



JewishTimes

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LETTERS

BIBLE & ISRAEL

Eternal Gifts to the
Eternally Chosen

**PROOF THAT GOD
WROTE THE BIBLE**

**MIRACLES &
SELF RELIANCE**

**ABRAHAM &
THE ANGELS**

GOD'S JUSTICE



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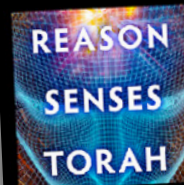
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EVIDENCE EXISTS for only one event of God revealing His religion to man. All other religions claim divine origin, yet provide no validation. This explains their requirement of "blind faith," which is absent in Judaism: a religion offering proof. 3332 years ago upon Mt. Sinai, God gave us His Bible: the only time God communicated a religion to man. Masses witnessed this, which is the only validation of any historical claim, and why the major religions accept the Bible. Mesora's mission is to share God's Biblical religion with all who seek it. As every human descends from that first couple; all humans are equals. Jews boasting "Jewish Superiority" and those who discriminate against any race violate the Bible and reason. Nearing a quarter century, Mesora helps others realize God's will for us all, sharing the beauty of Biblical wisdom. Search our 1000s of original essays, publications and audio, and write us with your questions. God determined the Jew's role is to share Torah's history, wisdom, laws and moral code with all mankind. As God created all mankind, He loves each person equally. As science has defined laws, God's will for man also has defined laws and principles, and they delight the soul. The greatest minds spent their lives studying God through Torah and science, as they found nothing that compared to its enjoyment. Let us humble ourselves before Moses, Kings David and Solomon, Maimonides, Aristotle, Newton and Einstein who taught that a life of wisdom is the most fulfilling life. We too can partake of this pleasurable existence.

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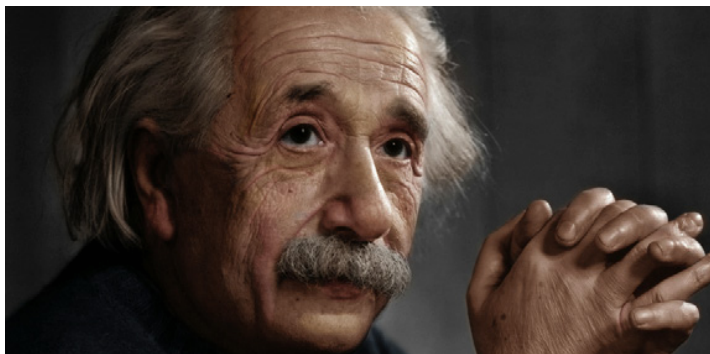
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**"A man should look for what is,
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ALBERT EINSTEIN

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Proof that God Wrote the Bible

FRIEND: What proof exists that God wrote the Bible?

RABBI: A history is validated only when masses witnessed the reported event; otherwise the story remains unproven, and is suspected of fabrication. As Rabbi Israel Chait explained, mass witnesses removes motive, as masses cannot share a common motive to lie; only a few people might conspire to spread a lie. This explains why we accept as true the historical accounts of Caesar, Alexander the Great, and other events even earlier which masses witnessed, although no one today saw them. Validation is through a single uncontested transmission—not writings—as a book cannot validate itself. (That would be circular and proves nothing.) When the world transmits a single account with mass witnesses, the event must be true. For if the event is a lie, we should also be in receipt of an alternative true historical record of that date, and those people at that place. Had Caesar not been emperor, it would be impossible for a liar back then to disseminate an alternative history. For the masses would deny what their eyes saw and would not replace their

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known history with the lie. And later too, a liar or an ignoramus could not convince the world that the singular history of Caesar's rule was false.

Had Revelation on Mt. Sinai 3333 years ago not occurred, Moses would have faced the same problem. Had God speaking from inside flames been a lie, and Moses attempted to convince some nation that they witnessed a voice emanating from inside fire, everyone would dismiss Moses as delusional. They would not replace their known history with Moses' fabrication. But Revelation at Sinai forms part of the singular Jewish history. The world too claims that 2 million Jews witnessed this miraculous event.

