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| TZEDAKA |

"Please test me in this said the Lord of hosts. I will surely open the store houses of heaven and empty out for you a blessing that is more than sufficient" (Malachi 3:10).

This means that God returns one's tzedaka tenfold. Chazal say that one cannot perform a mitzvah just receive a reward, but in tzedaka it is permissible. This is because if it is performed properly, it means God must return the kindness because God is the source of all kindness, of all tzedaka.

Rabbi Israel Chait

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Torah: Literal or Not?

READER: How does Rambam understand the Akeidah? Does he take it literally?

How can Abraham be righteous when he committed adultery with the housemaid?

—Turk Hill

RABBI: Yes, the Akeidah was literal. The rule is that we understand Torah literally, unless it is impossible to do so (Rabbi Israel Chait). An example of an interpretation that is impossible literally is "And Jacob was left alone, and he wrestled with a man until daybreak" (Gen. 32:25), and understanding the "man" as a literal

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human. Rabbi Chait taught, as Jacob was alone, he could not have wrestled a literal person. The wrestling was with something that could be understood to be a "man," perhaps indicating he wrestled "within himself"...with a part of his personality...an image of a "man." But the Akeidah poses no impossibilities, so it is understood literally.

And Abraham sleeping with Hagar was not adultery as she was not married. Furthermore, it was Sarah's request that he do so.

READER: I read somewhere that Rambam understands all narratives with angels as visions. Is it accurate to say that the angel who appeared to Abraham when he was about to sacrifice his son was a vision, dream, or daytime thinking?

RABBI: That moment when the angel appeared to Abraham he must have been unconscious, as Rambam says angels are not on Earth, but exist only in visions. But the Akeida occurred literally.

READER: According to Rambam, did Abraham discover G-d through reason, rather than faith or revelation?

RABBI: He used his mind alone...Rambam said he had no teachers:

"He neither had a teacher nor one to impart anything to him, for he was sunk in Ur of the Chaldeans among the foolish worshipers of stars, and his father, and his mother, like all the people, worshiped stars, and he, although following them in their worship, busied his heart and reflected until he attained the path of truth, and, by his correct thinking, he understood when he finally saw the line of righteousness. He knew that there is One God." (Laws of Idol Worship 1:3) ■

Sinful Charity?

READER: I recently came upon a shiur about a concept that was new to me. The idea that it can be viewed as some kind of evil if you give tzedaka to the wrong person, something to be punished for. Can you shed more light on the matter as it sounds a bit scary.

—*Omphile Tshipa, Africa*

RABBI: I don't know of the idea you cited, but Rabbi Chait discussed how lost money can be considered tzedaka. If he doesn't give tzedaka willfully, it will be taken from him:

The gemara says that if one does not give Tzedaka, God takes that money from him. He may not even know how God does this. But despite this, it is still considered as if he gave Tzedaka. This is because through losing his possessions and his realization that his loss was due to his failure to give Tzedaka, it is considered Tzedaka because the person broke his emotion [his attachment to his money].

READER: How far does one have to go to verify if the recipient is deserving?

RABBI: Rabbi Chait said if someone asks for tzedaka, he is a suitable recipient. My understanding is that as personal dignity is a powerful need, if one forgoes his dignity by seeking charity, one's need for money must be even greater than his need for dignity, and thus, he is worthy of receiving it. ■

Is Torah Superstitious?

READER: What's your take on this idea that the 3 weeks or the 9 days are a time when people should be more cautious because it's likely something bad will happen? This sounds very superstitious to me. How can a just God set a time in the year where more bad things are likely to happen? It kind of reminds me of the idea of bad things happening due to a defective letter in a mezuzah.

—*Jack Hazan, New York*

RABBI: The idea is that we should recognize that God has a reward and punishment system, and that reality is highlighted during these three weeks. So by acting in a way where we fear punishment, that demonstrates our acceptance of the reality of punishment. But in no way do we validate powers other than God, nor omens during a certain time. As God created the universe alone, with no aid from another source, suggesting such forces exist violates reason. However, God did select the 9th of the month of Av as a day of repeated calamities in order to demonstrate that these calamities were not happenstance. By the calamities occurring on identical dates, and on numerous occasions, we realize that they are divine and due to our sins. ■

