

JewishTimes

VOL. XX NO. 9 — JAN. 7, 2022



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| PSYCHOLOGY |

"His teeth are whiter than milk" [Jacob's blessing of Yehuda] (Gen. 49:12) teaches that the whiteness of one's teeth are superior to milk. In other words, a person's psychological well being is improved when receiving a smile (white teeth) from another. This is of greater value than physical sustenance (milk).

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT, "PIRKEI AVOS: BOOK III" MISHNAH 3:11

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Human Equality

READER: I came across this assertion from the Internet: "Public prayer is not rejected, even if the individuals in the group are not entirely sincere" (Taan-is 8A, based on Tehillim 78).

First of all, is this a true Torah position? If so, what exactly does it mean that, "the prayer is not rejected?" I'm cognizant of the fact that it doesn't say the prayer will be "answered" positively. What then exactly is the benefit to the people of the prayer not being rejected?

—*Omphile Tshipa, Africa*

RABBI: "Not being rejected" means the public will not be turned away empty handed...they will receive some of what they wish for, or all of it. This is because God won't reject Israel's "national" merit, as God promised to be with Israel always, as He told Abraham, "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" (Gen. 17:7). Whereas "individuals" may not have personal merit sufficient to

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receive God's positive grant of his/her request, the nation of Israel does have this guarantee. But King David also said that God does not forsake even individuals who search out God...who continually strive to study Torah and follow mitzvos: "Those who know Your name trust You, for You do not abandon those who turn to You, O Lord" (Psalms 9:11).

READER: Ok, it gets clearer now. How about other nations, who do not have that promise...or do they? King Solomon's request for Hashem to answer the prayer of the nations when opening the Beis Hamikdash comes to mind. Was Solomon restating a previously known concept (that God answers prayers of nations) or it was a new concept? Is this what Nineveh did to reverse the decree of destruction?

RABBI: You constantly impress me with your Torah knowledge and questions. King Solomon—and any human—merely perceives eternal truths with which God governs man since Creation. All mankind receive equal providence depending upon their level of perfection. This applies to individuals, nations, and the world. Maimonides teaches this in his Mishneh Torah:

Each and every one of the sons of man has virtues and vices. He whose virtues exceed his vices is a just man, and he whose vices exceed his virtues is an evildoer; if both are evenly balanced, he is mediocre. The same applies to a nation. If the virtues of all of its inhabitants exceeded their vices, it is, indeed, a just state; but if their vices exceeded, it is, indeed, a wicked state. Even such is a standard for the whole world (Maimonides, Laws of repentance, 3:1).

Nineveh was spared as they exemplified proper repentance. Any nation—Israel and others—would be treated similarly. However, Israel does have some greater measure of providence due to God's promise to Abraham. But again, any human can join Israel and share the providence.

Rabbi Israel Chait taught as follows:

"And everyone that is called by my name I have created for my Glory" (Isaiah 43:7). Radak comments: "Israel, who believes in Me, I have created for my Honor, so that they spread My Glory to all the people." Radak is saying that God's compassion and kindness is not limited to the nation of Israel, but includes all mankind. It is incumbent upon Israel to be concerned also about all humanity and to teach all mankind the true ideas of Torah. This is stated in Isaiah 2:2,3 and elsewhere throughout the Prophets. It is God's will that all mankind should have the opportunity to live according to the Torah way of life.

Maimonides writes:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but each and every human who enters the world, whose spirit moves him and he understands from his knowledge to separate himself to stand before God, to minister before Him and to serve Him, to know God, and he walks upright as God created him, and he breaks off his neck the yoke of calculations of the masses that man pursues, behold he becomes holy of holies and God will be his portion and inheritance forever eternally. And he will merit in this world sufficient sustenance just as the priests and the Levites. David, peace be upon him said, "The Lord is my allotted portion and my cup; You hold my lot" [Psalms 16:5] (Maimonides, Laws of Shmitta and Jubilee 13:13). ■



Astrology

One would think that if mysticism, magic, astrology and luck actually existed, that those with the greatest knowledge of the universe—scientists—would have verified these assumed powers. But just the opposite is true: scientists have verified only natural laws, including cause and effect which operates only through nature. Mystics would retort that it is precisely because mysticism and astrology operate "not" within the observable world, that scientists have not found evidence. Of course scientists will respond that if this is the case, what forces one to suggest the existence of something which cannot be observed? If we look at the most mystical and astrological societies like ancient Egypt, we wonder why they did not use their astrology or black magic to terminate the 10 Plagues, or why Pharaoh always summoned Moses alone to terminate the Plagues—he never asked this of his magicians. Obviously, Pharaoh recognized that his magicians were powerless, he certainly recognized this after the magicians and astrologers could not remove the plague of boils from their own bodies. ■

Is Love of God all Emotional?

READER: The Rambam emphasizes that the love of God is proportionate to the knowledge of God. That the intellect and rational thinking is the path to the love of God. My question is whether that love trickles down to one's emotions and passions, or does remain something cerebral?

—Alex Kahgan, NY

RABBI: Rabbi Israel Chait addressed your question:

The only enjoyment we do not experience in this world is the soul's enjoyment. Maimonides states this in his Commentary on the Mishna in Sanhedrin. In earthly life, there is no such thing as a spiritual enjoyment. Due to the nature of the merger between the soul and the psyche in the body, our enjoyments are purely psychological. Chazal agree with this view of Maimonides as well. It is a fundamental belief; we are prevented from enjoying spiritual pleasure on Earth. This means that our enjoyment of ideas and wisdom is only a psychological pleasure. But the soul has no enjoyment here. (Pirkei Avos 4:17, book IV pg 282). ■

BURIAL IN ISRAEL

Dani Roth

Yaakov, the last of the Avos, lives his last moments of life in a country full of idol worship and false philosophy. When Yaakov realized his death was near, he made Yosef promise to bury him in the Maarat Machpelah. Yosef, later on, does something similar in making Shevatim promise to bury him in Israel, and when the Shevatim couldn't do it, their obligation carried to future generations.

The question is, what is so important about where you are buried? Once you have left this world and gone to Olam Haba, why should it matter where your physical body is?

We can see that Yaakov's request of Yosef had three components: he shouldn't be buried in Egypt, he should be buried in Canaan, and he should be buried in the Maarat Machpelah. Yaakov specifically didn't want to be buried in the land of Egypt, where the people worshiped false gods and lived based on incorrect philosophies. This was his way of showing all further generations that he wouldn't ever volunteer to live in an immoral country such as Egypt. This shows us how important it is to be in a morally correct society. Instead of being buried in Egypt, he wanted to be buried in Israel, more specifically in the Maarat Machpelah, in order to further establish the "Godly" way of living that the Avos before him represent. Certainly if Yaakov thinks it's this important for a person to be buried there, more merit must be granted to a person who actually resides there. Israel represents the relationship between God and the Jewish people through our forefathers, and living there means you're putting faith in God's protection. Even if you are not able to live in Israel, we see from here that just being buried there is enough to represent your faith in God. ■