Suppose I tell you and our entire town that we were all together on the George Washington Bridge today at 12:00 noon in broad daylight, where 2000 vehicles stopped, and we all saw a spaceship and received a scroll from aliens. As this didn't occur, no one would abandon their senses and transmit this account as fact. Thus, no fabricated story is ever accepted or transmitted as fact. But it is possible that a "belief" can be transmitted on faith. But that account will not convince people that masses attended the fabricated story. This latter possibility describes many religions which were fabricated stories, with no claim of witnesses, but were accepted over time based on appeal or the threat of execution.

In his great work, Guide for the Perplexed (book I, chap. LXVI), Maimonides writes that tablets Moses received had text that was naturally formed and not through craftsmanship, like writing or carving. Maimonides bases this on the Torah's words, "And the writing was the writing of God" (Exod. 32:16). This means the Ten Commands were formed naturally inside the material of those two sapphire tablets. The writing was "inside" these translucent stones. The only way the writing appeared there, is by the Creator of the stone forming that writing. It is a proof that the communication Moses shared was identical to God's words. Moses accurately presented God's message to mankind.

Exodus 34:29-35 describes how, when Moses descended Mt. Sinai with the tablets of stone, that his face shined miraculously. This miracle was God's endorsement that all that Moses subsequently claimed as divine, were God's words. But had Moses lied and fabricated his own laws calling it Torah (Bible), God would not endorse him with a miracle.

The proof that Torah was written by God is that Revelation at Sinai 3333 years ago validated God's existence, as no biological being can exist inside fire, from which the Jews heard intelligence. The tablets validated that

Torah is from God. And Moses' face shining validated that Moses accurately presented God's Torah subsequent to Sinai. Thus, we know that Torah is God's words, that Torah commenced at this date, and that God gave it to the Jewish nation. The Jews are to share Torah with the world (Gen. 18:19, Deut. 4:6). ■

Bible, Jews and Israel: For Eternity

READER: In a recent discussion, I stated that Torah stands forever. The response I received was that the word "forever" in Hebrew is "olam" and means "to the horizon" or "to the vanishing point" and therefore does not mean forever, but only for the foreseeable future...until one "reaches the horizon" and further instruction is given. And *olam* comes from the root "*alam*" which means to conceal or veil from sight. Therefore the law was not forever.

I do not speak Hebrew; can you elucidate on this? Does Torah exist forever—*olam*—or just until it is changed?

RABBI: The verse "Hashem yimloch l' OLAM va'ed"; God will reign king forever" (Exod 15:18) cannot mean God is king "temporarily," God forbid. This shows that the translation you were given is wrong. "L'olam" means forever.

Regarding Torah's permanence, God knows the future, therefore a "new plan" to update or replace Torah is heretic. Other religions suggest this baseless notion as they cannot accept the Jews as God's eternally chosen nation; they wish to rise above the Jew to become God's favorite. But that doesn't resolve anything, as they must then in turn accept yet a third religions' jealousy of their own new lead, forcing them to step down based on their very own principle that God's plan can be revised. You realize, this position that, "plans can be revised" leads to an endless cycle of one religion replacing the other! No one ever remains as the "chosen one," in their view. But ask the other religions if once they are chosen, if they would step down, I would guess they would not, thereby exposing their contradiction. These religions succumb to sibling rivalry, instead of following a mature and honest acceptance of God's Bible, and reason.

Let's consider the following. God demonstrated His absolute knowledge of the future by designing creations that exist in time and rely on either food, air, water or conditions to sustain themselves. As God designed every-

thing, and therefore, knows their future needs, this proves beyond any doubt God's knowledge of the future. Furthermore, God created time itself. So He isn't bound by time: He has no future. His knowledge of our future is known by Him equally as He knows our present and past. To then say that "God needs to change His plan" and renew the Bible (Torah) with a new system, suggests God didn't see sufficiently far in to the future to forge a plan at the outset that could sustain itself. It means He is ignorant, and that He erred, which is the epitome of heresy. God's command not to alter the Bible (Deut. 13:1) means it was perfect from the outset. God knew that His Torah was made perfectly, with no need for any alteration throughout time, as He knows all generations. No new, unseen consideration was hidden from God. Torah never needs to change, as man never changes. So the religions that suggest God will change His chosen people or His Torah, speak nonsense.

The Jew too will eternally remain God's chosen people. God defines the members of His covenant as the seed of Isaac, not Ishmael:

"God said [to Abraham], 'Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come'" (Gen. 17:19).

"Ishmael shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you" (Gen. 17:20,21).

"For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you" (Gen. 21:12).