Moses' Last Crucial Words

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's Torah reading commences the fifth and final Book of the Torah, Devarim, which is fundamentally different from the other four Books of the Pentateuch. Those works exclusively contain the words that Hashem dictated to Moshe, who functioned essentially as a faithful scribe without making any changes in the story. But Sefer Devarim is different. Moshe knew that his journey on earth was nearing its end. He dedicated the last days of his life to communicating his final insights and teachings to B'nei Yisrael. When he completed this task, Hashem told him to incorporate all his addresses and make them the last Book of the Torah. Moshe reached the level where the words he uttered were worthy of attaining the exalted status of Torah. It would seem that great leaders do not leave the scene silently. They have accumulated much useful knowledge and insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their people, which they don't want to simply take to the grave. The concerned leader desires to impart certain messages which can be of great benefit to future generations.

And what better time is there to reinforce vital spiritual ideals than when one's time is up and is, for all intents and purposes, "no longer in the game?" Knowing that the leader is soon to depart, the people will listen to his words with rapt attention, seeking clarity on all matters pertaining to proper moral behavior and religious observance.

The timing also affords the leader an opportunity to express criticisms and unpleasant truths, which might not be too welcome at other times. People will be less inclined to view his negative words as being self-serving when he is conveying them in the shadow of eternity.

In the Book of Devarim Moshe reviewed certain Mitzvot which required greater amplification and introduced new ones which had as yet not been revealed. The entire Jewish religion revolves around performance of Taryag (613 Commandments), and these needed to be clarified to the greatest degree possible.

But Judaism is not restricted to performance of the Mitzvot alone, as we are enjoined to be a Holy People. The Torah contains a philosophy of life which is embedded in the Mitzvot. In Sefer Devarim, Moshe elucidated some of the fundamental philosophical ideas of Judaism.

For example, in Parshat Vaetchanan he reveals that the Jews, due to their brilliant elucidations of the Torah, are to be regarded by the nations as a "wise and discerning people." And in Parshat Eikev he deflates any notion of inborn superiority, and explains why Hashem has chosen the Jews to be His special People. There are many other

theological doctrines which are expressed at various places in the last Book of the Torah.

The main feature of Moshe's "last will and testament" is the complete absence of personal reminiscences and stories which are designed to garner praise. Moshe has absolutely no "agenda" and no interest in promoting a personal image or legacy. There is, furthermore, no evidence of any material which would cause one to say that Moshe was concerned about his "place in history."

The fact that he was uninterested in being popular and well-liked, can be seen from his willingness to express sharp criticisms of B'nei Yisrael. One example is in Parshat Eikev where he states, "You shall therefore realize that not in your merit does Hashem, your G-d, give you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people." No contemporary Rabbi could, with even the best of intentions, deliver this type of communication to his congregants and hope to retain his position.

But there is an important teaching here. We all want our leaders to inspire us by making us feel good and telling us how wonderful we are. But there is more to a great leader than that. We must seek out the truly knowing individuals who have special wisdom and whose love for the people is manifested by their courageous willingness to be brutally honest when necessary.

Shabbat Shalom.

Dear Friends,

My newest book, Eternally Yours: G-d's Greatest Gift To Mankind on VaYikra was recently published, and is now available at: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09SHRXS3Q>

I hope that my essays will enhance your reading and study of the Book of VaYikra and would greatly appreciate a brief review on Amazon.com.

Additionally, for those in Eretz Yisrael, my books are available at David Linden's bookstore located at Emek Refaim Street 21, Jerusalem and at Pomeranz Book store, Be'eri 5 Jerusalem. They are very nice stores to visit and browse.

—Rabbi Reuven Mann ■



HARDENED

Against Repentance

Rabbi Richard Borah

In the parsha of Devarim Moshe recounts many of the pivotal events of the Jewish people's forty-year odyssey through the desert. Moshe states:

But Sihon, king of Heshbon, did not wish to let us pass by him, for the Lord your God caused his spirit to be hardened and his heart to be obstinate, in order that He would give him into your hand, as this day.

