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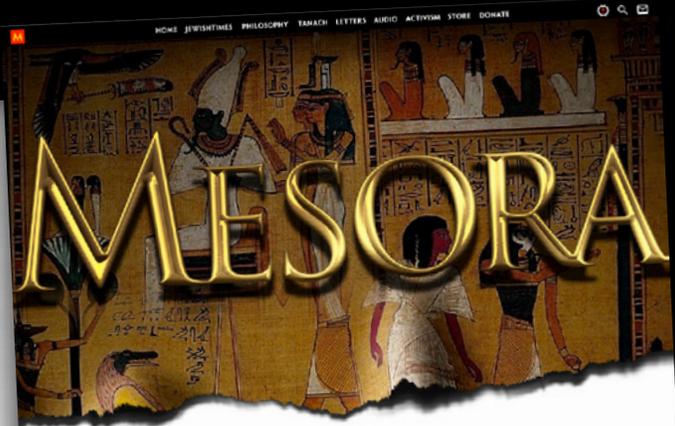
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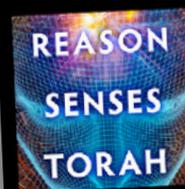
MISSION
God's Revelation at Mt. Sinai: One Plan for Mankind
 The greatest event ever witnessed forces one conclusion

MESORA
 Summer 2020

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.

THOUGHT
FUNDAMENTALS

"WHAT IS UNDETECTED BY THE SENSES, REASON OR TORAH, MUST NOT BE ACCEPTED AS TRUTH." MAIMONIDES



FEATURED
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PERFECTION

"PERFECTION" REFERS TO ONE WHOSE VALUES AND ACTIONS COMPLY WITH TORAH PERSONALITIES AND LAWS: THE MOST PLEASANT LIFE.



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As equals, all humans must fully treat others as we wish to be treated. Charity, kindness and justice demand we rise above personal or selfish emotions and recognize that God made others as He made ourselves. Doing so creates harmony, and earns His kindness to us.



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Mankind descends from Adam. Black and white twins unveil the lie of racism. Bible denounces it: Moses' wife was black, our kings married Egyptians and Messiah descends from a Moabite. "Better is the day of birth" (Isaiah 49:1) (Eccl. 7:9). Birth doesn't define us, but how

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"The great sickness and the "grievous evil" (Eccles. 5:12, 15) consist in this: that all the things that man finds written in books, he presumes to think of as true—and all the more so if the books are old."

"Know, my masters, that every one of those things concerning judicial astrology that (its adherents) maintain—namely, that something will happen one way and not another, and that the constellation under which one is born will draw him on so that he will be of such and such a kind and so that something will happen to him one way and not another—all those assertions are far from being scientific; they are stupidity."

MAIMONIDES

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Detecting Prophecy in Dreams

READER: Rabbi Israel Chait said, "By analyzing and contrasting both dreams [of Pharaoh] we should be able to determine the portion of the dream which is prophetic, and the part which is an expression of his personality. The aspects of his dreams which are duplicated are obviously of divine origin."

My question: why is duplication a sign of prophecy in dreams?

—Howard S. NY (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

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RABBI: Once a person outlets his desires in a dream, he is satisfied, and no longer needs to gain satisfaction through dreaming that act again. Thus, if he does dream about it again, it is not something emanating from a psychological need, but from God. There is no third possibility. ■

Tampering with God's Image

READER: I am concerned. We are created in Hashem's image. Are we humans attempting to change Hashem's image by which He created us with the recent introduction of mRNA vaccines? What does the Torah state regarding the manipulation of the human genome (DNA)?

—John Ravenscroft, Ottawa, Canada

RABBI: God has no image; He cannot be perceived through senses or imagination. "Created in God's image" means man was gifted with intellect: a faculty that can perceive God's wisdom. Unlike all other creatures, man alone can engage in knowledge.

Drugs are physical, and cannot alter the soul which is non-physical.

God desires life, and granted man intellect. We are to use our knowledge to advance life. We always weigh the risks against the gains, and follow what is most beneficial. When we are not 100% sure, and we are coerced to act, we must select the path that offers the most promise. ■

Finding a Match: Quick Fixes?

READER: What are segulahs for finding a zivug?

—Anon

RABBI: Following Torah and seeking someone who does too. That's how you find a good mate. If you're not worthy, God won't hurt a good person by matching you both. And if you are worthy, you still have to seek value over other considerations like wealth, age, or location; none of which defines the person's character. Bottom line: there are no segula powers. You don't find such notions in Torah. Eliezer sought for Isaac a woman of kindness and generosity. He did not seek segulas. Rambam says that marrying a good mate is a mitzvah, and marrying a person of low character is a sin, and God doesn't compel a person to do either a mitzvah or a sin; thus, it's in our hands. But God can help if we are worthy. And even if we are worthy, we can choose improperly. But segulas don't exist. If they did, a wicked person can use a segula to avert punishment for his sins. But that idea contradicts Torah's principle of reward and punishment. Segulas aren't more powerful than God's justice. Segulas don't exist outside one's imagination. ■

ASTROLOGY

THE BIG LIE

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Some time ago my brother Nissim wrote me regarding the Torah's view of astrology. We discussed the matter, and after reviewing many sources, I wish to share our findings, and my thoughts.

I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden.
—Maimonides, "Letter to the Community of Marseille"

Maimonides teaches that reason must be the ultimate guide of our thoughts and actions. Once we know something to be true based on reason and proof, any opposition, even from the Sages, must be of no consequence. Maimonides was guided by his understanding of the universe; there are fixed laws of nature and Divine providence. Our acceptance of theories have but a single arbiter: "proof". Once we see a proof for something, all other views are of no regard, for proof means that man has uncovered conclusive reasoning for how the universe operates. And any view opposing that which has been demonstrated, must be false.

The method displayed by many individuals defending a Sage or Rabbi is self-contradictory, as seen in this example: Ruben accepts Rabbi A on a philosophical issue. Then, Ruben reads that Rabbi B opposes Rabbi A. What shall Ruben do? He already claimed support for Rabbi A, based on his reputation. Now when he learns that Rabbi B opposed it, how does Ruben decide

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which is truth? For two opposing views cannot both be correct: either one is wrong, or both are wrong. But both cannot be correct if they oppose each other. Relying on reputation alone, Ruben is at a stalemate.

Many times, it is confidence alone that people lack—not proofs—and therefore they cannot say, “I think Rabbi B is more sensible. Sometimes this stems from false humility, and sometimes, from the lack of independent thought and the inability to cleave to truth, over reputations. Maimonides teaches that this path cannot be followed, for the clear reason proved in Ruben’s stalemate. Man must use reason to determine truth: this is precisely why God granted “each” of us intelligence. We are not to simply follow the leader.

