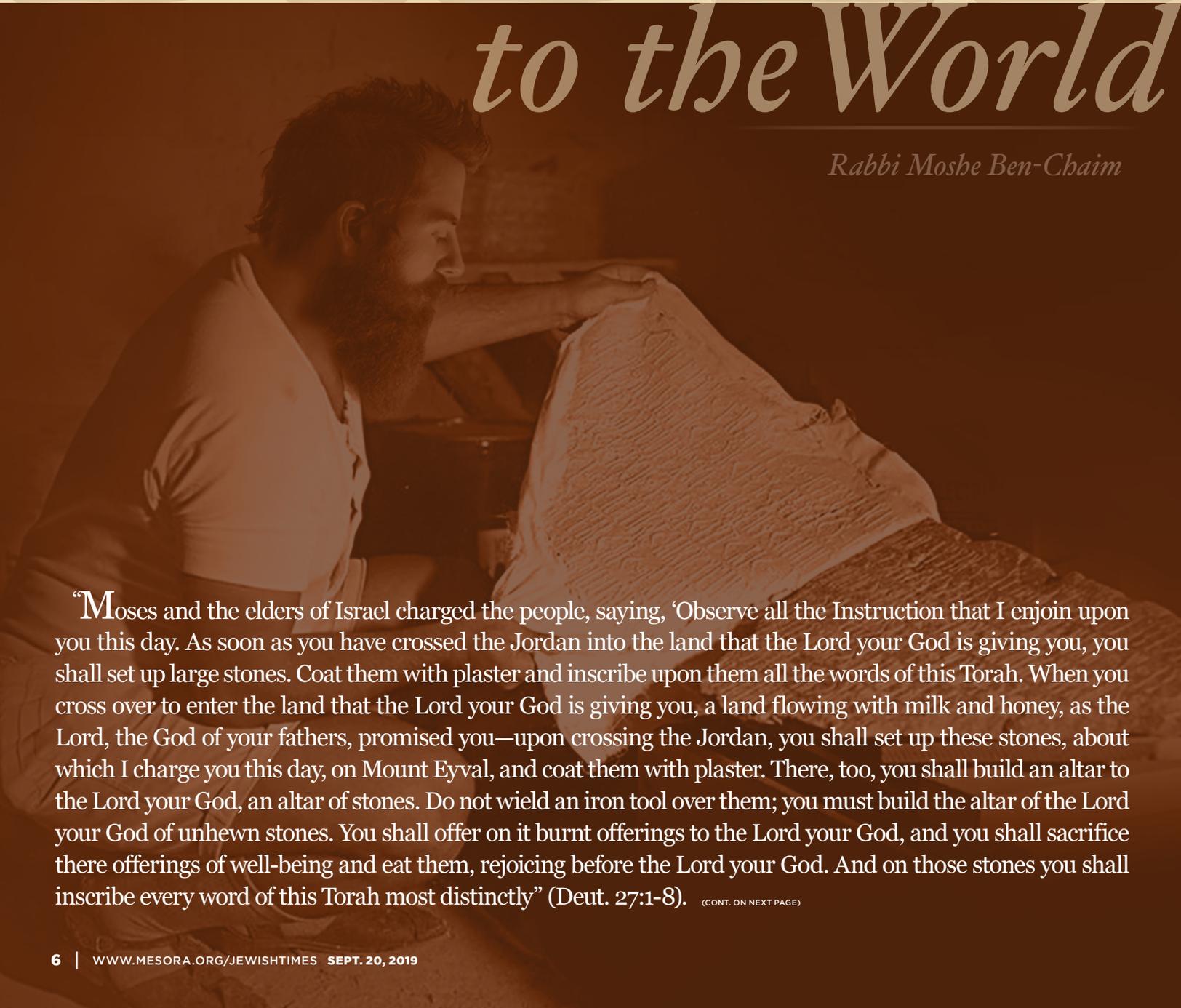
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How God First

TAUGHT

to the World

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



“Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people, saying, ‘Observe all the Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. As soon as you have crossed the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones. Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Torah. When you cross over to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you—upon crossing the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I charge you this day, on Mount Eyval, and coat them with plaster. There, too, you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. Do not wield an iron tool over them; you must build the altar of the Lord your God of unhewn stones. You shall offer on it burnt offerings to the Lord your God, and you shall sacrifice there offerings of well-being and eat them, rejoicing before the Lord your God. And on those stones you shall inscribe every word of this Torah most distinctly” (Deut. 27:1-8). (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



Moses' 12 Stones: 3280 years ago



Gutenberg Press:
580 years ago

Rashi comments that “inscribe every word of this Torah most distinctly” refers to writing the Torah in 70 languages. Clearly, Torah is intended for all peoples.