The Rambam in the Mishnah Torah explains unique type of punishment in which God blocks the path of repentance for an individual, and brings as examples Pharaoh and Sichon:

It is possible that a person may commit a grave transgression, or several transgressions, such that the True Judge rules that the punishment for this sinner, for the transgressions that he has performed willingly and knowingly, is that teshuva will be withheld from him and he will not be allowed the right to turn from his evil, so that he may die and be lost in the sin that he performs... Therefore, it is written in the Torah, "I shall harden Pharaoh's heart": because he first sinned on his own initiative, and did evil to the Israelites living in his land, as it is written, "Let us deal wisely with them..." - therefore it was ruled that

teshuva would be withheld from him so that he may be punished; therefore, God hardened his heart. But why does He then send a message to him via Moshe, saying, "Let [My people go] and repent [your evil ways]," if He has already told him, "You will not send them out" - as it is written, "You and your servants I know..." but for this I have placed you?" In order to teach everyone that when God withholds teshuva from a sinner, he is not able to repent; he dies in his wickedness which he performed at first of his own free will. Likewise, Sichon: because of his sins he was punished by having teshuva withheld from him, as it is written, "For the Lord your God hardened his spirit and toughened his heart." And likewise, the Canaanites: because of their abominations, teshuva was withheld from them and they waged war against Israel, as it is written, "For it was from God that their heart was hardened for battle against Am Yisrael, in order that they may be annihilated..." God did not decree upon Pharaoh to cause evil to Israel, nor did He cause Sichon to sin in his land, nor the Canaanites to perform abominations, nor the Israelites to engage in idolatry. All of these sinned of their own accord, and all were punished by having teshuva withheld from them. (Laws of Teshuva, 6:3)

There are different interpretations of what is meant by the "hardening of the heart" and whether it means that teshuva is completely prevented by God or only impeded and made more difficult. The Rambam also brings in Chapter 4 of the Laws of Repentance the "5 things (devarim) that cause the path of repentance to be locked (HaNoahleem) before those that commit them." These 5 are:

1. One who separates themselves from the community
2. One who contradicts the words of the sages
3. One who scoffs at mitzvot
4. One who demeans his teachers
5. One who hates admonishment

God's impeding or preventing of repentance for an individual is a difficult concept to understand, as the repentance from sin is a fundamental tenet of Judaism. Even the terrible sinner on his or her death bed can repent, receive pardon and merit a portion in the world to come. So why are the 5 acts listed above, as well as Pharaoh's and Sichon's sins, so unique?

These 5 sins all share a common flaw of self-exaltation. The person is so overwhelmed with their sense of self-importance that they have no patience or tolerance for working with the community. They cannot endure the humbling aspect of community participation. The "reality check" we experience is when others disagree with us or inform us that perhaps, we are

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

not as clever or wonderful as we would like to believe. This profound hubris is also behind the contradicting of a Torah sage, the scoffing at a mitzvah and the demeaning of one's teacher. All of these bespeak a high-heartedness (govah lave). But the clearest example of this inability to endure humility is hating admonishment. Sichon and Paroh were so full of themselves that it would have required specific intervention by God to provide them with an opportunity to see things differently and, perhaps, do teshuvah. Their punishment was that this was not afforded them and their own closed-off haughtiness "blocked them" from teshuvah. By not intervening and providing the precise situation that would have leveraged their path to teshuvah, God impeded their teshuvah, but did not absolutely prevent it.

The Rav (Rabbi Yoseph B. Soloveitchik) explains the concepts of man's sinning and repenting as being the difference between man functioning as an object or functioning as a subject. The Rav explains:

Sin transforms a person into someone who is acted upon or influenced. In response to the very first sin, when HaShem confronted Adam after eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam's response was, "The woman who You gave to be with me, she gave it to me..."(Beresheit,3:12). When HaShem confronted Eve in turn, the response was similar, "The snake tricked me and I ate" (Beresheit 3:13). Both emphasized their helplessness in overcoming an external influence that "forced" their fall....Regarding sin, an analogy is made to sleep. Sleep is an absolute passive state, in which man is a pure object. The insistent demand of the shofar, according to the Rambam, is the imperative to awaken oneself.... Through sin one is an object, while teshuvah allows one to again become a subject" ("Before HaShem You Shall Be Purified" Annotated by A. Lustiger, page 32-33).

