

# JewishTimes

VOL. XVIII NO. 12 — FEB. 28, 2020

## WHERE DOES

**Singing  
Embryos?**

**Everything  
Happens  
for a  
Reason?**

**Gender  
Equality**

## Reincarnation

## EXIST?



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*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

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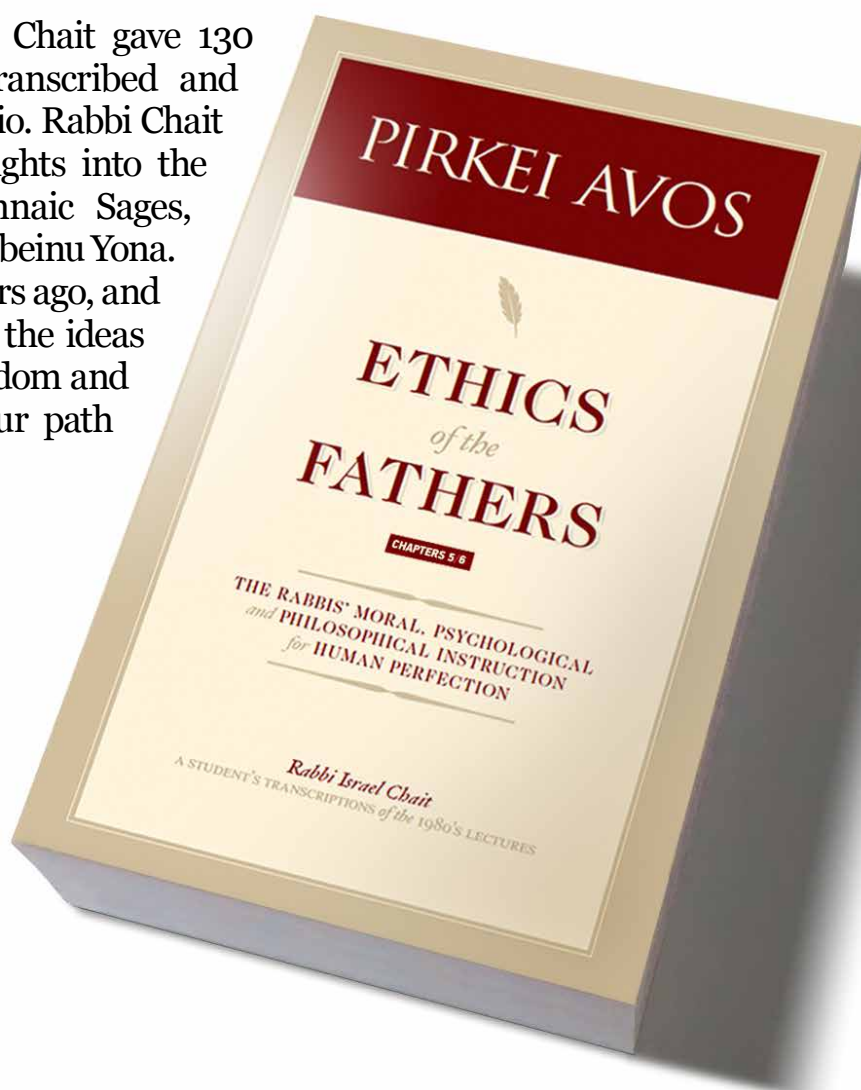
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# JewishTimes

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## LETTERS

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

## Reincarnation

**Reader:** Hi Rabbi, Some people believe in the strange idea of the transmigration of souls, the passing of a person's soul into a newly born body after death. Some use it to explain why righteous people suffer "because of their sins" and for no other reason. That is to say, that the righteous are punished due to the sins in a prior life. Conversely, the wicked may prosper because of righteous deeds they performed in their prior life. Furthermore, they say that happiness and sorrow is an everyday phenomenon. They claim that it would be an injustice for a soul to suffer for no reason at all and one to enjoy happiness without the practice of virtue. Do you think any of this makes any sense? And if not due to sins, what is a better explanation for why good people suffer? Thank you, Jeremy

**Rabbi:** Although resuscitation is found in Torah, reincarnation is not. It is also something that cannot be witnessed, and therefore, without proof.

Throughout Torah, God says He punishes and rewards for what we do here, not for what someone else did 300 years ago. So this theory is against God.