In his commentary on this Talmudic portion (Sotah 35b), Meharsha first identifies three fundamentals of Judaism: 1) the existence of the Creator, 2) the divine origin of Torah, and 3) reward and punishment. It is quite interesting. He proceeds to explain how Moses' command to inscribe the Torah on these 12 stones conveys Torah's divine origin, as Moses received the Torah from God. In Joshua's time, the miracle of the Jordan River ceasing to flow in front of the Ark (when they planted a second set of 12 Stones in the Jordan [Joshua 4:9]) demonstrates God as the creator Who can suspend natural law (he stopped the Jordan's current) since He created it. And the blessings and curses that were vocalized upon Mount Gerizzim and Mount Eyval at that moment embody the concept of Reward and Punishment. It is apparent that upon entrance to Israel—the fulfillment of the ancient patriarchal treaty—Moses saw it vital that Judaism's fundamentals be reiterated. This alone is a vital lesson, that the Jew

reflects a 1) Creator, 2) Who guides man through Torah and 3) rewards and punishes.

But the Talmud also discusses another consideration regarding these 12 stones. Moses told the Jews to inscribe Torah on the stones and then to plaster the stones. This plaster was pressed into the stones and took the form of the inscribed Torah text. Once dry, it was peeled and distributed amongst the gentile nations to study God's words.

The talmud says God gave the gentiles of that era additional knowledge so they can copy the text from the stones and study the Torah:

Rabbi Yehuda said, “The Holy One, Blessed be He, granted them (the gentiles) an extra degree of understanding, and they sent their scribes [noteirin], and they peeled off the plaster and copied it down. And on account of this matter their decree was sealed to be sent to the pit of destruction, as once the Torah was in their possession they should have studied it, and they did not study” (Sotah 35b).

Apparently these plaster molds of Torah text were inked and printed on parchment to

produce copies. Moses' stones predated the Gutenberg press by 2700 years. The Talmud says that due to the Torah knowledge that was thereby distributed to the gentile nations, this sealed their fate, for they had God's prohibitions in their hands, despite which, they disobeyed Him. But God's and Moses' objective was to offer a chance of salvation to the other neighboring nations—not those who were part of the Seven Nations who were too corrupt to save. God and Moses sought to benefit all peoples that they should learn God's will for man. They offered man copies of Torah through this printing device.

“Most distinctly” (be'air haytave) means that God and Moses gave the gentiles the opportunity to repent as the Torah engraved into the stones was written in their languages. In specific, Deuteronomy 20:18 says, “In order that you should not learn to do like all the abominations which they perform for their gods, and you will thereby sin to your God.” When the neighboring nations would lift relief molds from these stones and bring them back to their peoples, and they would arrive at this verse, they would understand that God condemns their ways and that they should repent. As they did not repent, they sealed their fate and earned God's punishment. ■

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PARSHA

an Endangered People

Rabbi Reuven Mann



This week's parsha, Ki Tavo, contains the "Blessings and Curses" that constitute the terms of the Covenant that the Jews voluntarily entered into at Sinai. Practically speaking, this means that our observance or violation of Torah has consequences. Some of these are built into the system and come about naturally.

By and large, the lifestyle of mitzvot is one of personal modesty, discipline, and learning. Not to mention a love of peace and benevolent treatment of others. One who adheres to the directives and spirit of the commandments will, as a direct result, enjoy a life of contentment and pleasantness.

However, the Torah promises that in addition to this, there are blessings and curses that will come to us as a result of a special divine providence. G-d will shower us with great advantages if we are faithful to His teachings. All the benefits of health, wealth, and security will come our way in great abundance.

Conversely, our parsha reminds us that that there is another side to this coin. If we abandon the Covenant and discard the mitzvot, we will be subject to severe travails. These will not be minor annoyances, but can entail the most serious and unimaginable forms of human suffering.

The parsha goes to great lengths to describe the Imprecations in extensive detail. We will suffer from diseases, impoverishment, and humiliating defeats at the hands of our merciless enemies. The worst catastrophe of all will be exile from the land that Hashem gave us and dispersion of the now-stateless Jews to the ends of the earth.