Rabbi Soloveitchik focuses on this distinction between the person as "subject" versus the person as "object" in his essay "Kol Dodi Dofek". Here he describes how a person who experiences tragedy at first only as a passive recipient of "fate" must attempt, through will and thought, to take charge of the tragedy and find a way to utilize it for some betterment in his or her person or the community. In this way, the Rav explains, a person acts properly and nobly by transforming him or herself from a person of fate to one of destiny. Now, no longer simply a passive object of tragic circumstances, the person emerges as a subject who purposefully participates in the course and outcomes of the tragedy, retroactively giving it meaning and changing its character to one that contains some element of good. ■

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A dramatic painting depicting the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The scene is filled with chaos, smoke, and people in various states of distress. The Temple's walls are crumbling, and people are seen falling from the heights. The overall tone is one of tragedy and devastation.

The 9th

Our Evil Ways Keep Temple Away

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The Temples were destroyed due to idolatry and baseless hatred towards our brothers and sisters. The current absence of Temple indicates we still have not mended our evil.

Temple exists when we relate properly to God; we do not do so today. We follow idolatrous beliefs like other nations as we relate to mezuzas and red bendels like magical devices; we think dead rabbis hear our prayers, while God warns against consulting the dead; we are over-attached to greed, the physical and to men. **In contrast, all we need is God.** Our competitive emotion drives us towards great Lashon Hara, cheating, and hatred. Our drive towards enormous wealth that we cannot use in 10 lifetimes and that can't fit into a coffin, blinds us from fair business practice and from the only pursuit that truly offers happiness: wisdom.

We have accepted the world's value of fame, fortune and lusts.

We have rejected the teachings of the wisest men: Moses, Solomon and Maimonides.

Pause. Withdraw from the above distractions and sinful ways. Explore Torah to learn what God's prophets and sages urged we follow...for our own good. God has directed us towards a life of fulfillment; He knows best. But we won't find it if we continue on our current path. We need to stop and seriously consider our delusions, egos, lusts, and rejection of God's teachings.

You follow doctors. Why do you reject God?

We have but one chance at life. We are fortunate to still be alive when we can recognize our errors and change...for our own good. May you all find the inner sense of wanting God's goodness, admit error, and steer towards the proper life. ■