ONE GOD

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

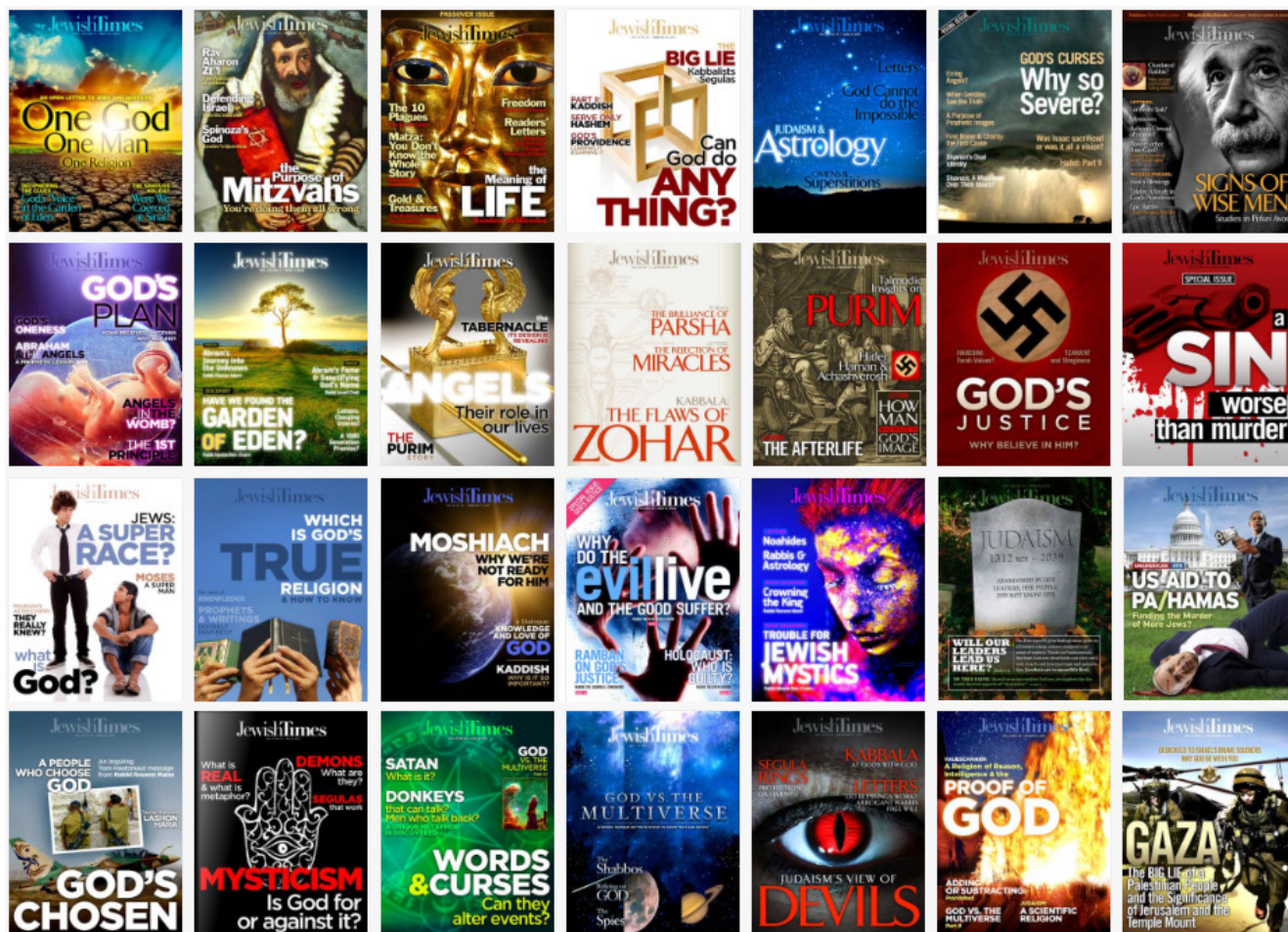
“FOR IF YOU REFUSE TO LET MY PEOPLE GO, TOMORROW I WILL BRING LOCUSTS ON YOUR TERRITORY. THEY SHALL COVER THE SURFACE OF THE LAND, SO THAT NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO SEE THE LAND. THEY SHALL DEVOUR THE REMNANT LEFT TO YOU OF THE HAIL; AND THEY SHALL EAT AWAY ALL YOUR TREES THAT GROW IN THE FIELD.”

(EXOD. 10:4,5)

“They shall devour the remnant left to you of the hail” indicates that the animal world worked together with meteorological world. Locusts “continued” the devastation that hail commenced. This teaches that a Being orchestrates these 2 worlds to achieve 1 goal. The lesson: God alone controls the universe as a whole. All existences follow His will. There are no other powers. ■

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MAIMONIDES

Judaism's Worst Sin

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Maimonides doesn't simply make statements; copying Torah's method and style, he organizes his words with precision, and subtly reveals paths for our exploration. To understand his depth and his ultimate brilliance, you must patiently analyze his words.

Maimonides states that in Earth's 3rd generation—that of Adam's grandson Enosh—mankind made a tremendous error and contradicted the advice of the wise men:

Man said that since God created the stars and planets to guide the world, and placed them in the heights of heaven, and God apportioned them honor, and they are the ministers that minister before Him, they deserve to be praised and glorified and shown honor. And this is God's will blessed be He: to make great and to honor those who God made great and honored, just as a king desires that those who stand by him are shown honor, for this is the honor of the king himself.

They began to build temples and sacrifice to the stars and to praise and glorify them with words and bowing to them in order to attain God's will...in their evil thoughts. And this is the core of star worship.

And so these words were stated by those who worshiped the stars who knew their rites. It is not that they rejected God, replacing Him with a certain star, as Jeremiah said: "Who does not fear You king of nations for that is Your due, for among all the wise men of nations, and in all of their kingdoms there is none like You. But they are both dull and foolish; their doctrine is but delusion, it is a piece of wood" [Jer. 10:7,8] (Laws of Star Worship 1:1).

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

BRILLIANT DISCOVERIES

Maimonides teaches that the original star worshipers did not deny God's existence, rather: "All mankind knew that God is unique alone. Rather, their mistake and their foolishness is they imagined that star worship is God's will."

What was their sin and what compelled them to sin in this manner? In this first law alone, Maimonides repeats the phrase "God's will" 4 times. His message is this: Idolatry's core sin is imagination...imagining what is God's will. Once man equates fantasy to reality, once a man believes his imagination dictates what is true, he in fact does not follow reality. That is why idolatry is referred to as strange worship—"avoda zara"—it is estranged from what is real. Maimonides reiterates this point in law 1:2 (Ibid):

False prophets would show a form (idol) that they conjured in their own hearts, claiming that it communicated to them in a prophecy, and (claimed) that by worshipping these forms they would improve their lives [since idolatry aims as alleviating insecurity]. Other liars arose and said that a star, a planet or an angel spoke to them and said, "Worship me in such a such a way and do this and do not do that." And this practice spread throughout the world, to worship idols in various distinct expressions and to sacrifice to them and to bow to them. Over many years the fame of the honored and awesome God was forgotten from the mouths of all people and from their thoughts and no one recognized God, and it ended up that the entire Earth, men, women and children only knew of the idol of wood or stone or of the temple of stones that they were trained in from youth, to bow to and to worship it and to swear by its name. And the wise men amongst them like their priests and similarly, imagined that there is no God, only the stars and the planets.