Regarding good people suffering, Rashi attributes Jacob's loss of Joseph for the same number of years that Jacob failed to honor his parents; Rashi ties his suffering to some just cause. And the tzaddikim who were killed in the first Temple destruction failed to rebuke the people's sins. They too had a flaw. Maimonides writes:

*"When we see that some men escape plagues and mishaps, whilst others perish by them" ... "it must be attributed to their different degrees of perfection, some approaching God, whilst others moving away from Him. Those who approach Him are best protected, and "He will keep the feet of his saints," but those who keep far away from Him are left exposed to what may befall them; there is nothing that*

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could protect them from what might happen; they are like those who walk in darkness, and are certain to stumble. The protection of the pious by Providence is also expressed in the following passages: "He keeps all his bones," etc. (Ps. xxxiv. 21); "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous" (ibid. ver. 16); "He shall call upon me and I shall answer him" (ibid. xci. 15). (Guide, book III, chap. xviii).

Maimonides also writes, "...he must not assume that a person is innocent and perfect and does not deserve what has befallen him" (Ibid. chap xxiv). ■

## Irrational Commands

**Reader:** In this essay [mesora.org/zohar.html](http://mesora.org/zohar.html) it sounds like the mitzvot are subject to human rationale. Indeed, you write in other articles that every mitzvah is rational, even if we do not understand it ourselves. But, this passage your reference seems to say that seemingly irrational mitzvot can be discarded. Ibn Ezra taught that even a command of the Torah is not followed if it is irrational. If in the written Torah we abandon that which is irrational, so much more so in other areas. Do you mean to say that if one cannot find a good rationale for a commandment (i.e. that he deems it irrational) that he is not obligated to keep it? Is it feasible that one could reject a commandment in the Torah, despite knowing its Divine Authorship? What is the source in the Ibn Ezra, and did the statement cause any controversy?

**Rabbi:** This Ibn Ezra is on the Ten Commands in Yisro. He means that if we cannot understand a mitzvah's performance, there is no action that registers on our minds, and therefore there is nothing we can perform. He does not mean to discard a mitzvah like shatnez, the performance of which is understood, although we may not understand its purpose. But as he cites, the mitzvah of "circumcising the foreskin of your hearts" (Deut. 10:16) cannot mean to literally tear our hearts from our bodies and cut them. If there were no Oral Law explanation that this means to subdue one's emotions (hearts), we could not perform the mitzvah, as we would not know what the command is. But the verse's latter half sheds light: "Cut away, therefore, the foreskin of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more." The command means not to be stiff-necked or stubborn: to subdue one's emotions. ■

## Racial/Gender Bias

**Reader:** I am very concerned with the blessing Jewish men recite, "Blessed are you God, for not being created as a gentile, a slave and a woman." I was informed that these blessings were formulated by the Sanhedrin. I noticed that most blessings in the morning prayer are stated in positive terms, like blessing God for providing for one's needs, giving man sight, clothing him, erecting the hunched, spreading out land, etc., except for the above blessings which in the negative: blessing

God for "not" making one a gentile, woman or slave. Why didn't the Rabbis formulate it in more positive terms, like "Blessed are you God for giving me the opportunity to be in your covenant and to take on the Torah"?

**Rabbi:** The gentile, woman and slave too must follow Torah. So blessing God for "Torah obligations" misses the mark. When blessing God for not being created a gentile, woman or slave, the Rabbis intended man to be thankful for having a greater "quantity" of commands, not just having the "quality" Torah obligation. We first praise God for the greatest goodness we received, that being not created a gentile, who has the least amount of commands. We progress to a slave who has more commands than a gentile, and then to a woman who has even more, but not as many as a man (Rabbi Israel Chait).

Although only God knows why He created one person a gentile and another person a Jew, be mindful that being created a gentile, woman or slave in no way precludes these individuals from attaining the same perfection as the Jewish male. We each possess free will, the ability to discern Torah as the best life, and follow it fully. One born a Jew can live evilly, and one born a gentile can study Torah, convert and surpass the born Jew.

**Reader:** I highlighted these queries in a counter-missionary blog. I also asked the following questions:

a. Is the formulation of this prayer consistent with Gen. 1:27, that all man (and woman) are created in His image?

b. I learnt that Hillel, a Jewish sage taught the essence of the Torah to a Gentile: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others, the rest is commentary, go and learn." I asked, "Is the formulation of the blessing by the Sanhedrin consistent with Hillel's teachings? Why say one thing and do another thing?"

The response I got is this:

*"These blessings are formulated in the spirit of humility and do not denigrate the non Jews. Reciting these prayers daily does not affect how Jews (Jewish men) see non Jews and women. The Rabbis probably thought that there is very little likelihood that a non Jew will come across these blessings. In addition, these blessings were formulated at a time when non Jews were probably more pagan than today. Based on this, the non Jew should not be concerned."*

However I am not satisfied with this explanation. In my opinion these blessings have the potential to marginalize large sections of humanity. I tried to explain how this is so from a human perspective.