When approaching the area of astrology, we are faced with this dilemma: great reputations oppose each other. Do we follow Maimonides, or Ramban and the Ramchal? Actually, this is not how a thinker frames his question. For a true thinker seeking truth, cares nothing about reputations: he is concerned only with what is reasonable. The thinker is not deciding between Ramban and Maimonides. He divorces the theories from the personalities, judging theories on their own merit. We are certain that our Baalei HaMesora—Masters of Torah Transmission—always followed Maimonides’ principle of following truth, over any other consideration:

It is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things: 1) clear proof deriving from man’s reasoning; 2) what is perceived through one of the five senses; 3) what is received from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of [Torah] tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three categories, of him it is

said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15). Maimonides, “Letter to the Community of Marseille”

Maimonides teaches that our acceptance of truths must be limited to one of these three methods; reason, sense perception, or Torah tradition. Based on the third, let us review some Torah verses addressing astrology. We will then answer other quotes, which on the surface, seem to contradict our findings.

Torah Refutations

In Miketz (Gen.41:8) Pharaoh has two dreams: in one dream, seven lean cows swallow seven healthy cows. In the second, seven lean ears of corn swallow seven healthy ears. In both dreams, no display of ingestion could be discerned. Pharaoh was deeply bothered by his dreams, but “he could find no interpreter” (Ibid).

Typically, Pharaoh would accept his astrologers’ theories. However, in this case, as Pharaoh was distraught, his regular acceptance of astrological theories did not suffice to settle his mind. Here, when he was personally involved, he dismissed the baseless quality of his astrologers’ explanations. This teaches that there were no incontrovertible proofs in the words of his astrologers.

On verse 41:8, Rashi states that his Egyptian astrologers suggested the dreams to mean that Pharaoh will bear seven daughters, and that he will bury seven daughters. However, this never occurred. We learn that these astrologers were lying, and had no knowledge based on their astrology. Why did they speak up when they knew they were lying about foreknowledge? The answer is because they desired to retain their posts as Pharaoh’s ministers: honor and fame is a great lure. Surely, his astrologers were consulted in the past, and as back then, they would suggest meanings, otherwise, they had no use to Pharaoh. Why would Pharaoh retain them? Because they could not be proven wrong; they might claim, “You will yet have those daughters and you will yet bury them.” The astrologers were wise

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BIBLE | EXODUS

enough not to paint themselves into a corner. Pharaoh may have retained their posts for the additional reason that he needed to consult with mystics, and perhaps, sometimes, these astrologers guessed correctly. They clearly received their position based on some performance...be their prior successes based on mere intuition, or coincidence. But foreknowledge is clearly dismissed, as seen in this example of the seven daughters theory.

Why did Pharaoh accept Joseph's dream interpretations? It appears from Joseph's method of explanation, that at a certain point even before completing his interpretation, Joseph was convinced he conveyed to Pharaoh a convincing explanation. At that point midstream in his interpretation, Joseph exclaims, "*This is the thing that I told Pharaoh: what God plans to do, He has shown to Pharaoh*" (Exod. 41:28). Joseph could have said this, only if he was certain that he already proved the true meaning, and that this was Divine. Thus, he tells Pharaoh, in other words, "Are you now convinced? This proves your dreams are divine!"

With the words, "*The dreams of Pharaoh are one*"—which Joseph repeats—Joseph was convinced in his interpretation, and that he also proved to Pharaoh his interpretation was correct. Telling Pharaoh twice, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one," Joseph deviated from the arbitrary methods of the astrologers: Joseph emphasized

the dream's "design"—duplication—not merely offering an alternative explanation of the "content." With his explanation of the repeating "design," Joseph distinguished his interpretation from that of the astrologers. Thereby, Pharaoh was convinced that Joseph was correct. Ibn Ezra (41:32) states that the dreams' duplication—in a single night—meant that God's plan was imminent as well. So the dreams' duplication in general proved that the dreams were divine, and the fact that the two dreams occurred in a single night proved that God's plan was imminent.

In Exodus 2:3, Moses' mother could "no longer hide him." After a premature birth to Moses, just six months pregnant, Moses' mother Yocheved was only able to hide him from the Egyptian, genocidal decree for three months. Why? Because according to Rashi, the Egyptians calculated when nine months would arrive after Yocheved and her husband reunited, expecting them to bear a child only after that time. This proves that the Egyptians' astrology was false: they continued killing infants fearing the birth of the Jews' savior...even after Moses was born! But since Moses—the savior—was already born, why did they continue their murders? They must have felt the messiah was "yet" to be born. But they were mistaken, for Moses was already alive for three full months. Again, they failed at discerning

a matter through astrology.

In Exodus 1:16 Rashi explained why Pharaoh decreed the death of the males, "for the astrologers saw that a savior was to be born to the Jews." But this is common sense: any oppressed people possess the probability of an uprising. Here, claims of astrological knowledge are unnecessary: psychology explains this quite easily. In Exodus 1:22 Rashi states, "*On the day Moses was born, Pharaoh's astrologers told him, 'today the savior has been born, but we know no whether he is Egyptian or Jew.'*" The words "*On the day Moses was born...*" are misleading, for one might think that Rashi was convinced that the astrologers knew the exact day that Moses was born. However, as Rabbi Israel Chait taught, this was not the first time the astrologers told Pharaoh a savior was born...they may have said this on numerous occasions, exposing their ignorance.

Saadia Gaon remarks that Egypt's magic was sleight of hand, and nothing more. ("The Book of Beliefs & Opinions", pg. 153) This also explains why the Egyptian astrologers could duplicate Moses' first two signs of blood and frogs: these objects can be manipulated with adequate, tactile dexterity. Saadia Gaon states the astrologers deceived others, using dyes to mimic blood, and spilling chemicals into the Nile causing the frogs to flee to dry ground. Through their deception, the astrologers simulated Moses' two

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plagues. However, the astrologers could not manipulate the third plague of lice. Lice are too small for the hand to adequately manipulate. Thus, the Egyptians attested, “This is the finger of God.” They admitted their lack of control, but did so in a way where they were not to blame, for “God is superior.”

Supposed astrological powers or knowledge are repeatedly refuted. No proof for astrological theories presents itself in any of these cases. And astrological claims have yet to be validated today.

Refutation in Prophets

But the most glaring refutation of astrology, is God’s very words:

So says God, ‘To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of heaven, do not fear, for the nations fear them. For the statutes of the nations are futile, for a tree from the forest they cut, the work of an artisan with an adze. With silver and gold they adorn it; with nails and pegs they strengthen it so it does not disconnect. They are like a sculpted palm tree and they cannot speak, they are carried about for they cannot walk: do not fear them, for they cannot harm and they also cannot do good’ (Jeremiah 10:1-5).