The final portion of the Tochecha (Curses) describes an unnamed calamity that keeps getting worse and worse and ever more unbearable. Finally, we reach the conclusion of this lengthy peroration, which declares that we will "seek to sell ourselves as slaves but there will be no buyers." But in what sense is this the most awful situation that can befall someone? And why are there no purchasers for the would-be slaves?

The Ramban asserts that this actually transpired to the Jews living in Egypt after the Roman conquest. I suggest that this phenomenon was not a one-time thing and occurred a second time, in a more horrible context, in Jewish history.

The last few verses of the Curses seem like an uncanny foreshadowing of the Holocaust. They depict the sense of dread and anxiety that engulfed the Jews of Europe as the Nazis relentlessly assaulted them with ever-increasing cruelty.

"And among those nations you will not be tranquil, there will be no rest for the sole of your foot; there Hashem will give you a trembling heart, longing eyes, and suffering of soul. Your life will hang in the balance, and you will be frightened night and day, and you will not be sure of your life. In the morning you will say, 'Who can give back last night!' And in the evening you will say, 'Who can give back this morning!'—for the fright of your heart that you will feel and the sight of your eyes that you will behold.

Hashem will return you to Egypt in boats on the way of which I said to you 'You shall never again see it!' And there you will offer yourselves for sale as slaves and maidservants to your enemies, but there will be no buyer!"

In my opinion, this is a poignant description of the horror that befell the Jews during the Shoah. Germany is here compared to Egypt, metaphorically, because both countries, at first, welcomed the Jews who were loyal productive citizens, but subsequently turned against them, accusing them

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

of being a fifth column and a lethal enemy of the state. After initial flirtation with genocide (the decree to cast all newborn Jewish males into the "River"), the Egyptians brutally enslaved the Hebrews.

The Nazis also enslaved the Jews, attempting to squeeze out of them their very last bit of labor. But that was just a temporary measure. The ultimate goal was the annihilation of an entire race, a program they kept hidden from their victims until the bitter end. Many Jews unknowingly believed that, if they could provide useful work for the Nazis, they would be spared from death.

They therefore eagerly offered themselves as slaves to their torturers, but "there were no buyers." Why? Because, as Rashi tersely puts it, "they will decree upon you murder and destruction." The Torah thus forecast the greatest tragedy in Jewish history.

There are many lessons we can derive from considering the Rebuke. One of them is that Jewish existence is very precarious, for we are an endangered people. The hatred of Jews is embedded into the scheme of things and has manifested itself at all times and places. There are many reasons for this. Prominent among them is the fact that G-d selected us from all the nations and distinguished us with His Torah.

The resentment against G-d for the "unfathomable" choice of the Jews finds expression in relentless persecution of His people and holding them responsible for all the ills of humanity. The Jews are therefore vulnerable and at constant risk for annihila-

tion.

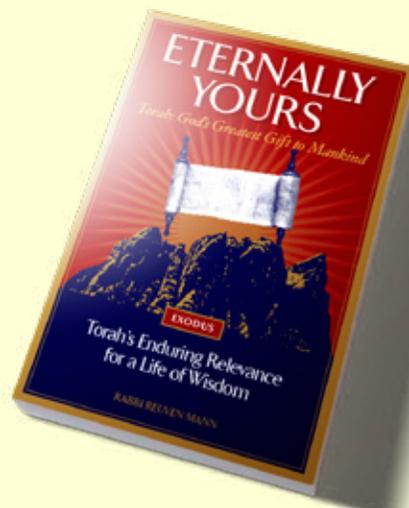
The Tochecha spells this out in stark detail. It describes what awaits the Jews if the antisemites are allowed to have their way. The Torah asserts that the survival of the Jews is only possible because of the special protection granted by Hashem. What would happen if G-d would withdraw from the situation? That terrible outcome is depicted in the disquieting verses of the Rebuke.

This teaching is spelled out very clearly in the section of the Haggadah called V'hee she'amdah, which states, "for not only one has stood up against us to destroy us; rather in each and every generation they stand up against us to destroy us. And the Holy One, Blessed is He, saves us from their hands."

The Tochecha is the source of this paragraph, for it elucidates the consequences that will accrue to the Jews if they sever their ties with their Protector. For without Him, there will be nothing to restrain their enemies who lie in wait.

The message of the Rebuke is that there is nothing in the natural order, not even a powerful Israeli state fully armed with nuclear weapons, or in alliance with the world's mightiest superpower, that can guarantee a tranquil existence for the Jewish people. That can only be obtained by close association with the Creator of the Universe, Who desires us to keep His Torah and thrive. May we merit to achieve this.

Shabbat shalom. ■



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