**Rabbi:** The prayers do not denigrate, and do not conflict with Gen. 1:27 "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Man and woman—gentile or Jew—possess the same soul ("God's image"). This verse refers to the human "design." But the prayers you questions refer to "obligations." That a woman and gentile possess fewer obligations is no reflection on the equal potential of literally ever human being: gentile,

Jew, male or female. Gentile and Jew equally descend from Adam and Eve, mentioned in this verse. Thus, we are all equal.

The blessings you question intend to imbue man with appreciation for how God created him. Similarly, we don't praise God only for how we are created, but for events as well. If we escape a major mishap, or death, we are obligated to praise God. The answers your received above, "little likelihood that a non Jew will come across these blessings, and it was a time when non Jews were more pagan" are mere conjecture and fail to address the wise formulations of the blessings, as Rabbi Chait shared, and I urge all readers to study his very thorough and insightful essay: [Mesora.org/GenderEquality.html](http://Mesora.org/GenderEquality.html)

**Reader:** In addition, the people I was conversing with in the blog did not answer my question on Genesis 1:27 and Hillel's teaching.

**Rabbi:** A gentile requested of Hillel, "Teach me the Torah as I stand on one leg." Hillel said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others, the rest is commentary, go and learn" (Sabbath 31a).

I don't see how Hillel's response relates to the blessing which thanks God for not creating one a gentile. The gentile wished to know the primary fundamental of Torah, expressed as "Sum-up Torah's message as I stand on one leg for a brief moment" (Ibid., Meharsha). Hillel meant that much of Torah commands man to overcome his egocentricity living for the self first, and instead, treat others as equals, just as Abraham lived. Overcoming self-importance is a primary theme in Torah. This was Hillel's answer. As far as I see, the blessing of not being created a gentile is unrelated to Hillel's lesson: Hillel addresses a summary of Torah, while the blessing thanks God for how an individual was created.

That talmudic section shares numerous cases where Hillel patiently answered the gentile's questions, and then convert them. Hillel viewed gentiles as equals, fit to follow the same Torah Hillel followed.

**Reader:** I then stated that I doubted the credibility of the Jewish people as God's witnesses, because the Rabbis did not consider non Jewish sensibilities and Torah when formulating these blessings.