God clearly teaches man that the nations live in foolishness, that stars or heavenly signs (occurrences) are nothing to fear, and idols are manmade. Man has no reason to attribute powers to his sculpted creations. They cannot speak or walk as man, yet man attributes more powers to these idols, than to himself. Herein is man’s distortion: man is greater and can walk and talk, yet he assumes these inanimate blocks of wood—that required human construction—possess greater powers than man. God exposes the corruption of thought harbored by these

nations, and He groups therein the practice of fearing heavenly phenomena. It is no coincidence that God groups heavenly signs together with idolatry in His ridicule. God says both; heavenly phenomena and idolatry are equally futile. Would it then be sensible to claim that the stars and astrology are not for Jews to follow, but for gentiles it is permissible, or that it even works? But God plainly states, “For the statutes of the nations are futile.” This applies to the object or practice, and it matters none if the followers are gentile or Jews. God states openly “for they cannot harm and they also cannot do good.” These are God’s own words. This satisfies the third of Maimonides’ three categories for determining truth “Torah traditions”: traditions must be true.

Maimonides’ second category of truths is sense perception, that is, all that we perceive is accurate and truth. And we have no perception or proof of the stars affecting our free will or granting us unique character traits. Just the opposite is the case: our free will is “free” and uncontrolled by anything, but our will alone. Heavenly phenomena do not affect man.

Maimonides first rule is that when something is proven, we care nothing about what we might find, even in the words of the Sages, as he says, “Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden.”

Maimonides teaches that the very fact God gave us commands must be predicated on our ability to comply. We are free to follow God or oppose Him, and therefore, stars and zodiacs contribute nothing to our own choices, for which we are justly rewarded or punished. “For all His ways are judgment” (Deut. 32:4). “Whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer. 32:19).

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Talmud: Astrology or Psychology?

The Talmud (Sabbath 156a) suggests that depending on the day or hour of one's birth, he will possess a certain personality. Sounds like astrology! Can we answer this in light of what we have stated to this point? But before we answer that, why is the entire discussion in the Talmud concerning one's "birth?" Why is this moment significant? Conversely, King Solomon said, "Better is the day of one's death than the day of his birth" (Eccl. 7:1). Why does the Talmud elevate birth, when King Solomon elevated death? Ibn Ezra answers this question: "At birth, we know not yet what will be come of this child; he might turn out good or evil. But at death, he has already earned his good name" (Ibid). Thus, even Ibn Ezra of whom it is said endorsed astrology, did not ascribe to fate, and here commits to his view that at birth, nothing is known. Death is better; for it is only then that we can determine through historical proof, whether an individual is good or evil.

So how then does the Talmud state that if one is born on Sunday, he will be either totally good, or totally evil? Rashi states that since Sunday is the "lead" day of the week, one who is born on Sunday will also be a leader, in either the good life, or the evil life. This explanation removes any need for astrological theories, and uses proven, psychological principles to explain why such a person will lead: he identifies with that "lead" day of the week, which itself would be insignificant, had it not harkened back to God's six days of creation. So man is not directed by some unknown, astrological "power," but functions many times based on his emotions: specifically, his emotion of identification.

Since man's ego tends to endorse "his" existence with great value, he invests his very first day on Earth with unparalleled significance: "my birthday has meaning" he feels. Thus, he looks at what other significant events occurred on that day, to bolster his self worth. He realizes God's creation is great, and parallels himself to God's creation by viewing the day of his birth on par with that day of the week in Creation. He then latches on to that day's significance (the "lead" day in our case) and then creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Talmud continues with additional examples:

He who is born on the second day of the week will be bad-tempered. What is the reason? Because the waters were divided thereon." (Division or disunity is caused by bad temper, Rashi) so will he be estranged from other people through his temper). He who is born on the third day of the week will be wealthy and unchaste. What is the reason? Because herbs were created thereon. (Herbs multiply very rapidly and also continually intermingle with other herbs.) He who is born on the fourth day of the week will be wise and of a retentive memory. What is the reason? Because the luminaries were suspended [thereon]."

In all these cases, man identifies with the day of his birth, and this identification is what propels him to mimic the nature of that day. The heavenly phenomena play absolutely no role in determining his fate. We also learn, "All is in the hand of heaven, except for the fear of heaven." Man is solely responsible for his actions. This Talmudic portion can be explained reasonably, and with no need to resort to astrological views. It educates man on his insecurities, and his means to inflate his worth. In truth, King Solomon is correct: one's birthday is insignificant. But it is also true that man is partial to himself, and ignores truths when they counter his ego.

This Talmudic portion concludes with five additional cases where individuals were not subject to planetary influence, but received their good lot based on merit. It is worth noting that two of those cases deal with serpents, which might allude to those cases being metaphorical, discussing man's instincts (serpent), not real events. But even taken literally, we find two opposing Talmudic views debating if astrology offers any true knowledge. On this, Maimonides wrote as we quoted, that we do not abandon what is proven, even if opposed by a sage.

Astrology Equated to Idolatry: Human Insecurity

Jeremiah 10 warns us against attributing any significance to heavenly signs or idolatry, and God groups the two crimes together, since they are related. In fact, Maimonides teaches that it is precisely man's flawed attribution of greatness to the stars, from which idolatry was born. Idolatry is actually referred to as "Avodas Kochavim," star worship. Maimonides elaborates on this in his first laws of his Mishneh Torah, Laws of Star Worship (idolatry).

To those who cleave to a belief in astrology, you must realize that you cannot claim a belief in something, if you cannot explain it. A Rabbi once defined idolatry as "claiming a causal relationship for unrelated things." He meant to say that idolatry has no basis in reason or what we perceive, so that we should accept it. Astrology is no different: if you cannot explain it, it must not be accepted, as our lives are to be guided by reason. Even if one were to say astrology is a force of nature, but he does not know what it is, it is worthless to say, "I agree with it." That is a lie. To suggest astrology refers to "heavenly powers which guide human affairs" is a nonsensical statement, if one cannot prove those powers exists, or how they might govern.

Regardless of which Rabbi held astrology to be truth or falsehood, I ask: "Why, without an argument reasonable to your mind, do you accept a premise...just because others do?" Astrology is not an area of Jewish "law," so there is no ruling, "psak." Therefore, feel not obligated to agree with one view over another. And be honest: if there are two opposing views, one must be wrong. And if you cannot reasonably prove your view, your view may

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be the incorrect one. Certainly, if the opposing view is explained rationally, as Maimonides has done, and as we read in the Torah and know from experience, that man has freewill, why should you not abandon your view in place of what makes sense?

