

Staff to serpent,...health to leprosy,  
and Nile water to blood. Who were these 3 for?  
Why wasn't 1 enough?  
Then, 10 plagues? What was their purpose?

**100<sup>th</sup>**  
ISSUE

*We wish a complete recovery to Avraham Abba ben Rachel*

ESTD  
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Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification  
of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

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**VaEyra**

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"When Paroh will say to you,  
"Provide for yourself a mofait  
(wonder)." And you will say to  
Ahron, "Take your staff and throw it  
before Paroh. It will become a tamin  
(serpent)." (Shemot 7:9)

The wonders that Moshe and

(continued on page 6)

## IBN EZRA

# the 10 Plagues

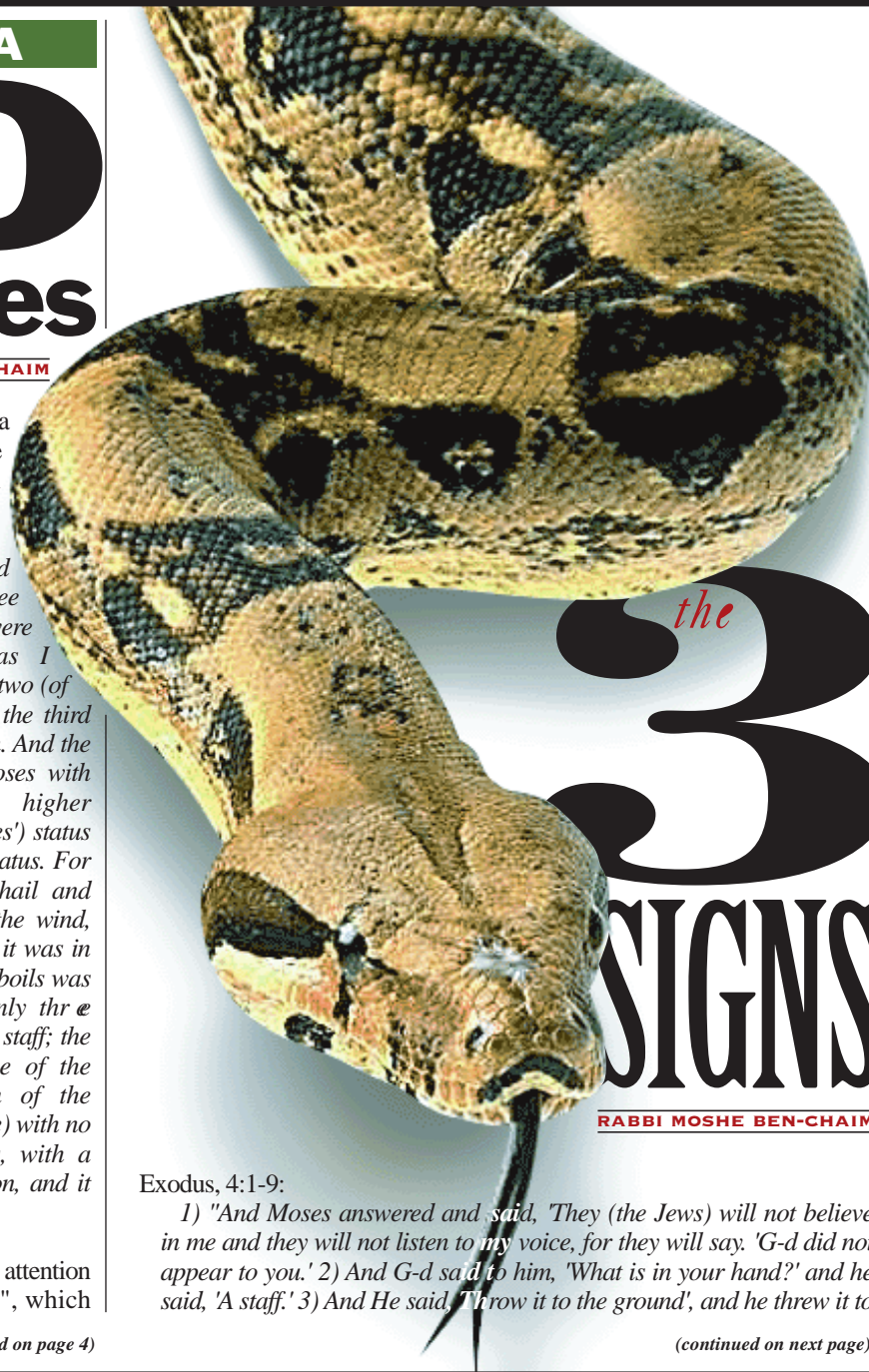
RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Exodus, 8:12, Ibn Ezra  
directs our attention to the  
performers of the Ten  
Plagues:

*"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 thr e  
(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."*

The Ibn Ezra focuses our attention  
on his first word, "Know", which

(continued on page 4)



# the 3 SIGNS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Exodus, 4:1-9:

1) "And Moses answered and said, 'They (the Jews) will not believe  
in me and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, 'G-d did not  
appear to you.' 2) And G-d said to him, 'What is in your hand?' and he  
said, 'A staff.' 3) And He said, 'Throw it to the ground', and he threw it to