**Rabbi:** I believe I resolved this concern: this answer is conjecture.

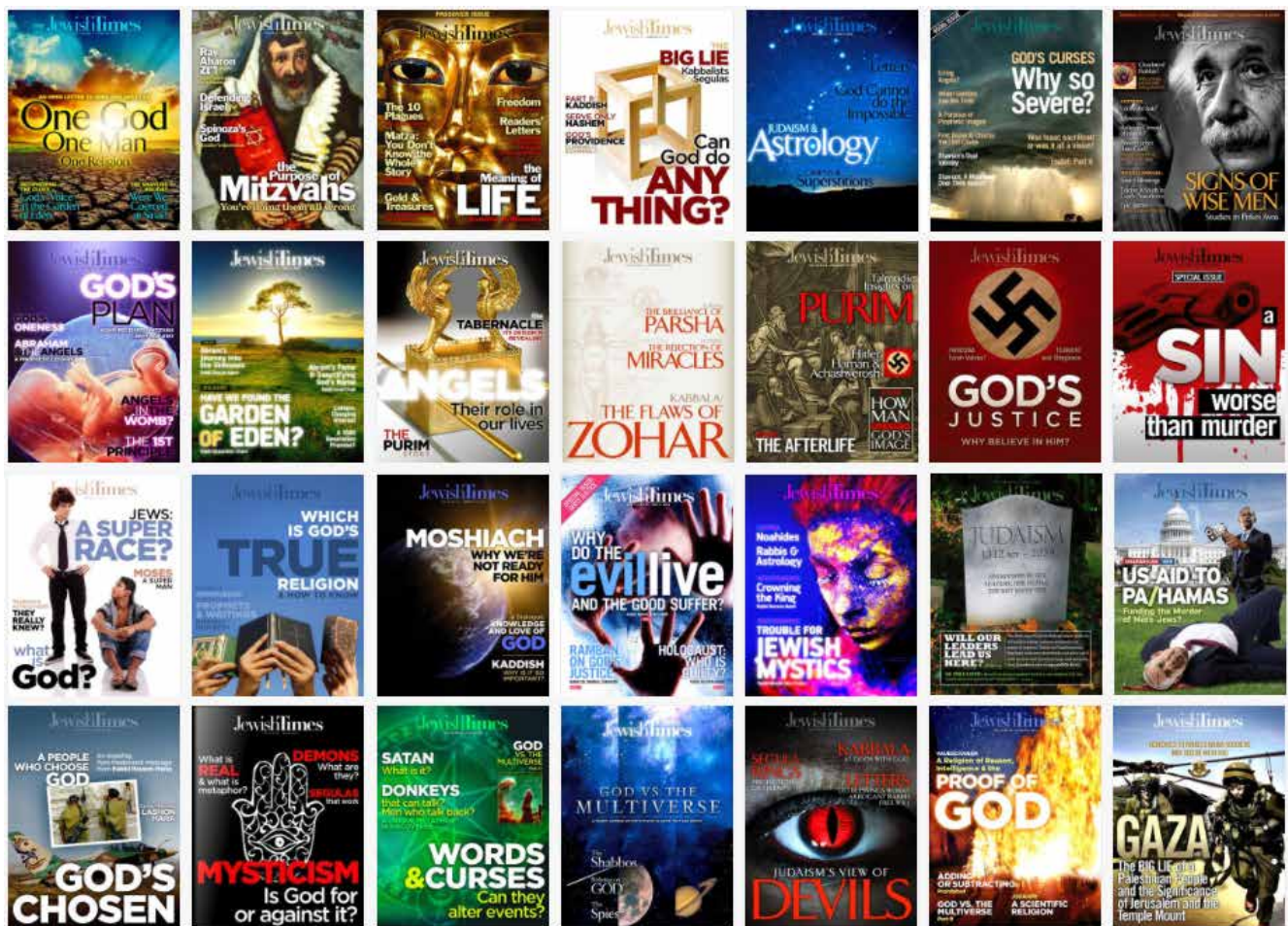
**Reader:** I then was accused for judging Judaism harshly and for employing double standards when it comes to Judaism. I was accused of having anti-semitic attitudes. In my defense, I can only say that I am using the same standards to assess Judaism as how I did in assessing Islam. I merely compared the Scripture of Judaism to its practice (Gen. 1:27 versus the blessings) and found Scripture is not the same as practice.

**Rabbi:** I believe I resolved this concern too, and you are fully justified to inquire, just as the gentile in Hillel's cases inquired. I always say, "There is only one bad question: it is the question one doesn't ask." But as long as one genuinely searches for truth, the teacher should be as patient and devoted as was Hillel, and seek to answer any person, even many times and on many questions. ■



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# WHERE DOES EXIST?

## Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

*Then Moses and Aaron, Nadav, Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not send His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld Elokim (God of justice, punishment) and they ate and drank” (Exod. 24:9-11).*

Rashi comments:

*They gazed intently and failing in this, they peeped in their attempt to catch a glimpse of the Supreme Being, and thereby made themselves liable to death. But it was only because God did not wish to disturb the joy caused by the Giving of the Torah, that He did not punish them instantly but postponed the punishment for Nadav and Avihu until the day when the Tabernacle was dedicated, when they were stricken with death, and for the elders until the event of which the text relates, (Num. 11:1) “And when the people complained...and the fire of the Lord burned among them and destroyed those who were the “nobles” of the camp (Midrash Tanchuma, Beha'alosecha 16).*

Rashi accuses Nadav, Avihu and the elders [Moses and Aaron did not sin] of attributing physicality to God; they thought there was something to see in connection with God. But God's intent in commanding Mt. Sinai be roped-off was to avoid this: “*You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, ‘Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death’*” (Exod. 19:12).

Torah teaches that God is unrelated to the physical:

*The Holy One, blessed be He, is the ‘place’ of the universe, but His universe is not His place [Tanchuma, Genesis Rabbah 68:8] (Rashi Exod. 33:21).*

God being the “place” of the universe means that without God, the universe can't exist, just like without location/place, nothing can exist. If there

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were no place (space) it would be impossible for anything physical to exist. The quote continues, “His universe is not His place” emphasizing that once God created the universe, He does not occupy any space within it. This is sensible, as God existed prior to the universe. The universe’s existence has no affect on God’s nature, which went unchanged before and after creation. As He existed unrelated to a physical universe before creation, He remains unchanged, not existing in any physical manner. Maimonides teaches that belief in a physical God, even if one thinks God occupies space, forfeits one’s afterlife. That is most severe.

*To whom, then, can you liken God, what form compares to Him? (Isaiah 40:18).*

*“To whom, then, can you liken Me, to whom can I be compared?” —says the Holy One (Isaiah 40:25).*

Isaiah proclaimed that God is unlike anything else. This means He is not physical, and cannot occupy place or space.