You must also know that if any of the Rabbis were shown that his view was false, he would abandon it. We witness this devotion to truth throughout the Talmud. Honesty and truth are at the core of every Torah scholar. Not a single one remained in his view once disproved, realizing it violated reason, science, or Torah.

You must also be sensitive to your feelings of insecurity, to which astrology caters. Assuming there are “powers out there guiding me” is quite comforting, and relieves one of his responsibilities. He can easily blame all his shortcomings on his horoscope. But remember that the Torah prohibits horoscopists. Horoscopes satisfy the very same insecurities which idols were created to address. This is why God groups idolatry with heavenly signs in Jeremiah: they share the same origin of human insecurity.

Living in line with truth means we examine all facets of our lives, which are primarily psychological in nature. If you ignore self-assessment and reflection, you will never see your flaws, and never repent, which God desires for our own good.

We are not born with all of the answers...far from it. But with honesty, we can arrive at an ever-growing attachment to truth, where we spend less time defending our predisposed, unexamined notions, and more time defenselessly seeking what is real and true.

Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 19:31 says the following:

Those with empty brains say, “Were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.” But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn’t prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues.

Based on this Ibn Ezra, as the Torah prohibits fortunetellers and horoscopists, they must be equally false practices, affording man lies, and not truth.

Again, as Maimonides wrote, simply because one Rabbi accepted astrology, this is no basis for you to accept it, especially when you do not fathom what he did, or understand his words, or possess reason to accept it. First and foremost, you must know what God said to be true, starting with Jeremiah,

and throughout the Tanach...this must be your measuring rod. But do not seek to defend a cherished view, if your mind tells you it violates God’s Torah.

The Rabbis state, “All is in the hand of heaven, except the fear of heaven” (Brachos 33b). This means that one’s wealth, health, personalities, children and all matters aside from free will are decided by God. Whatever God’s means are for determining our personalities or world events, God does so with wisdom, whether we know how He does this or not: “All His ways are just.” The One who gave such a perfect system of wisdom, i.e., the Torah, surely works with wisdom. The One who created and governs the universe with intelligent laws, is consistent. Therefore, it is a denial of God’s methods of wisdom to follow reputations or popular notions, instead of theories, certainly, when you are bereft of any understanding. God does not wish that man lies, and accept a view, unless man understands that view. Whether on a specific issue a Rabbi was right or wrong, this is not our concern to prove, for all men err. What our Rabbis teach is that we engage our minds alone for determining truth. If some view is contrary to reason, we are wise to reject it. Judaism’s teachers unanimously agree: our “methods” of decision making are crucial, not who we follow. This may sound odd, but provided we use our intellects granted by God, we are not to blame for accepting something God knows is false. The principle “Lo bashamayim hi”, “It is not in heaven”, teaches that our objective is not to make sure we know what God knows, but that we arrive at decisions to the best of our abilities. “Aylu v’aylu, divray Elohim chaim”, “These and these, the words of God live”, means that regardless of “these views or those views” (opposing rulings) both are nonetheless attempts to arrive at truth, and that is what is praiseworthy, “Divray Elohim chaim.” Of course, when two views oppose each other, one must be wrong, but that is not in man’s hands at all times. This last quote means to praise all those who honestly engage their minds in the pursuit of truth, regardless of their outcome.

We know quite little about how God governs the world. And just as we admit that point, we must be consistent and admit when we do not understand any other matter. And it makes no difference if a Rabbi claims to understand it. For if we do not understand a given matter, we have no grounds to agree with that view, whether right or wrong. “Agree” means we apprehend a matter, and understand it as consistent with how the world operates. Our allegiance to a theory must be, as Maimonides taught, based on proof, perception, or Torah Traditions. ■



Bashert?

“One receives God’s help in proportion to one’s perfection.
Most suffering is due to our poor choices.” –Maimonides

If one soothes oneself that all which occurs is Bashert—divinely determined—s/he does not introspect for errors in judgment, and will continue to suffer by their poor, uncorrected errors.

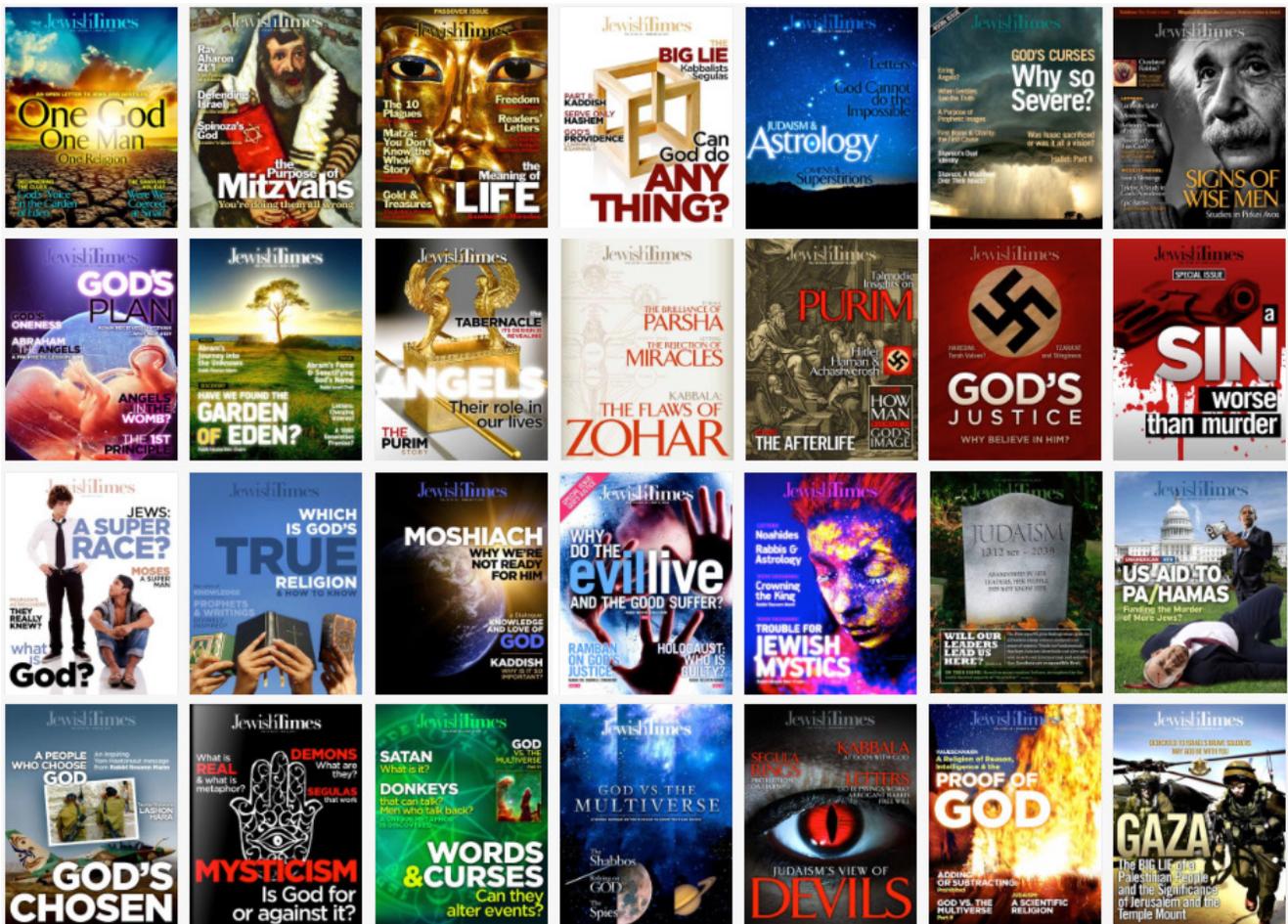
Our choices are our own, that’s why Reward & Punishment is part of Torah. Torah teaches that one should evaluate oneself to improve one’s life. If your business suffers, gain insight from successful people. If you are single for too long, ask your Rabbi to explore your choices and considerations. If your children rebel, explore where you have misguided them. God isn’t causing our pain; we are. But we can improve our lives:

“Let us search and examine our ways, and return back to God”
(Eicha 3:40)

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The Setback

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Parshat Va'eira depicts the interaction between Moshe and King Pharaoh. Their initial meeting had produced disastrous results for Moshe's mission. Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the supremacy of Hashem and retaliated by forcing the Jews to obtain their own straw while still being held to the same quota of brick production. This proved to be an impossible task and the Jewish foremen were beaten as a result.

The foremen protested the injustice to Pharaoh himself but to no avail. They then confronted Moshe and uttered harsh accusations against him saying, "May Hashem look upon you and judge, for you have made our very scent abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants, to place a sword in their hands to murder us!"

This had a profound effect on Moshe who took responsibility for worsening the situation of the Jews. He complained to Hashem wondering why since he had gone to Pharaoh things had worsened for the Jews but "You did not rescue Your people." Hashem thereupon reassured Moshe that with "a strong hand" Pharaoh would drive the Jews from his land.

Notwithstanding this, in Parshat Va'eira Moshe appears to have lost confidence in his mission. The harsh reaction of Pharaoh had an impact on the spirit of the Jews and Hashem sent Moshe to them with a strong message of redemption and deliverance. However the people "did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work."

Still Hashem instructed Moshe to again go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Jews go from his land. Quite surprisingly, Moshe demurred and wondered that if the Jews didn't listen to him how could it be expected that Pharaoh would listen to him especially since he was "difficult of speech."

It is difficult to understand this aspect of the story of the Exodus. Why did Hashem send Moshe to Pharaoh knowing that this tyrant would worsen the Jew's conditions and thus cause them to turn against Moshe? How would this advance the cause of rescuing the Jews from the enslavement of Egypt?

We can understand the frustration of Moshe when his conversation with Pharaoh resulted in



his harsh measures against the Jews. His desire was to rescue those in travail and certainly not become the cause for an increase in their sufferings. However, according to the Rabbis his complaint was unjustified. Rashi portrays Hashem as saying, "You have questioned My ways. Not like Avraham to whom I said, 'through Yitzchak your descendants shall be known' and yet afterward I said to him, 'offer him up as a burnt offering' but he never questioned My ways."

It is of the greatest importance that we cultivate a firm belief in Hashem and have faith that, 'The Rock His work is perfect for all His ways are justice.' This is not only referring to an abstract faith. Sometimes we experience setbacks that are contrary to all our expectations. They simply make no sense to us. There was no logical explanation of why Hashem would command Avraham to offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice, after He had told him that this child was destined to sire the "seed of Avraham." Yet Avraham did not utter a word of protest.

There are times when the ways of Hashem appear to us as incomprehensible. Our recognition of the Creator and faith in His Goodness demands that we "Nullify our will in the face of His will." True humbleness requires that we acknowledge the frailty of our understanding and the absolute character of Hashem's decree.

Moshe could not understand why, now that Hashem had come to save the Jews, that He would send him on a mission which would increase the suffering of the Jews and undermine their confidence in the leadership of Moshe. That made no sense to Moshe, but he should have absorbed it and moved on. He should not have made an issue out of it.

There is an important lesson to learn from this story. The path of life including that of successful

people is filled with setbacks. That is true even when we are on a divine mission and Hashem is with us. We simply can't predict the course that divine Providence will map out for us and things may happen that are entirely antithetical to any reasonable expectation. Our disappointment should not deter us.

Setbacks can be a blessing in disguise for they force us to increase our efforts and use creativity and ingenuity to seek out alternative pathways. They also improve our character by compelling us to conquer insecurity and the urge to cut and run. When a person overcomes setbacks by virtue of determination and hard work he elevates himself to new level of functioning.

So we should not just bail out when things take a bad turn. We should soldier on, firm in the belief that, "My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not My ways, says Hashem. As high as the heavens over the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." An appropriate faith in Hashem will take us a long way. Shabbat Shalom. ■

Dear Friends,

In this time of social isolation, we should seek ways to avoid boredom by staying occupied with meaningful activity. The world of virtual reality allows us to stay in touch with friends and attend all kinds of classes available online. But that can only take you so far. Comes Shabbat and Yom Tov, and you need books, especially on the parsha. I personally recommend Eternally Yours on Genesis <http://bit.ly/EY-Genesis> and Exodus <http://bit.ly/EY-Exodus>, and my newest one on Numbers <http://bit.ly/EY-Numbers2>. They are easy to read, interesting, and thought-provoking conversation starters. I am especially interested in your feedback and hope you can write a brief review and post it on Amazon.