The selection of Isaac's seed does not exclude others from joining Israel through conversion and equally enjoying God's blessings. But Isaac's seed is with whom God sustains His eternal covenant. God was not ignorant of the future, as other religions maintain when they suggest God will replace the Jew with another. Again, such heretic claims malign God as unable to plan properly the first time around.

Israel too will remain the Jews' eternal land

"I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7,8). ■

God's Justice

RABBI BERNIE FOX



I. Considering the unfathomable
We have a very limited understanding of how God judges an individual, a community, or the world. We know righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. But we do not know how God assesses righteousness or wickedness. Neither do we know precisely how He rewards or punishes. The Torah and our Sages provide some insights and observations. However, we would be foolish to assume that we completely understand these passages. We are not provided with a clear formula that we can apply to understand the fates of individuals, nations, or the world.

We have many questions concerning God's judgments. For example, we are befuddled and disturbed by the suffering of the righteous or innocent and the apparent bliss and outward success of the blatantly wicked. Many Sages and learned scholars have suggested explanations. No explanation or combination of explanations can completely penetrate the barrier that separates us from the All-Knowing, and All-Wise. The depth of the mystery far exceeds the satisfaction provided by the

explanations. When we consider the comments of the Sages concerning God's judgment, we must concede that our understanding of these insights is superficial. If some of their comments seem simplistic or inconsistent with our observations, we must allow for our limited grasp of their meaning.

The discussion that follows is not intended to explain God's ways. Its objective is to consider comments of two great Sages and to glean from them an insight into the relationship between the individual and the group.

And God said, "The cry of Sedom and Amorah because it is great and their sin because it is very heavy" (Gen 18:20).

II. God judges communities and the world

God reveals to Abraham that he will judge Sedom and its surrounding communities. If the judgment confirms the wickedness of these communities, He will destroy them entirely.[1] Maimonides cites this passage in his Laws of Repentance:

A person whose sins are more numerous than his merits immediately dies in his wickedness... Also, a community whose sins are greater [than its merits] is immediately destroyed, as it says, "The cry of Sedom and Amorah because it is great." Also, the entire world, if their sins are greater [than their merits], they are immediately destroyed, as it says, "For great is the wickedness of humanity in the land" (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws if Teshuvah 3:2).

According to Maimonides, in the above passage, God reveals to Abraham that He has weighed the merits and sins of Sedom and its neighboring communities. Their sins exceeded their merits.[2]

Maimonides explains that his discussion of God's assessment of one's righteousness or wickedness should influence one's behavior. He cites and interprets a comment of the Talmud:[3]

Therefore, the entire year a person should see oneself as if one is half innocent and half guilty. Also, [one should regard] the entire world as half innocent and half guilty. [If] one commits a single sin, one tips oneself and tips the entire world toward guilt and causes its destruction. [If] one performs a single mitzvah, one tips oneself and tips the entire world toward innocence and causes its salvation and rescue (Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4).

Rabbaynu Nissim – Ran – interprets the comment of the Talmud[4] slightly differently:

The entire world may be evenly balanced – half [of the people] are innocent and half [of the people] are guilty[5]. And its actions are equally balanced. One performs a single commandment, it occurs that one's merits exceed [one's sins]; it occurs that one is an innocent individual; it occurs that through him the balance of the entire world is tipped to be [composed of] more innocent [than guilty] individuals (Rabbaynu Nissim ben Reuven, (Ran) Notes to Commentary of Rabbaynu Yitzchak Alfasi, Mesechet Rosh HaShanna 3a).

III. Judging a community – two views

Let us carefully compare the positions of Ran to Maimonides. Maimonides explains that God judges the community and the world based upon its collective actions. Here, some oversimplified imagery is helpful. It should not be understood literally. On one side of a scale, He places all the "merits" of the community.

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On the other side of the scale, He places all its sins. The judgment of the community is determined by the side of the scale that is heavier. If the merits outweigh the sins, the community is preserved. If the sins outweigh the merits, the community is destroyed.

Ran explains that the community's "members" [not merits] are collected and placed upon the scales. The innocent members are placed on one side of the scale and the guilty upon the other. If the combined innocent members outweigh the guilty members of the community, it is preserved. If the guilty members outweigh the innocent ones, then it is destroyed. Ran and Maimonides have different views of what God measures or assesses. According to Maimonides, God's judgment of the community is based upon its collective "actions." According to Ran, God tallies the innocent and guilty "individuals."