This describes a downward spiral, a progressive deterioration of mind. Maimonides is consistent with his condemnation of man following his imagination, and not reality. Meaning, this deterioration was due to man following his imagination, where one corrupt thought led to a further corruption, leading man further and further from reality until God was no longer recognized, except by few individuals. Thus, this is not simply a historical record, which does not belong in a code of law. Rather, this progressive deterioration outlines the human psyche in its attachment to fantasy, the precise formulation of idolatry. Thus, with this depiction, Maimonides fittingly codifies what is the formulation of idolatry. Their progressive fantasy must continually follow wrong ideas. For once a builder starts a wall with crooked bricks, the wall can never be stable and perfectly vertical. It will fall. So too, once one commences down a path of fantasy, his further thoughts are now built on falsehood and he can never arrive at truth. Thus, idolatry is not only wrong due to its initial errors, but due to the continued falsehoods built upon the original errors.

In 2:3 Maimonides sites the Torah prohibition:

"Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them" (Deut. 11:16). This means to say that you should not err in the thoughts of your heart to serve these stars, to be an intermediary between you and the Creator.

Maimonides broadens the application:

And not star worship alone is one prohibited to turn after it in thought, but all thoughts that cause a person to uproot a fundamental of Torah, we are warned not to entertain them on our hearts (Ibid. 2:3). (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



BRILLIANT DISCOVERIES

In his “Letter to Marseille,” Maimonides again instructs us to accept as true, only one of three matters: 1) that which is perceived by the senses, 2) that which the mind demands to be true, and 3) that which is on the authority of Torah. These clearly exclude fantasy, which Maimonides repeats numerous times above as the core error of idolatry. “Thoughts that cause a person to uproot a fundamental of Torah” refer to fantasy. For that which is reality, truly supports Torah. As God is the sole architect of both Torah and the universe, so both must be complimentary.

As Maimonides stated in his commencing words above, man equated God to a human king and his relationship with his subjects. Man erred thinking that since a king desires his viceroys to receive honor, God too desired this for the stars—thinking the stars’ and planets’ “close proximity” to Him in the heavens elevates them to ministers, demanding they be honored.

Man then projected human qualities on God assuming God’s will is like a king’s will (explaining why idols are formed as humans). Man’s first mistake was thinking that God occupies space in the heavens. This led to his second mistake thinking the stars and planets are “near” God. His third mistake is that this close proximity indicates that they minister before God. And his final mistake is to project human rulership onto God and assume that those ministers—stars—deserve human honor. This is how star worship commenced.

The core error is man's imagination regarding God's will

For if man has imaginations concerning unicorns and other fable-type creatures, he does not do himself so much harm. But once man makes an error about God’s will, man now makes an error regarding the purpose of his very existence (i.e., God’s will for man’s life). Man thereby forfeits his purpose as his concept of God’s will is complete falsehood, thereby render-

ing his life purposeless. Thus, imaginary notions of God’s will eliminates man’s purpose in existence, where’s fantasy in other areas are less harmful. Maimonides treats this in his Guide (book I, chap. xxxvii)

One who believes that angels eat and drink and the like, he deviates less from truth than one who believes that something besides God is to be worshipped; for ignorance and error concerning a great thing, i.e., a thing which has a high position in the universe (God), are of greater importance than those which refer to a thing which occupies a lower place (angels).

More crucially, as man cannot know God's essence, our knowledge of God is limited to His will and His actions. Therefore, if we possess an incorrect notion regarding God's will, our knowledge of God is completely wrong and we thereby worship fantasy, and not God. This is the core corruption of idolatry.

The same critique applies today about those who believe in mysticism. For this area of the mystical, the occult, astrology, magic, luck, spells, tarot cards, fortune tellers, protective mezuzas, red bendels, et al, share one thing in common: they all are unvalidated by senses, rational thought, and Torah. These are Maimonides’ 3 criteria for determining what is real or false. But believers in mysticism and in that list above offer no validation; they follow fantasy. This is the core error and sin of idolatry and star worship: their claims were never witnessed as true.

God's Will

But as Maimonides reiterated, it is not fantasy about anything which is sinful and at the core of idolatry. It is fantasy regarding God’s will. Believers in mysticism and other powers deny God as the “sole” force in the universe. Therefore, believ-

ers in mysticism have no concept of God and His “exclusive” nature and will, which cannot be overridden by any imaginary force.

Before he died, Jacob (Israel) asked his 12 sons if any of them had leanings away from God. Their response forms our seminal Shema prayer: “Hear O Israel, God is our God, God is one” (Deut. 6:4). The 12 sons answered their father Israel, “There is only One force in the universe. We accept no other imagined gods.” (Pesachim 56a)

We must make a sharp distinction between serving an idol and serving God. The former aims at securing imaginary personal benefit. But service of God has at it’s objective the awareness of the real single source of reality. God’s greatness demands man’s attention and subservience. God gains nothing from man, for He has no needs: “If you are righteous, what do you give Him; what does He receive from your hand?” (Job 35:7) We worship God as He is great, and not to gain anything personally. God commands our worship so we might benefit from recognizing His great wisdom and enjoying Torah study, the greatest pleasure.

Unfortunately, idolatry is alive and well today. The sin of mind—following fantasy and mysticism—is expressed not only in Christianity, but in Judaism as well. While gentiles have their horoscopes and fortune tellers, Jews have their red bendels and protective mezuzahs. Maimonides’ lesson is to reject as false all unvalidated claims. No one regrew a severed limb or was cured of cancer by wearing a red string. No one recovered from any disease or got rich by placing a mezuzah on his home. Our Torah system is a reward and punishment system: God benefits the righteous and punishes the sinner; no other consideration is valid. A wicked man will not be saved by a mezuzah, and a righteous person won’t be harmed if not wearing red strings. As foolish as it sounds, many still need a reminder of Judaism’s fundamental that God is one. No other powers exist. ■

DEATH & MORTALITY

Rabbi Israel Chait
Written by a student

STUDENT: On “VaYikrivu yemai Yisrael lamus; And Israel’s Days Drew Close to Death” (Gen. 47:29) Rashi explains as highlighting Yaakov’s failure to reach the age of his father (Yitzchak lived 180 years and Yaakov lived 147 years). The language of “Keriva L’amus” (closeness to death) indicates such. The question is, why is this fact important? People live different durations; what is the significance of not reaching the age of one’s father?

RABBI CHAIT: As a person’s death approaches, he faces his own mortality. Through his identification with his father, a person also encounters his own mortality when confronting his father’s death. In both situations, a person’s emotions are aroused, and he is provided an opportunity for reflection and Teshuva.

When a person approaches the age at which his father died, through his identification with his father, he similarly encounters his own mortality. This provides another opportunity for Teshuva. The Pasuk is highlighting that Yaakov was not provided this opportunity. (Although Yaakov was to die shortly, and he would face his own mortality, he missed an additional opportunity of encountering his mortality had he lived past the age of his father’s death.)

STUDENT: Why is it important for the Torah to highlight that Yaakov did not receive this opportunity for perfection?