BIBLE | EXODUS

Pharaoh's Astrologers: Liars

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Pharaoh was threatened by the Jews' numbers; he feared they would join Egypt's enemies. Therefore he enslaved the Jews. Now that Pharaoh had the Jews under his control, what led Pharaoh further to murder Hebrew male newborns? Rashi says, "The astrologers saw a savior would be born to the Hebrews" (Exod. 1:16). Of course, the astrologers saw nothing as astrology is a baseless belief. I will soon prove they lied, but what compelled them to fabricate this claim? The answer is the same as why they held their roles as Pharaoh's astrologers: they desired a high political position. But to remain in power, one must continually display their value. The astrologers could not be silent for too long, otherwise, Pharaoh would dispense with them. Therefore they needed to continue their charade conveying value to Pharaoh. Playing on Pharaoh's original fear that the Jews would rebel, the astrologers cleverly fabricated "seeing in the stars" that a savior will be born, which heightened Pharaoh's fear of an uprising. Pharaoh—clearly insecure and a mystic—blindly accepted the astrologers' words. He felt through his imposed back-breaking labor, all adults were now of broken spirit, posing no threat to become a savior. Therefore, to avoid the future threat of a child maturing into a savior, He ordered the midwives to murder newborn males on the birthing stools. When the midwives refused, Pharaoh's hands were tied. He had wished to disguise the midwives' murder of the infants as a natural stillborn epidemic, which he felt would be accepted by the Jews. But after the midwives saved the infants, Pharaoh could not order them to openly kill the newborns,

as the midwives said, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth" (Exod. 1:19). Pharaoh accepted the midwives' sentiment that once an infant was successfully delivered, a stillborn pandemic claim could no longer deceive the Hebrews. Pharaoh failed.

The astrologers once again found themselves pressed to sustain their value to Pharaoh. They saw Pharaoh bothered about the living infants. Therefore, they fabricated a new lie to show their value to Pharaoh:

For on the day when Moses was born, Pharaoh's astrologers said to him, "Today their deliverer has been born, but we know not whether he is born of an Egyptian father or of an Israelite; but we see by our astrological art that he will ultimately suffer misfortune through water" (Rashi, Exod. 1:22).

Based on this, Pharaoh now had the Egyptians drown all Egyptian and Hebrew newborns. The astrologers realized Pharaoh was disturbed by his inability to carry out his plan the kill all Hebrew newborns. They once again rose to secure their positions and offered Pharaoh a solution. They would provide an immediate solution to Pharaoh, as they could effectively kill the savior today. But why did the astrologers include in their fabricated forecast, the savior's death by water? This is because astrologers wished to placate Pharaoh that he was acting in line with a "higher force." Pharaoh's sense that he followed an astrological fate alleviated his fears of repercussion.

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“But we know not whether he is born of an Egyptian father or of an Israelite”

Why did the lying astrologers not offer Pharaoh a clear message, but instead, claimed ignorance of the savior’s nationality? The astrologers knew Pharaoh would consider the reality of an Egyptian sympathizer. Had the astrologers said the savior was a Hebrew alone, they knew Pharaoh would be troubled that they had not addressed the possibility of an Egyptian sympathizer. The astrologers wished to sustain their value which required Pharaoh’s complete satisfaction with their forecast, and therefore said they were not sure if the savior was Egyptian or Hebrew.

Rashi Knew the Astrologers Lied

How can Rashi say, “On the day when Moses was born” Pharaoh’s astrologers said to him today their savior has been born? Is Rashi agreeing that the astrologers knew the day when Moses was born?! The astrologers were not prophets, and astrology is false. How does Rashi say this? Rashi (Exod. 2:3) says that Moses’ mother

Yocheved hid Moses from the Egyptians for 3 months after his birth. Now, had the astrologers been correct that they knew which day Moses was born, they would have stopped killing infants after Moses’ birth date; as they had killed all infants born on that day, this included the savior. However, the fact that Yocheved hid Moses was because the astrologers had not yet told Pharaoh, “Today the saviors is born.” Had they already told this to Pharaoh, the murder of infants would no longer continue, and Yocheved would not need to hide Moses. Thus, the astrologers lied when they told Pharaoh “The savior is born today.” Yocheved hid Moses because the astrologers had not yet suggested the savior’s birth date had arrived. Moses was born before the date the astrologers said that he was born. Rashi teaches that the astrologers lied.

Finally, consider this: God planned Moses’ birth and existence to carry out His will. Therefore, it is nonsensical to suggest that God shared Moses’ birth date (via astrology) with those intent on murdering him. God did not allow the astrologers to know when Moses was born. The astrologers were liars.

Many Jews today still accept the validity of

black magic, astrology, amulets, spirits, communicating with the dead, omens and all such idolatrous notions. Torah offers us the opportunity to discover the truths of God’s creations, and how to determine what is false. In this case, Rashi provided us with insights that unveil the fallacy of astrology. We must not sustain our belief in unproven matters, such as these idolatrous practices and beliefs. Maimonides wrote:

Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of [Torah] tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as true anything that is not of these 3 categories, of him it is said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15).

Astrology and idolatrous practice fall under the category of matters undetected by the senses, alien to reason and outside the pale of Torah. They must be rejected as false. ■

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Moses' Staff

Dani Roth
& R. Moshe Ben-Chaim

My friend Dani Roth asked me this excellent question, which I never heard asked even by adults:

Why did Moses need to wave a staff when announcing the plagues? Couldn't he just announce the plagues, since it was God who really made the plagues?

Once I heard Dani ask this, I said "That's a great question!" I immediately started thinking and researching the Torah for clues. Dani is correct: God has no needs, so whether Moses waved a staff, or simply announced to Pharaoh the next plague, or even if Moses did nothing, God can cause the plague to start independent of Moses' actions. Furthermore, what difference is it to Pharaoh and Egypt if they see Moses waving a staff or not? The plague alone is the impressive event!

To answer Dani's question and learn the significance of Moses' staff, we must study the first instance of the staff found in Exodus 4:2 during Moses' first prophecy at the burning bush on Mount Sinai. During this prophecy (which commenced in chap. 3), God outlines His plans to send Moses to address Pharaoh to answer the cries of Abraham's descendants and deliver them to freedom, also giving them the land of Israel.

Moses was the most humble man on Earth^[1], and therefore when God summoned him to lead the Exodus, he replied to God, "Who am I

that I should address Pharaoh and take out the Jews?" God then assures Moses He will be with him. Moses then asks what name of God he should use, and God says, "I am, that I am." God then instructs Moses to gather the Jewish elders and inform them of His plan, and God assures Moses "they will listen to your voice (Exod. 3:18)." God concludes that He knows Egypt's king will not initially release the Jews, and that He will bring the plagues. Ultimately the Egyptian king will release the Jewish nation, and the Jewish women will ask the Egyptian women for gold, silver and clothes and they will despoil Egypt. This apparently ends God's address to Moses.

However, we notice that in God's initial presentation to Moses about how these events will take place, God does not command Moses to use his staff. This is significant.