IV. The judgment of Sedom

These views can lead to very different outcomes. Let us consider the communities of Sedom. God performed His calculations and judged Sedom and its communities to be guilty. What did God discover when He judged these communities? According to Maimonides, He discovered that iniquity outweighed righteousness. This does not mean that these communities were destroyed because their guilty members outnumbered the innocent ones. The same guilty judgment could have emerged even if the innocent members outnumbered the guilty ones. Imagine a community in which the merits of the innocent only marginally exceed their sins. The sins of the guilty far exceed their merits. There may be more innocent than guilty individuals in this community. Nonetheless, the aggregated sins of the community exceed its merits. According to Maimonides, this community will be destroyed.[6]

According to Ran, Sedom and its communities were destroyed because the guilty members of these communities outnumbered the innocent members. It is conceivable that the combined merits exceeded the aggregated sins of the communities. If the sins of the guilty only marginally outweighed their merits but the

merits of the righteous far exceeded their sins, then the collected merits could outweigh the combined sins. Still, the communities would be destroyed.[7]

V. The individual and community

In short, according to Maimonides, a community is judged based upon the aggregated sins and merits of its members. According to Ran, God's judgment is based upon its individuals – the sums of its innocent members and guilty members. How can we understand this dispute? What does it reveal?

Before considering the meaning of this dispute, let us remind ourselves that the purpose of this discussion is not to uncover a principle that God uses in judging communities. The objective is to discover what the interpretations of two great Sages – Maimonides and Ran – reveal about their perspectives.

Ran explains that a community is judged based upon its individuals. What is the integrity, the righteousness, the virtue of the community's members? A functional community produces and sustains righteous members who have personal integrity, and live virtuous lives. A failed community does not produce and sustain such members. The sole purpose of the community is to advance the spiritual and ethical development of its members.

Maimonides views the community as an organic entity. Each of us is an individual, a member of a community, a nation, and worldwide humanity. Each of these is itself significant. The individual is judged by one's virtue. In the same manner, a community is judged by its virtue. In a worthy community, the aggregated merits of a community must exceed its sins.

VI. Creating a functional and worthy community

Both perspectives are important. Ran demands that we build and maintain communities that support and develop righteous individuals. We must heal the sick, care for the poor, and have compassion for the downtrodden. But we must also provide our children with Torah education, sustain and support Torah observance and

learning, and encourage observance and virtue. A functional community is one that advances the development of righteous individuals.

We must each strive to live a righteous life. According to Maimonides, we must also create a righteous community. What are the values of the community as a collective? For what does the community stand? How does the community implement these values? A worthy community must strive for and practice virtue. ■

Footnotes

[1] Unkelus explains that the people will be given a final opportunity to repent. If they repent, the communities will be spared. If they do not, they will be destroyed. It seems that the people were tested by the three visitors who came to Sedom and were taken by Lote into his home. The people surrounded the house and demanded that Lote hand over his guests. Their announced intention was to abuse the guests. No one in Sedom opposed this outrage. Lote refused to abandon his guests. The people of Sedom attempted to break into his home and take them. A wonder occurred and the mob was stricken with blindness. Still, the would-be abusers searched for the door.

[2] Maimonides points out that God considers more than the number of sins and merits. He also considers the significance of the specific sins and merits. A single sin may be more significant and be assigned more "weight" than numerous less significant merits. A single merit may be more "weighty" than numerous minor sins. (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:2)

[3] Mesechet Kidushin 40b.

[4] The actual text of the Talmud is as follows: Ribbi Elazar the son of Ribbi Shimon said: Because the world is judged based upon its majority and the individual is judged based on one's majority. One performs a single mitzvah, [let one be] overjoyed, for one has tipped one's balance and the balance of the entire world toward innocence. One commits a single sin, woe [to him or her], for one has tipped one's balance and the balance of the entire world toward guilt...

[5] In his comments Ran uses the terms צדיק and רשע. These terms are generally translated as righteous and wicked. However, Ran suggests that in this context these terms should be understood to mean innocent and guilty. (Ran, Rosh Hashana daf 2B in the Rif's dapim, divrei hamaschil "Tzadikim Gemurim")

[6] This does not mean that the guilty people of Sedom and its communities did not exceed the innocent people. It is clear from the Torah that there were virtually no innocent people in these communities. However, these communities were destroyed because their combined sins exceeded their merits and not because of the number of guilty exceeded the number of innocent members.