It is impossible for a person to suggest how the physical world was created. This is because man is only aware of the physical universe and suggesting what existed prior to the physical world is pure imagination, and is as impossible as suggesting what God is. By definition, man would be in error to apply these physical laws to a time which preceded the physical. Maimonides explains this (Guide, book II, chap. xvii). One must restrain his infantile need to make all agreeable to his emotions, forcing all phenomena into familiar physical space, as the Jews sinned when creating the Gold Calf to replace the “man” Moses (Exod. 32:1). Instead, man must claim ignorance about how God created the universe from nothing. Certainly, suggesting the universe was made from “part of God” is baseless and heretical.

God existed prior to the universe. The creation of the universe is the creation of something other than God. The Rabbis are united in their position that God’s creation of the universe was a creation from nothingness and not the creation pantheists suggest, that God molded himself into the universe and He now permeates all matter. But many people cannot tolerate the concept of creation ex-nihilo (from nothingness) and therefore imagine that God took a piece of Himself to create the universe. They feel, as God was all that existed, when He made the universe, it had to be made “from His



material.” This is a sinful projection of one’s limited physical orientation. Such a person assumes that all operated at creation, just as the universe operates now. As now, any creation is mere manipulation of existing substance, they feel God’s creation of the universe too was God manipulating Himself into all the galaxies, and that He is now part of every corner of the universe. Such notions emanate from an infantile imagination, they are baseless, and they are not found anywhere in the Prophets. Again, Maimonides says such notions forfeit one’s afterlife.

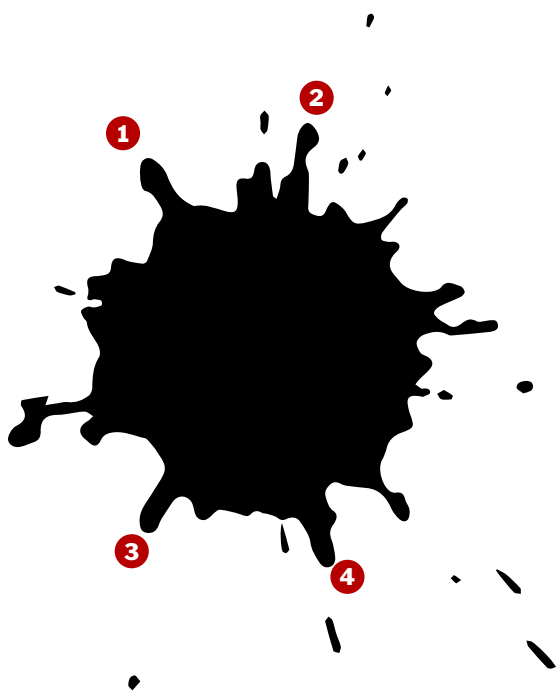
Nadav Avihu and the elders sinned. They were overtaken by God’s imminent revelation at Sinai. They sinfully looked for some “appearance” of God, but saw only the sky, which they projected was now special: “pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.” As they saw nothing but sky, they assumed God was “above” the sky: “under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.” If under God’s feet was sky, God sat above the sky. This verse depicts the sin. The next verse depicts the accusation: “Yet He did not send His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld Elokim (God of justice, punishment) and they ate and drank.” God “not sending forth His hand” means He didn’t smite the sinners, as Rashi states, but they were worthy of smiting. Also, God’s name is changed in this verse from “God of Israel” to “Elokim” denoting justice. This verse indicates that justice was warranted for their attempt to see something in relationship to God. “Eating and drinking” is also mentioned, as it is mentioned when the Jews sinned with the Gold Calf: “Early next day,

the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance” (Exod. 32:6). This teaches that once a person caves to one emotional desire, he seeks satisfaction for all his other desires (Rabbi Israel Chait). Thus, once Nadav Avihu and the elders sinned in attributing physicality to God (He could be seen), their other emotions of appetite were awakened. “The Lord struck at the men of Beit Shemesh because they looked into the Ark of the Lord; He struck down 57,000 men” (I Samuel 6:19). Here is a parallel sin, where man attempted to “see” God. In both cases, man believed God to partake of some physicality. Such a belief forfeits one’s life, for all he believes is false. His life has no purpose. We also notice God refers to Nadav, Avihu and the elders as “nobles,” thereby teaching that no one is exempt from anthropomorphizing God; even “nobles” can succumb to the same emotions lesser people have. The only guard against sin is knowledge.