In the next verse Moses says, "...they [the Jews] will not believe me and they won't listen to my voice for they will say 'God did not appear to you' (Exod. 4:1)." Moses says this, despite God's earlier assurance that the Jews would in fact believe Moses (Exod. 3:18). Some Rabbis^[2] critique Moses for this disbelief, while Maimonides teaches^[3] Moses was merely asking "how" God intended His plan will cause the Jews to accept Moses' words, as God stated in verse 3:18. (I will soon propose a third possibility.) Nonetheless, God responds, "What is in your hand?" Moses replied, "A staff." God told Moses to cast it downward. Moses did so,

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and it became a snake. Moses then fled from the snake. God then told Moses to grab its tail and it returned to a staff. God explained this miracle was “in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you (ibid 4:5).” In 4:17 God commands Moses to use this staff to perform the miracles and the plagues[4]. But we must ask, as God already told Moses “they will listen to your voice (Exod. 3:18)” even without the staff, how can God now say that due to the staff miracle, “the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you”? The Jews’ belief is independent of the staff’s miracle!

God then performed another miracle of Moses’ hand becoming leprous. God continued:

And if they do not believe you, and they don't listen to the voice of the first sign, they will listen to the voice of the second sign. And if they don't believe also to these two signs, and they don't listen to your voice, then you shall take of the Nile's water and pour it on dry ground and that water you take from the Nile will become blood on dry land (Exod. 4:8,9).

What is this “voice” referred to here? Furthermore, Moses too says “will not believe me, and they won’t listen to my voice.” Why is “voice” in addition to Moses himself?

Now, while it is true, as Dani’s father said,

God could have ultimately planned Moses to use the staff, regardless of Moses’ apparent initiation of the need, it is equally tenable that God’s instruction to Moses to use the staff was only a concession to Moses and not part of God’s original plan. A few other considerations lead me to this assumption. First of all, after Moses pleads with God to find another emissary and God concedes to allow Aaron to speak instead of Moses, God includes in that concession the statement “And this staff take in your hand with which you will perform the miracles (Exod. 4:17).” Why is the command to take the staff joined to Aaron’s appointment? Secondly, in verse 4:20 the staff is mentioned again, but now Moses calls it the “Staff of God.”

The Purpose of the Staff

Moses was most humble, viewing himself as no one special. He did not wish leadership. Perhaps Moses’ very humility made him perfect for this role in God’s plan. As God wished to display His greatness to the Egyptians, a humble man would ensure that the focus remains on God, and not allow leadership to corrupt him.

I wish to suggest the purpose of the staff is connected to Moses’ humility. Perhaps God gave Moses this staff to equip Moses with complete confidence. Holding the staff throughout the signs and plagues — the staff that turned into a snake and back again — Moses was thereby emboldened to carry out God’s mission confidently. He would be able to

speak with a “voice” of confidence. Perhaps also, God grouped together His concession of sending Aaron with His command to take the staff (ibid 4:17) to say in other words, that both were concessions — “for Moses” — not Pharaoh or others. And Moses’ reference to the staff in 4:20 as “God’s staff” is another way of saying that Moses viewed the staff as a surety from God: Moses’ sentiment of satisfaction that he will succeed.

This explanation of the staff also explains why the staff was a “response,” and not in God’s original plan: the staff was for Moses, not the Jews, as God already said the Jews will believe Moses “prior” to the staff’s miracle. When God says the staff will be used “in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you (ibid 4:5),” God does not mean the staff is what convinces the Jews, for God said “they will listen to your voice (Exod. 3:18)” without the staff. Thus, the staff was to provide Moses with the necessary assurance, in order that “he” feels confident that the Jews will listen. The staff was to embolden Moses, and was unnecessary for the Jews or Pharaoh.

So Dani, thank you once again for asking me a great Torah question that has led me to learn new Torah ideas. Together, we are sharing Torah with many other people who will read and learn from this article. ■

[1] Numbers 12:3

[2] Rashi, Ramban

[3] Guide for the Perplexed, book I, chap. lxiii

[4] Ibn Ezra, Exod. 4:17

OMEN'S

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



On the one hand, gemara Succah (29a) says that solar phenomena are signs of impending evil...surprisingly echoing the idolatrous notion of astrology. But later on the gemara says that if the Jews follow God's will, there is no need to fear these phenomena. So which one is it?! If they are signs of doom, why shouldn't Jews fear them even when obeying God? And if they are not signs, why do these eclipses occur when the Jews obey God? This later case rendering them not ominous, questions their very appearance if astrology is true!

Furthermore, Jeremiah 10 compares fearing solar phenomena to idolatry, suggesting that it is inherently wrong to attribute value to any solar phenomena, just as idolatry is inherently wrong. This strengthens the question as to how the talmud can suggest an eclipse is an omen.

Rabbi Israel Chait taught as follows:

This gemara must be interpreted. There is a saying that an eclipse has a bad affect on a person: one feels as if something bad is about to happen to him. [But] this is all in his imagination.

He cannot protect himself from this [these baseless fears]. Only Torah can remove him from this idolatrous state of mind. The language of the prophet Jeremiah expresses this idea: "From the signs of the heavens do not fear because that is what the gentiles do" (Jeremiah 10:2). The entire chapter 10 of Jeremiah is very interesting.

Rabbi Chait means that this gemara's statement "solar phenomena are signs of impending evil" is a prevalent incorrect attitude. The gemara teaches that due to his great insecurities, man forecasts good or evil based on meaningless phenomena. The rabbis who said heavenly phenomena indicate doom, didn't refer to objective reality, but that insecure man subjectively views these phenomena as forecasting evil. This gemara is a discussion of human insecurity connected with rare heavenly events. Man doesn't say that nightfall indicates impending doom, since man considers nightfall as natural. But eclipses are rare, evoking idolatrous thoughts that play on human insecurity. Due to man's need to know his future, he seeks indica-

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tions in his day to make his future certain by removing the fear of the unknown. Even if the indication forecasts some evil, man prefers that evil forecast over no forecast at all; uncertainty is intolerable to the infantile, idolatrous and superstitious mind.

Jeremiah (10:1-9) corrects idolatrous notions:

Hear the word which the LORD has spoken to you, O House of Israel! Thus said the LORD: Do not learn to go the way of the nations, And do not be dismayed by signs in the sky; because the nations be dismayed by them! For the laws of the nations are delusions: for it is the work of a craftsman's hands. He cuts down a tree in the forest with an ax, he adorns it with silver and gold, he fastens it with nails and hammer so that it does not come apart. They are like a beaten [sculpted] palm tree, they cannot speak. They have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they can do no harm; nor is it in them to do any good. O LORD, there is none like You! You are great and Your name is great in power. Who would not revere You, O King of the nations?! For that is Your due, since among all the wise of the nations and among all their royalty there is none like You. But they are both dull and foolish; [their] doctrine is but delusion; it is a piece of wood, silver beaten flat, that is brought from [the land of] Tarshish, and gold from [the land of] Uphaz, the work of a craftsman and the goldsmith's hands; their clothing is blue and purple, all of them are the work of skilled men.