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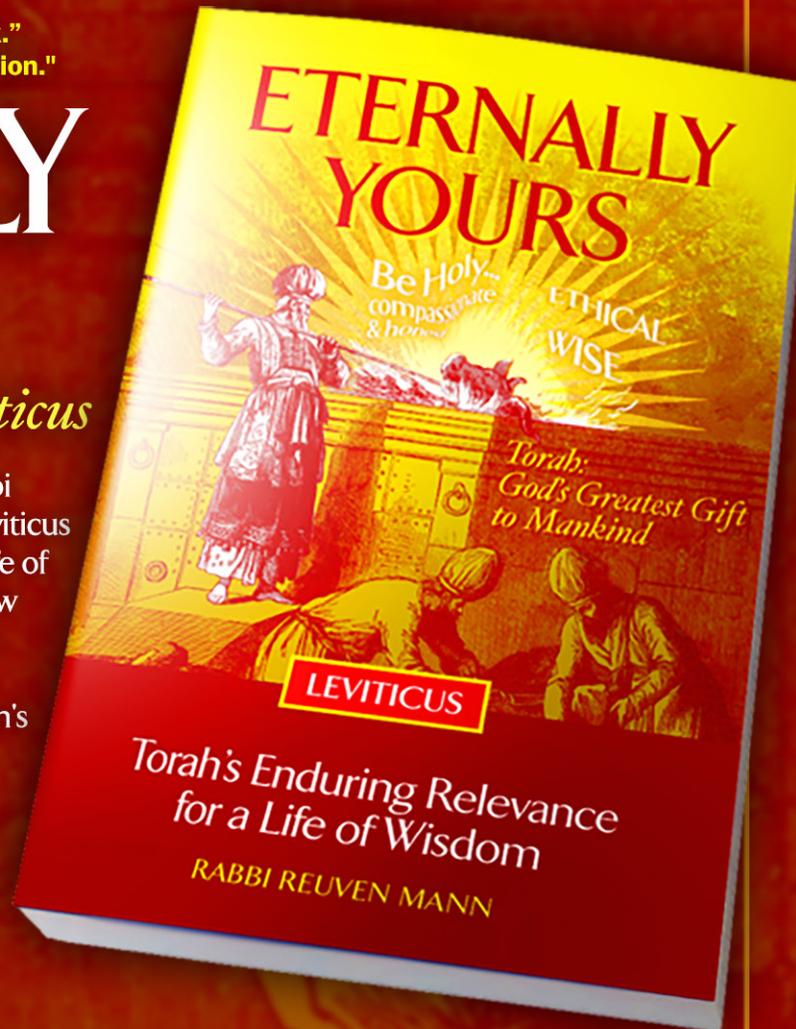
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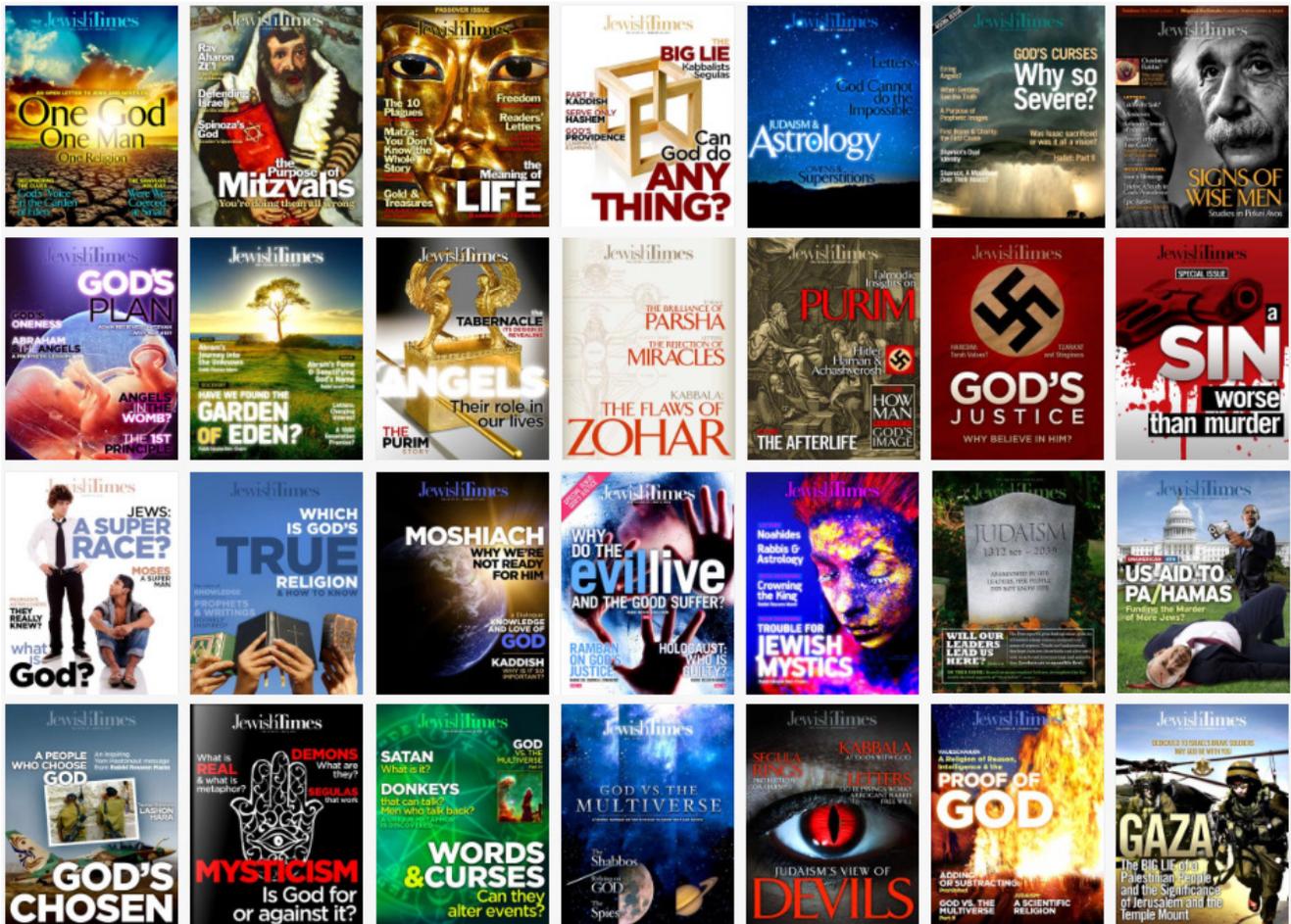
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