Finally, Rashi says God punished Nadav and Avihu when they offered the strange fire, thereby linking their anthropomorphism with innovating their own fire sacrifice. Both sins emanated from the same source: projecting one’s emotional beliefs onto his relationship to God. The elders too were punished when they tested (Sforno) to see if God was among them—“murmuring in God’s ears”—thereby suggesting God interacts with time and space like a physical entity. Rashi means that the very sin of looking for God and then imagining He exists “above” the heavens, is linked to later sins sharing a common sinful expression. ■

# “Everything happens for a reason?”

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



Although there is a definite cause for every ink blot's shape (the speed the ink fell, paper coarseness and absorption, ink density) we do not say there is a "meaning" behind why this blot has 4 long legs while others have 5.

**M**any people subscribe to the notion “Everything happens for a reason; chance doesn’t exist.” However, this is rejected by Rambam in his Guide, and Sforno too says this at the end of parshas Tazria. They explain that God’s involvement in man’s life is proportional to his perfection. Great people like the Patriarchs and Matriarchs earned God’s providence in all parts of their lives, while lesser people are left to chance, like animals (Guide, book III, chap. xviii). Maimonides based his opinion on a study of Torah and how God describes His relationship with various people. All matters of God’s acts are deep and we cannot speak without tremendous study. Although it’s comforting to believe that one’s life is purposeful in all its major events and inconsequential minor occurrences, this feeling is not the result of evidence, or even theory. It would appear this feeling stems from the ego, “How can things happen to me if they aren’t planned or important?” But does a person really feel each leaf falls from a tree at a set time, for a reason? That’s this frog was meant to eat that insect? That this scratch on my car is meaningful? Or, is it irrelevant that this leaf falls at 2:01 and not at 2:02 PM, but leaves falling in general is the plan. And perhaps I didn’t take much care when parking, and scratched the car myself?

I would add that suggesting there is nothing called chance removes one’s responsibility: he will view all failures as divinely determined, when in fact—as Rambam says—most evils in life are self-inflicted. A person gets ill by eating poorly, not because God determined this. People lose jobs because they fail to meet requirements, and relationships end due to selfish emotions. To know what is real, it must be perceived by the senses, proved with the mind, or found in Torah (Maimonides). But to follow imagined beliefs as those we discuss here, one lives in fantasy, and reality will eventually prove him wrong and halt his plans. If one enters into any relationship because he feels “I met that person for a reason,” and he does not research that person’s ethics, he unnecessarily subjects himself to possible great harm.

Torah is for man’s perfection, and a major element in perfection is abandoning psychological wishes rooted in ego, lusts, greed, superstition and more. So central to Judaism is the curbing of emotions, that Hillel told the gentile that the main concept of Judaism is to treat others as you wish to be treated (Sabbath 31a).

Believing “Everything happens for a reason” will lead a person to follow inconsequential phenomena, he will project importance where it is undeserved, while dismissing reality which God designed to teach man and lead him to happiness and success. ■





# “Singing embryos?”

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim**



A friend wished to learn the meaning of the metaphor, “Even embryos sang to God” after He drowned the Egyptians, their horses, riders and chariots in the Reed Sea (Brachos 50a).

The keys to deciphering the Rabbis’ riddles and metaphors are in their very words. Here, the unique elements are embryos and the Reed Sea miracle, where God triumphed over the Egyptian army. Embryos can’t sing, so we must explore what embryos represent. And there was no song after God smote Egypt with 10 plagues, so what existed at the Reed Sea and not elsewhere? We can also examine the very song for clues.

At the Reed Sea, God saved us from the most valiant and invincible power: Egypt’s army and her chariots. Rashi (Exod. 14:10) says the Jews saw Egypt’s “guardian officer” traveling from heaven to strengthen them. This metaphor means that the Jews viewed Egypt as invincible, as if empowered by heaven, the strongest force. At the sea, God conquered Egypt: the Jews’ feared and powerful authority. God now became the Jews’ hero. But the hero emotion—“ga-oh, ga-ah”—did not emerge through the plagues; there was no song at the conclusion of the 10 plagues.

So significant was God’s victorious decimation of Egypt’s horse, rider and chariot, that the Shira (Song of the Sea) both commences and closes with praise to God for conquering these. Miriam too in her song with the women isolates this feat as expressing God’s greatness. When something is mentioned 3 times, this must be central to this story. This is compounded by the numerous repetitions within the Shira of God’s triumph over the Egyptian army.