RABBI CHAIT: The Torah is teaching that Yaakov didn’t require this extra encounter with his own mortality for his perfection, since he had continuously encountered his mortality throughout his life. As the Midrash Tanchuma says, quoted by Rashi on 43:14:

The one who said to the world “enough,” should also say “enough of my own troubles,” as I did not have peace since my youth: I had the pain of Lavan, the pain of Esav, the pain of Rachel, the pain of Dina, the pain of Joseph, the pain of Shimon, and the pain of Benjamin.

Moreover, during Yaakov’s tribulations with his loss of Joseph and Binyamin, Yaakov states (42:38):

My son should not go down with you, for his brother died and he alone is left. And should mishap happen to him on the travels that you go, you will bring down my gray hair in sorrow to the grave.■



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IBN EZRA
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Plagues

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

BRILLIANT DISCOVERIES

Ibn Ezra directs our attention to the performers of the Ten Plagues (Exod. 8:12):

Know, that by the hand of Aaron were the first three plagues and these signs were in the lower matter as I explained earlier, because two (of them) were in water, and the third was in the dust of the earth. And the plagues performed by Moses with the staff were in the higher elements, just as his (Moses') status was higher than Aaron's status. For example, the plague of hail and locusts were brought by the wind, and (so too) the darkness, it was in the air; also the plague of boils was through him (Moses). Only three (plagues) were without the staff; the wild animals, the disease of the animals, and the death of the firstborns. And one (plague) with no staff was through Moses, with a little connection with Aaron, and it was the plague of boils.

Ibn Ezra catches our attention by his first word, "Know," urging us to think more into this commentary's ideas over others. There's much below the surface. But what here is of such significance? Ibn Ezra does not simply list dry statistics, but directs us towards important principles. Beginning with the word "Know," Ibn Ezra is teaching an important lesson.

Each of the Ten Plagues was used as a tool to teach Egypt and the world the following: 1) Aaron and Moses were each assigned 3 specific plagues each, in the lower and higher realms respectively, 2) the staff was absent in certain miracles, 3) Moses joined with Aaron in a single plague of boils, 4) God distinguished (v'hifla, v'hiflaisi) between Egypt and the Jews through two plagues, in which no staff was used, and which was placed in the center of the series of plagues. These 2 plagues were also not performed by Moses or Aaron, but by God alone, as the verses says, "And God performed" (Exod 8:20, 9:6).

In his Laws of Idolatry, 1:1, Maimonides teaches that early man already began projecting greatness onto the heavenly bodies. Man thought, since the planets, stars and spheres "minister before God," they too are worthy of man's honor. Eventually, man's corrupt thinking—and sins—increased as he replaced simple honor of stars with his worship of them as deities, until God was no longer recognized. Star worship reveals man's false estimation that the heavens deserve to be worshipped. Man feared not only the stars and planets, but also heavenly phenomena, as Jeremiah 10:2-3 says: "So says God, 'To the ways of the nations do not learn,

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

and from the signs of the heavens do not fear, because from them the nations fear. Because the statutes of the peoples are false, because a tree from the forest they cut, fashioned by an artisan with an adze.” Jeremiah teaches that man did in fact fear the heavens. But their fear stemmed from a false projection, not reality. Jeremiah’s lesson is insightful: he equates the fear of heavens with the idolatrous practice of prostrating to wooden idols. He taught that the heavens do not hold any greater powers than wooden sculptures. Man’s idolatrous emotions project the same imagined authority onto both heaven and trees. But the underlying message is that man fears the skies, as Maimonides taught above. It appears that based on man’s first error that God occupies space and “lives in the skies,” man erred further, ascribing greatness to the spheres and stars that are assumed to be “in close proximity” to God and minister to Him. One fallacy must lead to others, as all is built on lies.

Egypt accepted the primitive view of the heavens as determining man’s fate. God corrected this error with one aspect of His plagues. Commanding Aaron to perform the plagues limited to the earthly realm, and Moses to perform those of the “higher” heavenly realm, God discounted Egypt’s dangerous esteem of the heavens. God showed that the only difference between the heavens and Earth is the level of understanding required to comprehend their natures, as the wiser man—Moses—addressed the heavenly plagues, and Aaron addressed the earthly plagues. Laws control both realms, and both could be understood. Understanding a phenomenon removes one’s false, mystical estimations, and accurately renders it a natural phenomenon. Realizing that all corners of the natural world—including the heavens—are “guided” by laws, means they are subordinate to something greater: God who created those laws. These realms do not “control,” but are “controlled,” teaching the Egyptians that their views were false.

The Egyptians erred by assuming that the heavens were a governing and mystical realm. God corrected this disproportionately high, heavenly grandeur. God did so in two ways: 1) by showing the heavens’ subordination to a Higher will, God demoted heaven’s status from the divine to the mundane, and, 2) by aligning the plagues with Moses’ and Aaron’s participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heavens not divine, but they share the status as created and subordinate entities. Additionally, Moses and Aaron each performed three miracles



independently to equate heaven and earth, dispelling a false supremacy of heaven and meteorological phenomena. Hopefully, the Egyptians would comprehend that both heaven and Earth are equally under God’s control, as Jeremiah taught, and that neither one is “divine.” Egypt would then realize that Something higher was responsible for all creation. God wanted the good for the Egyptians. The good, means knowledge of what is true. As Torah says concerning these plagues, “in order that they tell of My name in the whole world” (Exod. 9:16).

Deified Heavens

Interestingly, the three plagues designed in the heavens were hail, locusts and darkness. Why these three? Perhaps to address three errors of the Egyptians. Egypt assumed meteorological phenomena to be divine, so God responded with a hail/fire plague to display His exclusive control in this area. Wind—believed to be controlled by Egypt’s god “Shu”—was also a heavenly phenomenon, but now they experienced an unnatural wind blowing the entire day, the entire night, until the next morning when it delivered the terror of locusts destroying all vegetation remaining of the hail’s previous destruction

(Exod 10:13). Finally, with the plague of darkness, God displayed control over the primary focus in heaven, the sun, and thus control over their sun god “Ra.” Weather, the atmosphere and outer space were all shown as false deities and under the exclusive control of Israel’s God. Additionally, the plague of “darkness” had one other facet: it was palpable, perhaps to show that it was not a simple solar eclipse.

Justice is God’s Alone

Ibn Ezra noted 2 plagues—the attacking animal mixture and livestock deaths—where no staff was used, meaning that man was absent. These 2 also included the lesson of national distinction: Exod. 8:18, “And I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen that My people stand on it, to prevent from being there the wild beasts...” and Exod. 9:4, “And God will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nothing will die of the Israelites.” What is the purpose of distinguishing Egypt from Israel? And why did God restrict Moses and Aaron’s involvement in these 2 plagues, performing them Himself? And primarily, we must understand the unique nature of these 2 plagues.

Distinguishing Egypt from the Jews by

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afflicting Egypt alone with these 2 plagues expressed God's system of reward and punishment: "justice." God performed these 2 plagues Himself as administering justice is exclusively God's domain. Therefore, Moses and Aaron could not be involved.

Animal mixtures attacking Egypt sought to reject the Egyptian view that their animal deities favored them. With this plague, God administers justice regarding Egypt's view of God: God does not have intermediaries (animals).