[7] Of course, this was not the case. There were virtually no innocent people in these communities. Also, the Torah and its commentaries explain that the few innocents – Lote and his family – were barely innocent.

Abraham and the Angels

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

One must revisit Torah portions many times to uncover God's numerous lessons. What catches our attention during our first few reads of a given area, obscures other points. However, if we follow the halacha of reading each weekly portion twice yearly, and we are fortunate, new questions arise leading to new discoveries. I will address this account of Abraham and the angels, following God's words that all prophets excluding Moses received prophecy only while unconscious.[1]

Three angels visit Abraham. We read five times how fast Abraham "ran" and "hurried" to prepare a meal for these guests, described as men. What is God's intent in, 1) giving a vision to Abraham that highlights Abraham's kindness to people, and 2) repeating the haste in which Abraham served them? 3) Since God ultimately discusses Sodom with Abraham, of what purpose is this vision of the three men visiting Abraham? The could have bypassed Abraham and traveled directly to Sodom.

Only one angel seems required for this vision, since he and no other angel talks (he shared news of Isaac's forthcoming birth). The other two angels were silent the entire visit and could have initially "arrived"[2] at Sodom. The Rabbis teach that the other two angels had the respective missions of destroying Sodom and saving Lote. Thus, there was no need for them to accompany the angel assigned with the mission of the birth announcement. What then was the purpose of the two other angels visiting Abraham?

One angel asked Abraham, "Where is Sarah your wife?" We would assume this was intended to call her to share the news. But this did not occur. As Abraham responded, "She is in the tent," the angel then announced to Abraham alone the news of Isaac. Why then did the angel inquire of Sarah's whereabouts? It appears inconsequential. The Torah then tells us that Sarah "in fact" heard, as she was behind the angels. She denied her ability to become pregnant at ninety years old. God then ridicules Sarah addressing Abraham, "Is anything impossible for God?" As Abraham was alone in communion with God, what purpose was served by God including Sarah's words in this created vision? Although this was Abraham's vision, God accurately depicts Sarah's true feelings, which no doubt, Abraham discussed with Sarah in his waking state subsequent to this prophecy. For she too would be instrumental in transmitting God's justice. Alternatively, Sarah might have very well participated in this prophecy, similar to when God gave a joint prophecy to Miriam, Aaron and Moses (Num. 12:4).

This is followed by the angels "gazing at Sodom," but not yet leaving.

Their departure is suddenly delayed, and interrupted by God's following consideration:

Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do? And Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God, performing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken. And God said [to Abraham], "The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, I know" (Gen. 18:17-21).

Following God's words, we read in the very next verse (ibid. 18:22) that the angels departed for Sodom. Again, the angels gazing towards Sodom should be immediately followed by their leaving. What is the meaning behind God's words above interrupting the angels' departure? And what is God's message here?

Abraham's Concern for Man

Why the emphasis of Abraham "running" and "hurrying" the meal preparations? Abraham was experiencing a vision, and to him, he was relating to men, not angels, as the verses state. Abraham had a keen sense of kindness, and wished to give honor to his fellow man. One can serve others, but if he runs to serve them, this expresses the height of honoring others, as we see regarding Rivka "running" to draw water for Eliezer's camels (Gen. 24:20). One feels more appreciated when another person runs to assist them, and does not merely walk. Abraham desired to make the three men feel most appreciated. Abraham prized human dignity. Typically, a leader seeks honor. But the perfected leader views all others as equals, and even forgoes personal rights and feelings to accommodate others. But why was this part of the vision God created? How is this related to Abraham learning God's justice? Men such as Abraham, who are genuinely concerned for his fellow, and who teach others God's ways of "charity and justice" (Gen. 18:19) will be the recipient of greater knowledge in this area. God therefore teaches Abraham not only His ways, but also, that man (Abraham) earns God's knowledge due to his acts of kindness to his fellow. Thus, Abraham sees himself showing kindness to the three men, and this is followed by God's dialogue on Sodom's justice. God says in other words, "Abraham, due to your kindness, justice and concern for mankind, I am revealing greater knowledge with you on how My true kindness and justice operate."