Jeremiah teaches by association that heavenly phenomena must cause no fear, because the nations who fear them also value idolatry. The same idolatrous mindset that accepts idol worship, also attributes meaning to heavenly phenomena; it's the same error. The breakdown is that idols are mere crafts made from a tree

in the forest. Just as one would not look at one tree as more significant than others, one should not view this carved tree as a deity. The craftsman intends to raise its value through silver and gold adornments, he must use tools, indicating the idol's need for man's construction. The idol is dependent. It is no more than a molded palm tree. Man's modifications haven't elevated the tree stump to any greater value than the tree from which it was cut. It doesn't have life or speech, and it can't walk. Man must carry it. Jeremiah exposes the idol as a lifeless log. "For they can do no harm; nor is it in them to do any good." "But they are both dull and foolish; [their] doctrine is but delusion; it is a piece of wood, silver beaten flat, that is brought from [the land of] Tarshish, and gold from [the land of] Uphaz." The whole of the idol seems impressive, but it is merely lifeless components shipped in from various lands.

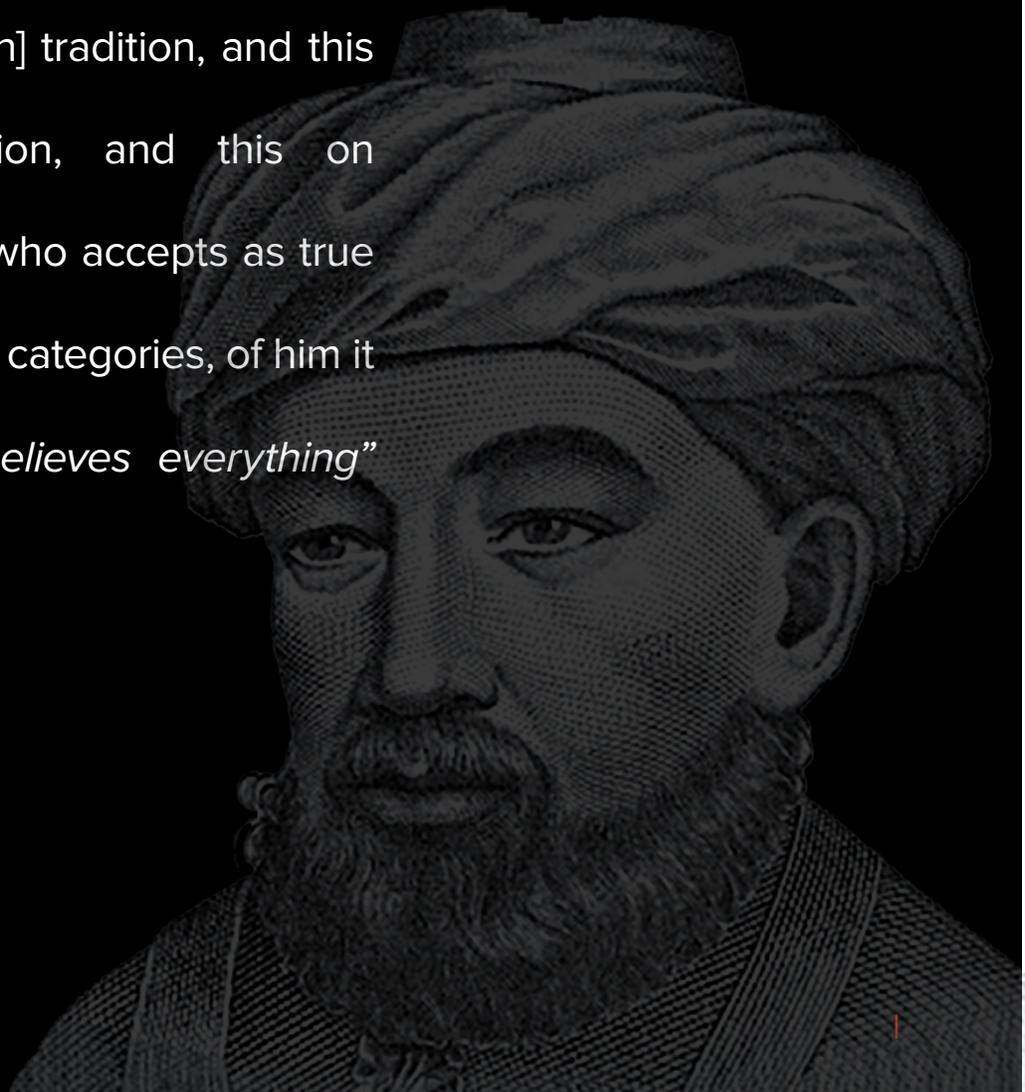
Eclipses and other natural phenomena must carry no more weight than sunset or a rainy day. Both are equally natural, they are unrelated to man's activities and bereft of any consciousness or will that can affect man. The talmudic rabbis discussed man's baseless fears regarding the heavens, a realm out of man's control and often deified, as seen in star worship, from which idolatry commenced.

Jeremiah and all the prophets present God's absolute truths. Once we know from Jeremiah that the heavens are inconsequential, we interpret this talmudic portion accordingly. Torah sources have a hierarchy: God's words are most authoritative, and these comprise Bible, Prophets and Writings. We are dedicated to truths found in these books, and apply their truths to decipher the rabbis. The rabbis cannot contradict Jeremiah who dismisses astronomical phenomena as natural as a leaf falling from tree. Omens are a false idolatrous belief.

Man must escape the infantile mindset, and as Rabbi Chait said, use Torah to guide him towards truth. Here, Jeremiah is our guide. ■

MAIMONIDES

“Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of [Torah] tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as true anything that is not of these 3 categories, of him it is said: *‘The simple man believes everything’* (Prov. 14:15).”





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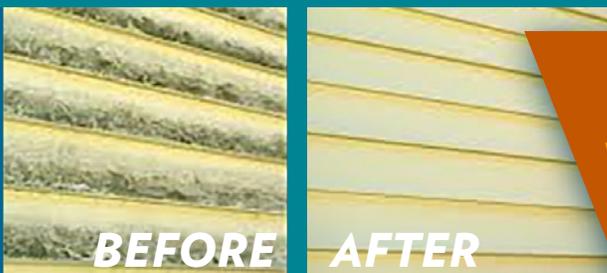
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