God's next plague was killing Egyptian livestock, also a judgment through reward and punishment, but here addressing God's providence, and not who God is as a deity. Thus, with these two plagues God rejected Egyptian's view of deities, and of providence.

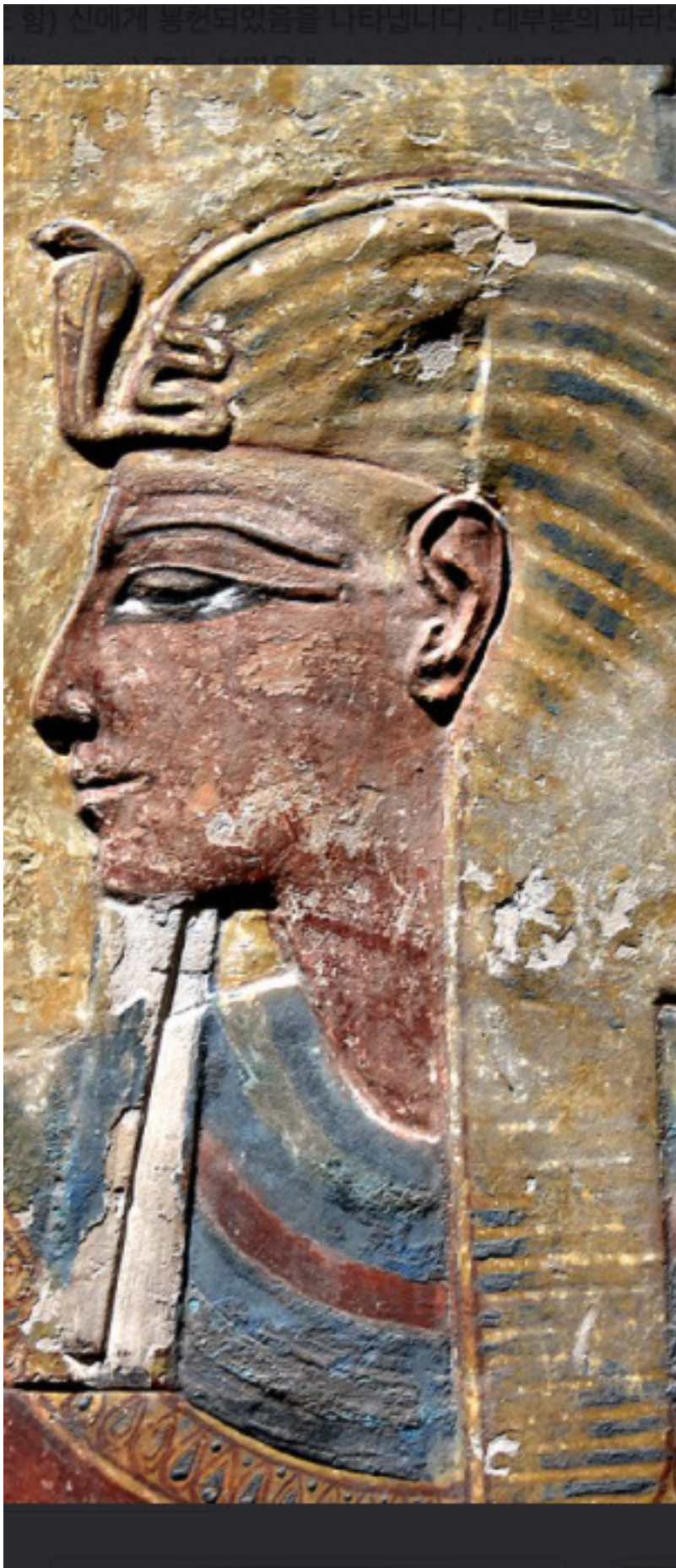
The Egyptians thought that to please their gods was man's correct obligation; an expression of a child/parent relationship. How would such an infantile idea be corrected in order to teach God's true system? By Egypt witnessing punitive measures only on their "side of the river" they were awakened to a new idea: objective morality. They were held accountable. They also realized something even more essential: their false view of their gods was one where their gods benefited from man's actions. Egypt felt that their gods need man to serve their needs, which were projections of man's own needs. But Judaism teaches that relating to God is not for God, but truly only for man. God does not need man. Man cannot affect God, as if God does not previously know our actions. Man must do that which is proper for himself, and if he does not, he will not only be punished, but he will lose the true good for himself. The Egyptian's exclusive receipt of these two plagues—a system of "reward and punishment"—awoke them to a realization that service of God means not catering to a god's needs, but rather, an alignment with proper ideals and morality. This is a drastic difference from Egypt's primitive notion of worship and pleasing their gods.

Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods, i.e., animals: wild animals attacked them, and then their own animals died. Their deification of animal gods was compromised. Pharaoh's response (Exod. 8:21), "sacrifice to your God" confirms his lowered estimation of animals, to the point that he encourages Moses to slaughter them, and to do so to his God. In other cases, Pharaoh does gesture to free the Jews, but only here in connection with the animal plagues does Pharaoh say, "sacrifice to your God." Torah includes these words of Pharaoh to inform us that the plague had the desired effect on Pharaoh. God understands what will affect man, and so it does. The Egyptians were all the more confused when they saw that Israel was not affected, even though they did not serve animals. In Exod. 9:7, Pharaoh himself sent messengers to see if Israel's livestock suffered. This plague of the animal's death concerned him greatly.

God displayed His control of the complete universe: the first three plagues showed His control of the Earth, the last three over the heavens, and the middle three displayed His control over man, meaning an expression of justice: only Egypt's population was attacked by animals, only their herds were killed, and their astrologers were exposed as charlatans when they could not remove boils from their own bodies, just like average Egyptians.

Moses, Aaron and the staff are not employed in the 2 animal plagues, since these were more clearly God's measures of justice, distinguishing Egypt from Israel as the verses state. As such, human participation





through directing these plagues (the staff) would suggest God does not exact justice alone. Therefore, God did not instruct Moses or Aaron to employ the staff. God must be viewed as the only one who determines man's justice.

An additional reason suggests itself why these two animal plagues were bereft of the staff. Perhaps the staff carried with it some element of cause and effect; man would hit something, and only then would the plague commence. Perhaps, God wished to teach that He is in no way bound by the physical. A plague may occur with no prior cause. Removing the staff might effectively teach this lesson, as nothing was smitten to bring on these plagues.

I heard another explanation for the use of the staff. Its presence was to remove any divinity projected by Egypt onto Moses and Aaron, lest onlookers falsely believe these two mortals possessed some powers. The staff might have been employed as a redirecting agent, a pointer. By seeing the staff incorporated into the miracles, Moses' and Aaron's significance was diminished in Egypt's eyes. But wouldn't people then believe the staff to have those powers? I believe for fear of this erroneous notion, God created a miracle where the staff itself turned into a snake. This was to show that it too was under the control of God. Had there been no use of a staff, focus would have remained on the announcers of the plagues (Moses and Aaron) thereby deifying man, not God. But I feel the first possibility is most correct, i.e., that God must be viewed as the sole cause of human justice.

Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? Jessie Fischbein taught that just as Moses and Aaron addressed the higher and lower forms of nature in their respective plagues, the plague of boils executed by both Moses and Aaron included the higher and lower matter: ashes from Earth, and they were commanded to be thrown towards the heavens (Exod. 9:8). Her parallel revealed another facet of the boils, as God's plagues contain many strata of insights. I believe the boils' combination of realms was to teach that heaven and Earth do not operate in two unrelated systems. The very act of throwing ashes towards the heavens teaches that both Earth (ash) and heaven (air) work together. This was a necessary lesson in the reduction of the heaven's deified status. By showing this further idea that the heavens participate in earthly phenomena, the heavens' false, divine status was stripped that much further. Just as his subjects will view a king who spends time with commoners in a less regal light, so too the heavens now lost their reputation by participating in Earthly matters. Moses could have collected the ashes himself, but by working with Aaron, together, they underlined this point.

Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues? Perhaps, as these plagues specifically intended to distinguish Egypt from Israel, the evildoers from the victims, this theme of "justice" is placed smack in the middle of the set of 10 Plagues. Thereby, justice emerges as a highlighted message of all the plagues. A story or an awards dinner does not commence with the primary plot or the guest of honor...in both, they are placed at the midway point. Here too, perhaps God placed His plagues of justice in the midway point of all the plagues, to underline the theme that all the plagues were in fact an expression of justice, not viciousness.

We now appreciate Ibn Ezra's identification of the 10 Plagues' clues, and his message that we "know" their precise design. He means that God is sharing much wisdom with His 10 warnings to Egypt, and that much analysis is essential to unveil God's many lessons, if we are to know their meaning. ■



the HARDENED heart

Rabbi Reuven Mann

A major feature, of the story of plagues which were visited upon Egypt, is the “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.” Superficially, this seems to imply, that Hashem made the King stubborn, so that he would refuse to yield to Moshe’s demands.

This way of understanding the matter, asserts that Pharaoh actually lost his free-will and could not find his way, to comply with G-d’s Will. This is the view of the Rambam, who maintains that even though it is the general desire of Hashem that the wicked should repent and return to righteous behavior; there are exceptions, and Pharaoh was one of them. He was penalized for his great wickedness, by being prevented from escaping his predicament.

However, not all the commentators accept this position. Most prominent among the dissenters, is the Sforno, who argues that Hashem never “gives up” on even the worst sinner; but instead “waits” for him, to repent. And, if he does return to Hashem and renounces his sinful ways, Hashem will forgive him.

Indeed, the Rambam himself, holds that even if a person sinned grievously his entire life but (sincerely) repented at the very end, his Teshuva (repentance) is accepted and he has a place in the world to come. (Unless, that person is one of the few whose sins, like those of Pharaoh, are so wicked that they are punished with the loss of their free-will and thus cannot do Teshuva.)

But the Sforno, denies that Hashem ever removes a person’s capacity for repentance. His way, of understanding the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart, is unique and original. He says, that it’s purpose was to provide Pharaoh with

the intestinal fortitude, to resist being crushed by the overwhelming force of the plagues. Many of the afflictions visited upon Pharaoh and Egypt, were devastating and terrifying. The natural impact, would have been to instill great fear and break down any possibility of resistance.

Therefore, says the Sforno, Pharaoh would have automatically yielded to Hashem, as a result of the crippling blows which were visited upon him. But that type of capitulation, was not what Hashem sought; for it would not have resulted from a free-willed decision, to become obedient to the Creator.

Therefore, Hashem intervened by giving Pharaoh the psychological endurance, to not be crushed by the blows that fell upon him. In this way, Pharaoh would not be compelled to listen to Moshe, but would retain the ability to freely decide.

The pertinent lesson here, is to carefully preserve our freedom of action; and not allow ourselves to become so addicted to unwholesome substances and behaviors, eventuating in our becoming creatures of compulsion. A true human being, is one who possesses the freedom to behave according to wisdom. One, who like Pharaoh, recognizes the good but simply cannot compel himself to do what it requires, is lacking a vital component of the human constitution.

We may raise a question on the Rambam: If Pharaoh had lost the ability to conform to G-d’s command to send forth the Jews, how is it that in the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh himself gave the order for the Jews to leave immediate-

ly. Did he not, in this instance, do precisely what he had been instructed to do?

I believe, that the Rambam and Sforno would agree, that Pharaoh’s freeing of the Jews under the pressure of the final plague, did not constitute a conscious decision to conform to Hashem’s Will. In this case, the terror was so great, that Pharaoh simply had no choice. He reacted instinctively, in order to save himself, from an unthinkable calamity. In this instance, G-d did not intervene to give Pharaoh the emotional strength, to remain uncrushed by the blows.

The feature of repentance, was prominent in the first nine Makkot (plagues), that Hashem brought down on Egypt. In all of these cases, Hashem hardened Pharaoh’s heart, so that he could retain a clear mind and make a rational decision. But Pharaoh squandered the opportunity.

Our Parsha, Bo, records the final meeting between Moshe and Pharaoh, which took place after the plague of Darkness. Moshe firmly told him, that the Jews would have to bring all of their animals with them, for they had no way of knowing what and how many sacrifices Hashem would require of them. Moshe went so far as to say, “Even you will place in our hands feast-offerings and elevation-offerings; and we shall offer them, to Hashem our G-d. Shemot 10:25)”

According to the Even Ezra, Moshe meant to say, that our G-d is the Creator of the universe, whom all people – including Pharaoh – are obligated to worship. As far as Pharaoh was concerned, this was the final straw. “Pharaoh said to him (Moshe), ‘Go from me! Beware—do not see my face any more, for on the day you see my face you shall die!’ (Shemot 10:28)”

Pharaoh, thereby indicated, that his relationship with Moshe was over; and he would not engage in any further efforts to hear the commands of Hashem, or be affected by the words of Moshe. The purpose of the tenth plague, was to cause Pharaoh to release the Jews from slavery; even though doing so, was against his will.

Hashem, had granted Pharaoh a great opportunity to grow spiritually, by assigning Moshe and Aaron to be his teachers and guides; but Pharaoh tragically squandered the opportunity.

There is much we can learn from the tragic story of Pharaoh. Hashem provides us with many chances to improve ourselves, in many different ways. We should take advantage of them, when they appear, and not put them off for a later date.

We do not know what the future holds, and whether opportunities that are available now, will be there in the future. Or if our great desire for religious growth and improvement, will always be so powerful and compelling. In the spiritual realm, we should always be guided by the advice of our Rabbis, who famously said, “If not now, when? (Avot 1:14)”

Shabbat Shalom. ■

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THE EXODUS Despoiling Egypt

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

And God said to Abram (Abraham), “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; I will also execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth” (Gen. 15:13,14)

What is the purpose of this great wealth? We then read God’s forecast to Moses at the Burning Bush:

And I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will perform in their midst; after that Pharaoh shall let you go. And I will place grace in the Egyptians’ eyes towards the Jews, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. Each woman shall request from her neighbor and the dweller in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, despoiling the Egyptians (Exod. 3:20-22).

Finally, just prior to the last plague of Firstborn Deaths, God addresses Moses:

And God said to Moses, “I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall utterly completely chase you out from here. Now, tell the people to request, each man from his neighbor and each woman from her’s, objects of silver and gold (Exod. 11:1,2)

These last 2 quotes are the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, the first quote above. However, how do we explain the discrepancies of the women alone requesting silver and gold, while the second quote now includes the men? Also, why mention that the women will dress their children only in the second quote? Finally, the last quote alone includes the words “utterly completely chase you out.” What is its significance?