Angels

Angels are not omniscient; they are God's metaphysical agents to perform events on Earth. As King David said, "He makes His angels winds; His ministers [He makes as] blazing flames" (Psalms 104:4).

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Each angel controls a particular sphere within natural law, and nothing outside that law. As Rashi taught, "...one angel does not perform two missions" (Gen. 18:2). We also read, "And the angel of God that went before the Jewish camp traveled, and it went behind them; and the pillar of cloud that went before them traveled and stood behind them" (Exod. 14:19). There is no redundancy. This verse teaches a fundamental: there are two entities: 1) the metaphysical angel, and 2) the physical entity (cloud) over which God places the angel as a supervisor. God controls nature through an angel, charging the angel over a specific sphere of nature; here, the specific task of repositioning the cloud to protect the Jews from the approaching Egyptian army. Thus, angels themselves are not physical, but they control physical phenomena. This explains why this verse describes the angel traveling, and then again, the cloud traveling. We are taught that the angel controls the cloud. And angels only control the sphere of laws determined by God. Thus, the angel did not know where Sarah was and needed to ask, since this knowledge was outside its specific sphere of control. Yet, the angel somehow knew Sarah's name. This I believe further proves that this story was a vision. For if it were a literal event and these three were men and not angels, they could not know Sarah's name.

The angel did not intend to share the birth announcement with Sarah. It is my opinion that it was ascertaining that Sarah was not in earshot of this announcement. The angel's inquiry "Where is Sarah your wife?" is understood as ensuring she did not hear the birth announcement. Why? I believe this teaches another lesson about God's justice. For it was Abraham who taught monotheism and God's justice to his children and mankind (Gen. 18:18). Therefore, the news of Isaac's birth—the son who would continue Abraham's legacy—related primarily to Abraham, and not Sarah.

The Vision

This entire vision dealt with God's justice. Justice is not merely the destruction of evildoers. A primary aspect of God's justice is educating man about His ways. Therefore, the two other angels, although silent the entire time, came along with the announcing angel to convey a relationship between all three angels. Isaac's birth was vital to continue Abraham's teachings, and the destruction of Sodom and Lote's salvation comprise important lessons in God's justice, the very substance of Abraham's teachings. Thus, all three angels' missions related to Abraham, and therefore they were all part of this vision.

The Interruption: God's Dialogue with Abraham

God's will is to teach man. The angels were about to leave to Sodom, but not quite yet. First, God shares with Abraham a clue to greater knowledge of God's justice. This knowledge would have been "hidden" from mankind—"Hamichaseh ani may'Avraham?" (Gen. 18:17)—had God not suggested to Abraham that although exceedingly great in sin, Sodom might be spared if certain conditions were met. God knew there were not 10 righteous people, and therefore the angels proceeded to destroy Sodom, prior to Abraham's dialogue with God. But the message of the angels not departing to Sodom until God commenced a dialogue with Abraham indicates that the angel's mission of destruction played a great role in Abraham's knowledge of God's justice. So we can read the verses as follows: God is about to destroy Sodom (the angels gaze at Sodom) but God first shares knowledge of His justice before doing so. Once this dialogue ensues, the destruction can take place, and Abraham will attain greater knowledge of God's justice. Again, God's dialogue is inserted between the angels' gaze towards Sodom and their departure for Sodom, conveying a relationship between Sodom's destruction and Abraham learning God's justice.

Sarah

What purpose did Sarah serve in this vision? The Torah makes it clear that Sarah viewed natural law as absolute, "After I have aged, will I truly give birth?" (Gen. 18:14). Thus, God's response, "Is anything too wondrous for God?" (Gen. 18:14). The lesson to Abraham by God's inclusion of this scenario within the vision is this: knowledge of God's justice must include the idea that God's justice is absolute. Nothing—not even nature—overrides God's justice. This is expressed throughout Torah in the many miracles God performed to benefit righteous people. As God was teaching Abraham new insights into His justice, this lesson was of critical value.