What is meant by the gemara in Brachos 50a that even the embryos sang the song at God’s victory at the Reed Sea? Embryos refer to future generations. Seeing the Egyptians’ horses, riders and chariots drowned, and done so with such power and in an unparalleled miraculous display, the Jews viewed God’s conquest as permanent, giving the Jewish nation a future vision of eternal freedom from Egypt for generations to come. Moses told the Jews, “...the Egyptians whom you see today, you will never see again” (Exod. 14:13). Embryos singing refers to those future generations, an endless blue-sky forecast of goodness which God secured for the Jews. During the plagues, God was not triumphant over the Egyptians, but demonstrated His control over the universe. But at the sea, God became the victor and the Jews defender. Victory over a powerful enemy evokes song, where as viewing great plagues is amazing, but does not impact the person the same manner. ■





PARSHA

# A Place for Hashem

Rabbi Reuven Mann

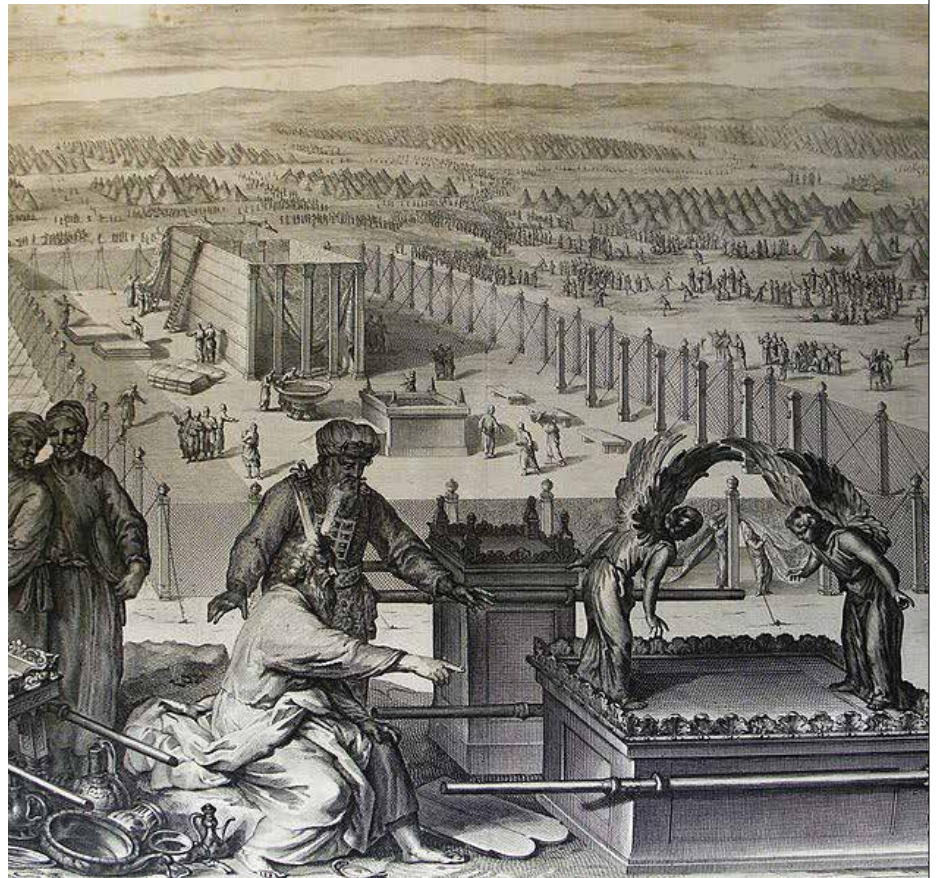
**T**his week's parsha, Terumah, describes the greatest national project in Jewish history, the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). This was the precursor to the Holy Temple, which would be built by King Solomon many years after the land was settled. The Mishkan was a "temporary" sanctuary where the people could offer sacrifices under the auspices of the Kohanim during their sojourn in the wilderness.

Initially, they were not supposed to stay in the wilderness for a long time. At first, they spent about a year encamped around Mount Sinai, preoccupied with studying and practicing the mitzvot and building the Tabernacle. Then they were to immediately embark on the march to Canaan, a matter of just days, and initiate its capture. Unfortunately, that became an ordeal of 40 years, due to the sin of the Spies.

Why was it so important to establish the Mishkan right after the great Revelation on Mount Sinai? They did not know then that they would be spending 40 years in the desert. Wouldn't it have been more reasonable to complete the conquest and division of the land and afterward erect the Mishkan?

Why should they have to take time to create the Sanctuary instead of moving immediately forward to the Promised Land? To answer this, we need to understand the true nature and purpose of the Mishkan.