Perhaps the purpose of the enslaved Jews receiving gold, silver, and clothing from their former oppressors, indicates that this was an act of God. Meaning, the Exodus was orchestrated by God. This demonstrates God’s fulfillment of his promise to Abraham, and not simply one people ridding their country of another people. For which oppressor ousts their slaves and gives them elaborate wealth, were it not by God’s plan?

A second consideration is that the Jews gain dignity to obscure their former slave status. As now was the very formation of the Jews’ nationhood, and nationhood comprises their future generations, God instructed Moses that the women dressed their children who are the next generation. This dignity may also serve as a foundation for the Jews to embrace God’s Torah. For a less dignified people may feel unworthy or reluctant to accept God’s authority when commanding the Jews in Torah. A poor taste of Egyptian authority can compromise accepting God’s authority. Therefore, the Jews could not transition from Egyptian authority to God’s authority without a transitional state of dignity.

Lastly, just prior to the final plague of Firstborn Deaths, God told Moses that the Egyptians would “chase” them out of Egypt. However, such an angry eviction would compromise the Jews’ dignity. Therefore, a third element of requesting gold and silver acted to counter this undignified “oust.” But as children do not sense this hostile attitude of eviction, God told Moses that only the men and women should ask for the gold and silver, not mentioning the children.

One must not think the second quote mentions women to exclude men. It merely means this was the women’s role, but men too would be asked later to request Egypt’s spoils. ■

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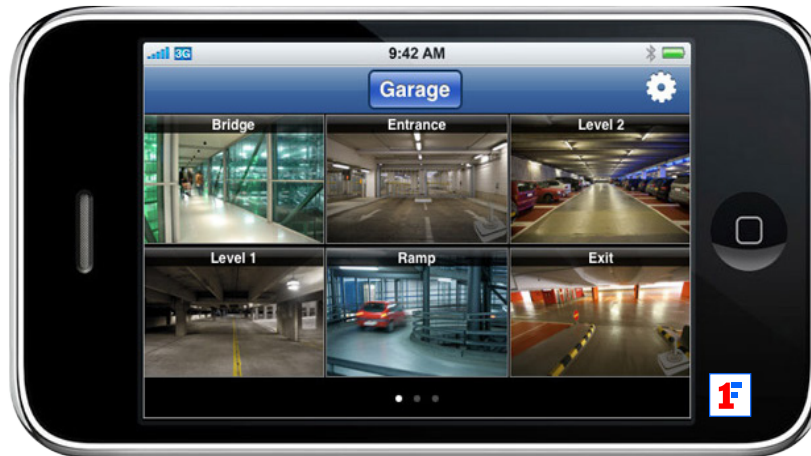
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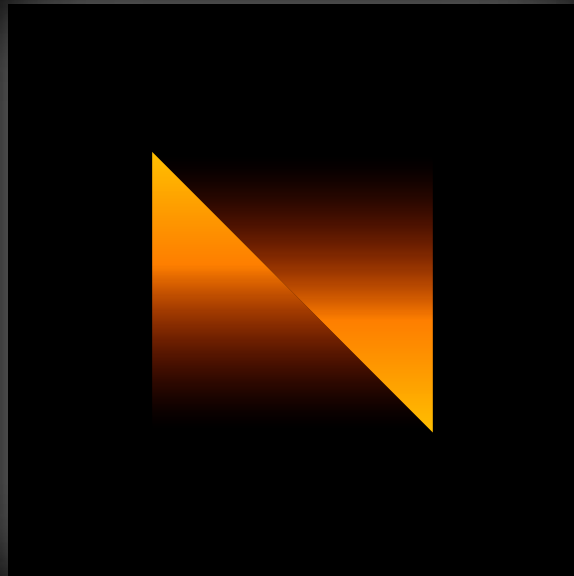
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54 Ways of Looking at Evil

15th WAY: IDENTITY GROUP

In the parsha Bo, the Egyptians are subjected to the tenth and final makkah (plague)—the death of the first born (makkos bechoros). As the parsha states (Shemos:12:29):

It came to pass at midnight, and the Lord smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who is in the dungeon, and every firstborn animal.

Earlier in the night, God commanded the Jewish people of Egypt what they had to do to avoid sharing the same fate as the Egyptians. The Torah states (Shemos:12:22):

And you shall take a bunch of hyssop and immerse [it] in the blood (of the Korban Pesach) that is in the basin, and you shall extend to the lintel and to the two doorposts the blood that is in the basin, and you shall not go out, any man from the entrance of his house until morning.

It is only the act of placing this blood on the doorpost and lintel that protected the Jews from having their first born killed along with those of the Egyptians, as the following pasuk states (Shemos 12:23):

The Lord will pass to smite the Egyptians, and He will see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the entrance, and He will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses to smite [you].

Rashi comments, “once the destroyer is given permission to destroy, he does not discriminate between righteous and wicked. And night is the time that destroyers are given permission, as it is said: “in which every beast of the forest moves about” (Ps. 104:20). — [from Mechilta] Rashi offers a similar explanation in describing the method by which God destroyed all life on Earth at the time of the Great Flood. He comments, “Wherever you find promiscuity (and idolatry), “androlomus” comes upon the world and kills both good and bad alike. — [from Gen. Rabbah 26:5] Rashi’s parallel explanations between the destruction of the Flood and that of the death of the first born are instructive in clarifying how the Jewish people were protected from this final makka. Particularly, why was it necessary to save the Jewish people through the placing of the blood of the Korban Pesach on the door and lintel? No protective act was necessary for the Jews to be excluded from any of the other makkos. Also, why is the concept of the Jews being “passed over” at the core of their redemption from Egypt.

The central offering of the holiday is called

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

RABBI RICHARD BORAH

the Korban Pesach and the holiday is called by the term “Pesach” which mean “pass over” and refers to the destroyer “passing over” the homes of the Jewish people. Why is this term so central to the process of miracles and punishment that resulted in the redemption of the Jewish people from bondage? I would not have thought that this “passing over” of the destroyer would be so central to the redemption as to be utilized as the name the offering and the holiday. Why is this so? We can see that there is a great distinction between the first nine makkos and the death of the first born. The first nine makkos were a means of revealing God’s existence and Kingship to the Egyptians and the world, displaying His control over the forces of nature and his setting aside the Jewish people as a nation under his protection and providence.

The Egyptians were deserving of this punishment through their cruel treatment of the Jews, but these 9 makkos were not specifically brought to punish them as much to bring them a clear understanding of God’s rule over them. But makkos bechoros (the death of the first born of all living things in Egypt from the greatest man to the smallest flea) was the makka that carried out the judgment God passed on the Egyptians for their sins. This was not done to instruct or to clarify. This final makka was brought to punish the Egyptians and to bring about the redemption of the Jewish people. When God carries out a judgment on a city or nation, all those deserving of destruction are destroyed in that place, unless they merit exceptional protec-

tion. In this case the first born took the place of all living things that were decreed for destruction in the time of Noah.