Summary

God gives Abraham a vision intended to further educate him in His ways, and for him to teach his son Isaac and the world. But God only does so, since Abraham was perfected in his concern for man. Abraham is taught through the vision that this concern is what earned him new insights from God. The other two angels visiting Abraham and the interruption of the angels' departure by God's dialogue, teaches that man's knowledge of God's justice is a primary purpose in His

meting out of justice. Thus, the angels did not leave to destroy Sodom until Abraham was engaged in learning a new insight into God's justice in this destruction. Abraham also learns that God's justice is absolute, expressed in God's rebuke of Sarah. ■

[1] "If there will be prophets of God; in a vision to him I will make Myself known; in a dream I will speak to him. Not so is it with My servant Moses; in all My house he is trusted. Face to face I speak with him and in vision and not with riddles; and the form of God he beholds..." (Num. 12:6-8).

[2] I say, "arrived", but in no manner do I suggest that angels are an earthly phenomenon. Rather, as I elaborated within this essay, that the two other angels could have "addressed" God's will for Sodom without connection with the announcing angel. (Similarly, the angels of God addressed God's will that the pillar of cloud relocate behind the Jews. But angels are not on Earth; only the cloud is. See Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, book II, end of chapter 6.)

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Miracles and Self Reliance

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Vayera, contains the story of the miraculous birth of our second Patriarch, Yitzchak. Sarah was well past the age where she could have children. According to the laws of nature such a happening had to be ruled out. But that was not the whole story.

Judaism affirms the reality of miracles. But unlike most religions it takes the laws of nature very seriously. We are commanded to obey them and live within their framework. Indeed, the mitzvah of Maakeh incorporates this principle. It stipulates that one is obligated to build a rail around the roof of his abode if it is flat and people have access to it. The reason is to prevent someone from falling off of it.

By extension this commandment further stipulates that one must remove any dangerous object from his premises. He may not allow harmful substances or paraphernalia, unattended, in a place where they can do harm.

We see from this that one cannot be complacent or reliant on the protective embrace of Divine Providence. He must be proactive in confronting the challenges that nature places before us. This has nothing to do with our level of religiosity. Even the greatest Tzadikim among us may not ignore reality and rely on miracles.

This issue is a matter of great concern in the contemporary era of coronavirus. Unfortunately rates of infection have been the highest in very religious neighborhoods. These communities tended to be very reluctant to scrupulously adhere to the necessary guidelines especially when they openly conflicted with their religious responsibilities.

Thus they did not close down shuls or prevent attendance at weddings, funerals or chasidic gatherings such as "tisches" and the like. This in spite of the warnings about the serious harm that could emerge from this. Tragically the evidence seems clear that



many people got sick and died due to this abandonment of reason.

It is necessary to reiterate the teaching of Judaism that all commandments are cancelled (except idolatry, murder and forbidden sex) in the face of Pikuach Nefesh (danger of death). One may not engage in any behaviors proscribed by the medical experts even if this means praying at home or not attending significant religious and social events. It is sinful to act on the premise that since I am engaged in holy activities I need fear no harm.

This is not to deny the prominent place that miracle play in the outlook of Judaism. Our view is based on the doctrine of Yesh Ma'ayin which asserts that the world exists because Hashem created it from nothing. The Creator designed and established the laws of nature according to His Will and he may alter them whenever that suits His purposes.

It must be remembered that the power to produce miracles is exclusively that of Hashem. Man can only make progress by studying nature and thereby learning how he can work within that system to achieve his goals. However he cannot operate outside of the natural order established by G-d. He can't effectuate any changes in the world of actuality.

Hashem intervenes in the world to bring about results that would be impossible from the standpoint of nature. Such a case is Sarah's birth of Yitzchak recorded in our Parsha. Why did Hashem decide to act in this manner? He could have responded to

Avraham and Sarah's prayers and allow her to become pregnant at a much younger age. Instead Hashem "waited" until they were very old and required a great miracle in order to reproduce. How are we to understand this?

We lack solid information on this matter but I would like to engage in some speculation. Yitzchak, the heir of Avraham, had a singular mission. It was to continue the religious movement based on renunciation of idol worship and emulation of the "ways of Hashem" which had been established by Avraham. Avraham was extremely successful in terms of spreading the message and gaining adherents.

However in order for the Abrahamic religion to succeed it needed to be demonstrated that it was not dependent on a single great personality such as Avraham. Rather it was a system of philosophical and theological concepts which could be rationally demonstrated and adhered to by all thinking people.