The Ramban (Nachmanides) explained that



the Tabernacle was supposed to be the place where Hashem "dwelled" amongst the people of Israel. However, this statement cannot be taken literally. We must always remember that Hashem is not physical and therefore cannot be said to occupy space.

Rather, it means that the Creator manifests His presence in a certain locale, and it is as though He is actually there. Hashem manifests His presence by His providential care of the Jewish people. When G-d is with us, as He was on our trek through the wilderness, He fends off all dangers, and no harm can befall us. His care even extends to Moshe's poignant depiction in recounting

the Midbar experience: "Your garment did not wear out upon you, and your feet did not swell, these forty years."

All the major calamities in our history occurred only because we had distanced ourselves from Hashem. To describe this, Moshe said, "My anger will flare against them in that day, and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My face from them, and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter them. And he will say on that day, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?'"

Our "closeness" to Hashem depends on

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obeying His words and keeping His commandments. The degree of divine Providence we might enjoy is related to the level of moral perfection we attain.

G-d's presence also manifests itself in His ongoing communication with us. In that sense, the Tabernacle was a continuation of Mount Sinai as a place of Revelation. As the Ramban says, "The main purpose of the Tabernacle was to contain a place in which the Divine Glory rests, this being the Ark, just as He said, 'And there I will meet with thee, and I will speak with thee from above the Ark-cover.'"

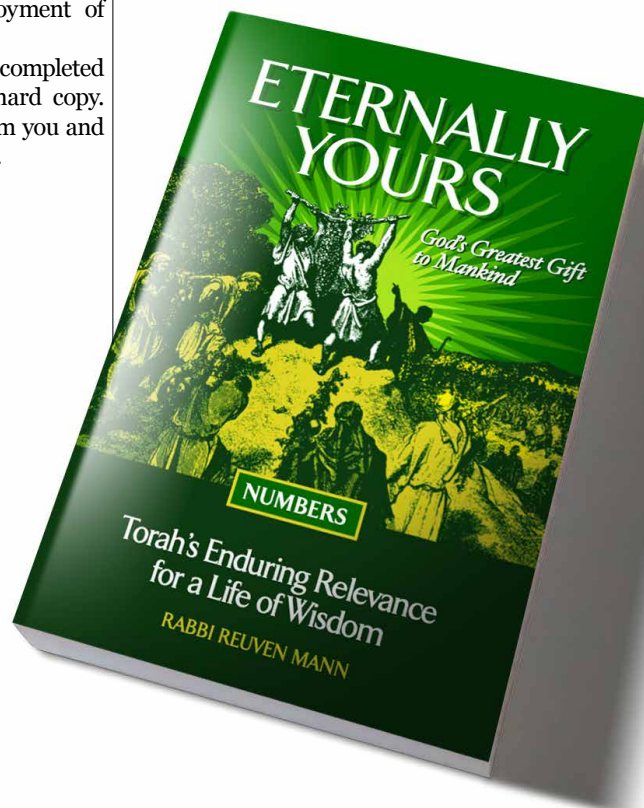
We can now understand why the Mishkan had to be constructed immediately after the great Revelation on Sinai. The Jewish people can be unique as a holy entity only when Hashem is "among" them. If we could imagine that (Heaven forbid) Hashem would separate from us completely, then we could no longer define ourselves as the Jewish people. The Mishkan accompanied the Jews on their journey in the wilderness. And the Ark, which was its most essential feature, was brought with them when they went into battle with their enemies. It was essential that the people traverse the wilderness and conquer the land as a "kingdom of Priests and a holy nation." That could only be done with the presence of the Mishkan, that is, with the presence of Hashem. Thus, it had to be built immediately, so the people could be transformed into the Jewish Nation. And that is why we long for the restoration of the Holy Temple. May it be rebuilt speedily and in our time.

Shabbat shalom. ■

P.S. Have you finished reading the essays in Eternally Yours: Genesis and are feeling a bit sad that you no longer have thought-provoking material to look forward to reading on Shabbat?

Good news, because Eternally Yours: Exodus is now available: [bit.ly/EY-Exodus](http://bit.ly/EY-Exodus). The articles offer a new and original perspective on the weekly parsha that will encourage you to think and enhance your appreciation of Torah and enjoyment of Shabbat.

Eternally Yours on Bamidbar is completed and we are proof reading the hard copy. When that is done we will inform you and you will be able to order the book.



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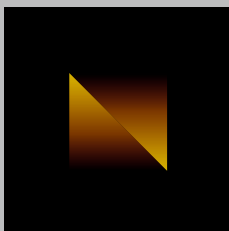
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