What was the greater evil of the first born that did not apply to the other Egyptians who did not die? Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that the Egyptian first born did have greater culpability than the others as they were the leaders of their families and set the agenda for the cruel treatment of the Jews. I would like to pose the idea that perhaps the reason the Jews needed to place the blood on their doorpost was because they too were culpable of death. Though perhaps worthy of being given the opportunity to save themselves through the Korban Pesach offering and the placing of the blood on their doorway, they were not worthy of being saved without this action. Why was this so? We know that the Jews of Egypt, with the exception of the Leviim, intermingled with and joined the Egyptians, to some extent, in their idolatrous way of life. They identified with them and joined them, from an identity perspective. The midrash explains that the Jews had sunk to the 49th level of tumah and needed to be redeemed immediately.

The fact that the “destroyer” had to “pass over” the houses of the Jews implies that the houses were physically intermingled with those of the Egyptians and not separate in the land of Goshen where the Jews originally settled, far from the Egyptians homes. But how did the slaughter of the Korban Pesach and the placing of the blood on the doors and

lintel suffice to exclude the Jews within from being included in the destruction? This is different from the case of Noach during the Flood, where he was subjected to the same deluge as the rest of the world. He was only saved by being in the ark, which he had been instructed to build. But with makkos bechoros, the decree of death “passed over” the Jews and did not touch them. In what way did the blood of the Korban Pesach placed on the doorposts transform them so as to exclude them from the destruction? One way of understanding this is to view the offering of the Korban Pesach and the placing of its blood on the doorposts, as the act that created the Jewish people. Through this act Klal Yisrael was born. Taking the blood of one of the “gods” of Egypt, slaughtering it and placing it on the doorpost was a free will break of identification with this group. We know that the Torah law is that a person who does not offer the Korban Pesach is punished with “karet”—being cut off from the Jewish people. Once the individual Jews of Egypt became Klal Yisrael (the Jewish people) through this act of placing the blood on they doorpost, they were no longer part of Egypt and the Egyptian people. As such, they were not subject to God’s decree against the people of Egypt. If a Jew did not carry out the Korban Pesach, they remained Jews individually, but did not become a member of Klal Yisrael and were not excluded from the punishment of the “destroyer” sent to carry out judgment on Egypt. These Jews would be destroyed along with the Egyptians. ■



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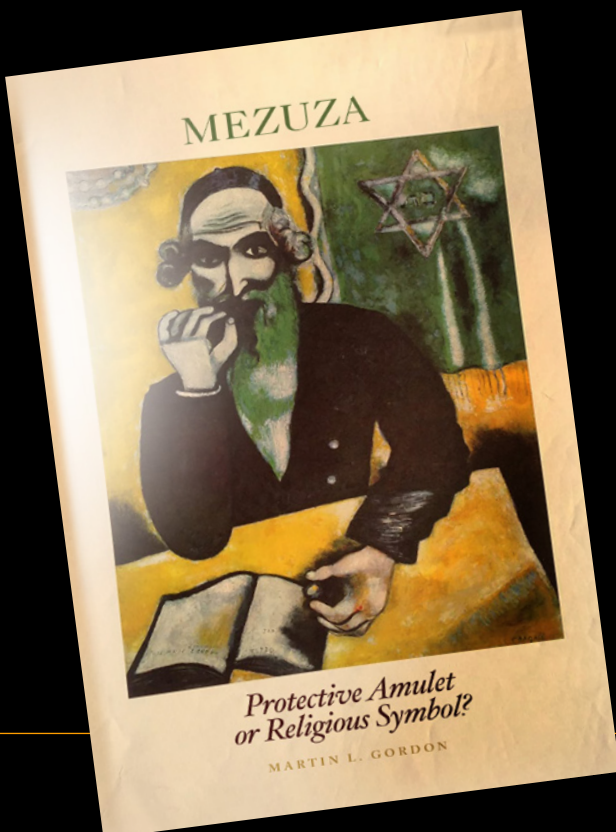
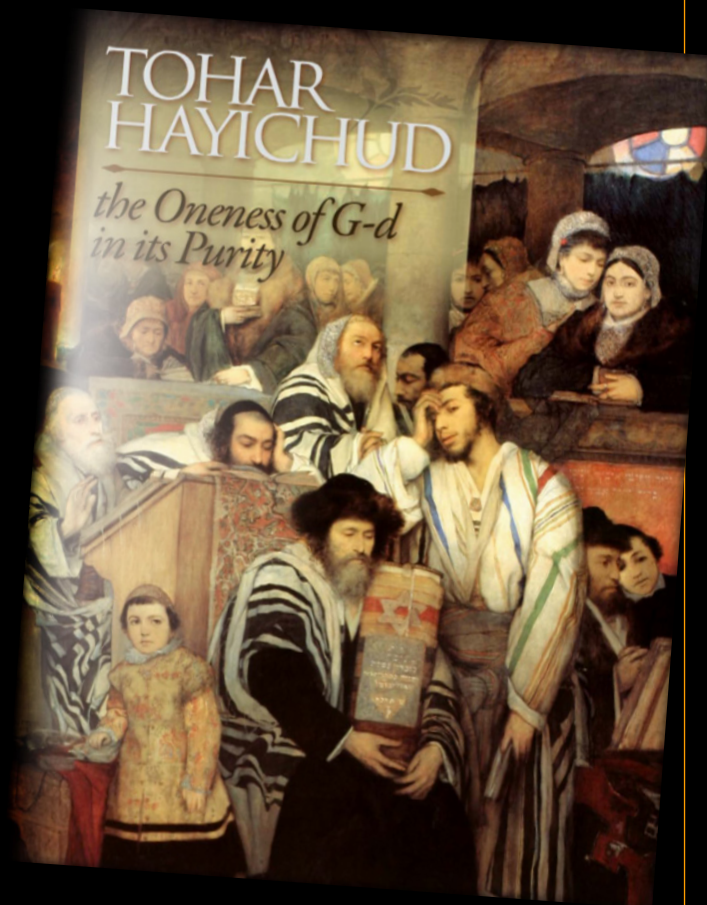
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God created man to live by truths concerning Him, creation, others and ourselves.

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

Racism: A Lie: Man descends from Adam. **Black/white twins** unveil the lie of racism. Bible denounces it: Moses' wife was black, our kings married Egyptians and Messiah descends from Moabites. "Better is the day of death than the day of birth" (Eccl. 7:1). Birth doesn't define us; how we live does.

Insecurity: Man's insecurities can be false, but reality is greater, as it is truth. Man seeks security about his future, accepting fallacies like astrology, amulets, omens, horoscopes and others. God prohibited such practices precisely because they are false. God is more powerful than false notions. Rely on Him alone.

Happiness: Many think wealth and success secure happiness. But Torah teaches happiness stems from study. When pursuing wisdom, one is most happy as Torah offers childlike amazement at every turn. Study offers the daily novelty necessary to retain interest and the depth that offers amazement.

Pleasing Others: Don't seek approval over truth. Torah says, "What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:5). "Don't fear man" (Deut. 1:17). "Desist from man whose soul is in his nostrils, for what is he considered?" (Isaiah 2:22). Mortal attention is irrelevant. Following God earns all goodness.

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