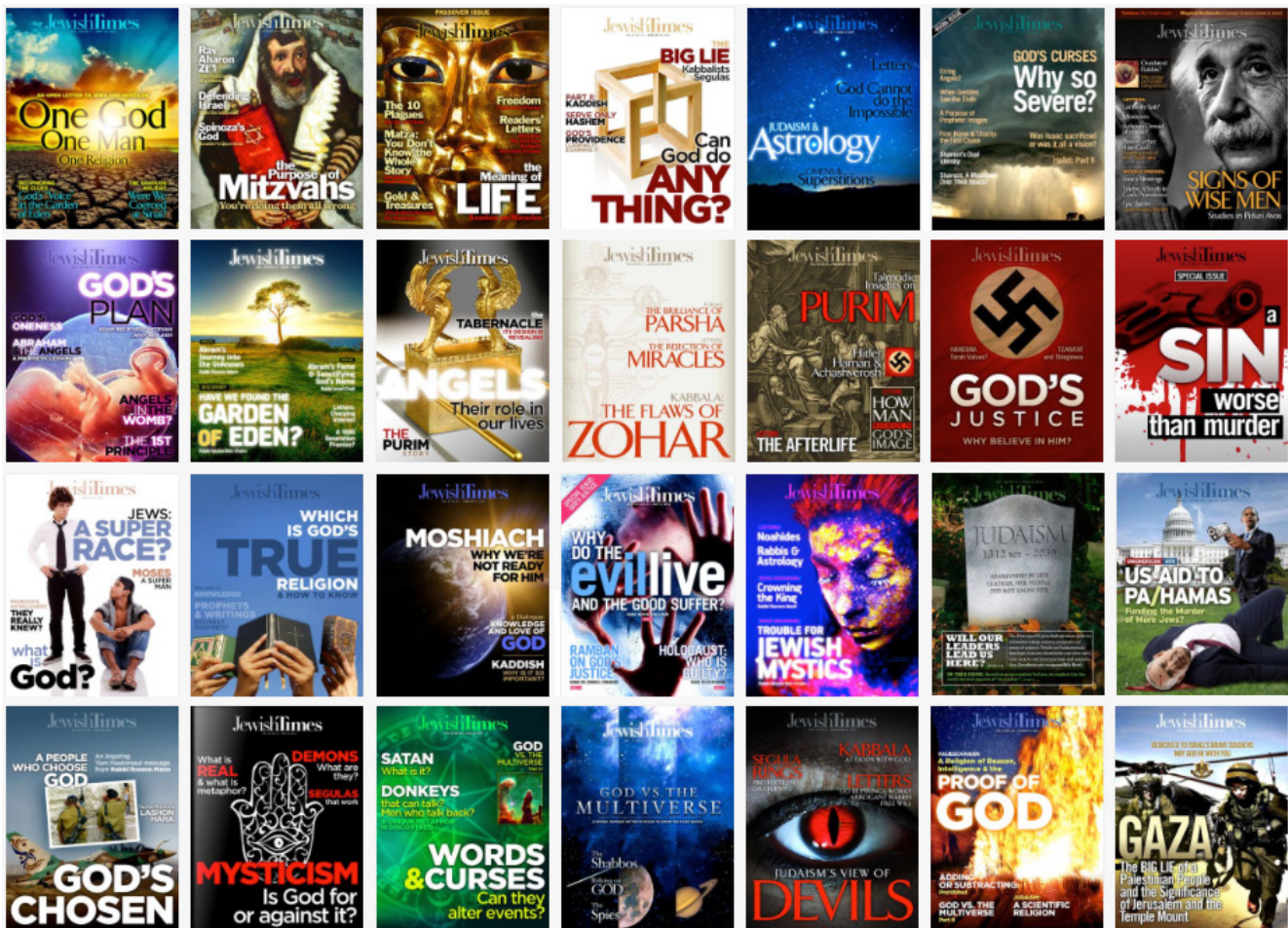
The birth of Yitzchak was a momentous event. He was the divinely ordained successor to his great father. By his miraculous birth Hashem demonstrated that the religious approach of Avraham was the one which found favor in His eyes and that He would see to the ultimate success of of this movement whereupon all the world will "become a united society to do Your Will wholeheartedly." May this moment come "speedily and in our time."

Shabbat Shalom. ■

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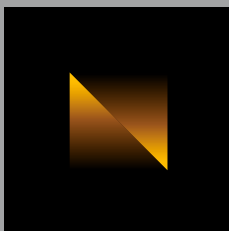
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