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# the THREE SIGNS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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the ground, and it became a serpent. And Moses fled from before it. 4) And G-d said to Moses, 'Send forth your hand and grasp it by its tail'. And he sent forth his hand and he seized it, and it was a staff in his palm. 5) 'In order that they believe you, that G-d appeared to you, the G-d of their fathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob.' 6) And G-d said to him, 'Further, bring now your hand into your chest', and he brought his hand into his chest, and he took it out, and behold his hand was leprous as snow. 7) And He said, 'Return your hand to your chest', and he returned his hand to his chest, and he took it out, and behold it returned to its flesh. 8) 'And it will be if they do not believe you, and they do not listen to the voice of the first sign, then they will listen to the voice of the second sign. 9) And it will be if they do not listen to also these two signs, and they do not listen to your voice, and you will take from the waters of the Nile, and you will spill it onto the dry land, and it will be that the water that you take from the Nile, and it will be blood on the dry land.'

G-d instructs Moses on his mission to free the Jews. G-d then responds to Moses' doubt of the Jews' conviction in his divine appointment, by giving him three signs. These signs will prove G-d's appearance to him. A number of questions arise. Before reading further, take time to review the verses above, and discuss them with others. Simply reading on will remove your opportunity to engage in the process of learning and the use of your own thought. This process is how we become better Torah students, thereby refining our own thinking for future study. It is also an enjoyable activity. The Torah was purposefully written in a cryptic style so as to engage the mind in this most prized activity of analysis, induction, deduction and thought - our true purpose whose rewards are unmatched, both here, and in the next world. Once you have spent due time reviewing the issues, feel free to read the questions enumerated below, and our possible answers.

1. The sign of blood is said to be the ultimate proof of G-d's directive. How does this sign surpass the others? 2. If blood is more convincing than a staff turning into a serpent, or leprosy, why

not instruct Moses to perform the blood sign first? Three signs would then not be necessary! 3. What are the ideas conveyed through each specific sign? Why were these three selected? 4. Why does G-d give Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the magicians? 5. What is meant by the "voice" of each sign? 6. In both cases, the transformation of a staff into a serpent, and Nile water into blood, does not take place until both objects reach the ground, as it says, "and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent", and "it will be blood on the dry land." What is the reason for this "miracle at a distance"? 7. Why do the first two signs "return" to their original objects? What need does this serve? 8. Why is Moses requested to "conceal" his hand in order for it to become leprous? G-d could certainly make him leprous without him concealing it. 9. In contrast to the sign of blood where G-d tells Moses what will happen to the Nile's waters before the sign's performance, why does G-d not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? 10. What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to G-d as "the G-d of their fathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob"?

We must say the following: The reason for three signs is twofold; 1) G-d wished the viewer to be convinced of His appointment of Moses with minimal, emotional amazement; and 2) G-d wished this from everyone, as additional signs of less deniability accompany the first. G-d knows what the most convincing sign is, i.e., blood, but He desired it come last in the sequence. As Rabbi Mann teaches in this week's JewishTimes issue, "G-d desires we use our minds to know him".

### Action at a Distance

It is for this very reason, that additional features are found in these signs. I refer here to the fact that both the staff, and the Nile's waters transformed only once on the ground. It is not the ground that is essential here, but the "distance between Moses' hand and the transformation". All magicians require tactile control of their manipulated objects. Without physical contact, they cannot create illusions through sleight of hand. However, Moses' objects did not transform, while in his hand, but only once distanced from his control. "Distance"

teaches that this was not sleight of hand - his hand was no where near the transformation! These signs could only be explained as true miracles, as G-d's actions.

Magic Does Not Exist Sforno on Exod. 4:3 cites Talmud Sanhedrin 67b: (Responding to the plague of lice, and their inability to mimic it)"Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'this is the finger of G-d.' This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size. [Strengthening this first position] Rav Pappa said, 'By G-d, he cannot produce something even as large as a camel! [So what does it mean that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn?] [It means] these that are larger than a barley corn, he can collect, and produce the illusion that he has magically created them." This Talmudic portion teaches that the human hand cannot control that which is too small. Sleight of hand was known in the times of the Talmud, and in Egypt's times. Magic is all illusory. What these Egyptians performed by hand, was quicker than the eye, but only when the object was large enough to maneuver it properly. Our Rabbis did not accept that any powers exist outside natural laws. G-d is the only One capable of altering natural law, as He created it, and controls it. Saadia Gaon too stated that the Egyptian's blood trick was performed by the use of colored dyes, and the frogs were mimicked to leave the Nile by their use of chemicals that frogs repel, causing them to jump from the water onto land. Sforno also states that the snakes of the Egyptian's had no movement, i.e., they were not real. Moses' staff transformed into a "nachash", not the lifeless "tanin" of the Egyptians. The difference in terms, indicates to Sforno, a difference in the two performances.

### Blood

Blood is the source of life. When one sees water transformed into blood, one realizes that life itself is in G-d's hands. This strikes at the core of any person's greatest fear - death. Additionally, its creation from the Nile disputed the Nile's position of grandeur. But as G-d wishes we come to know Him by the use of our higher natures - our intellect - He did not place the blood sign first in sequence. G-d offers a person the chance to rise to a higher level by following his mind. With a minimalistic

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# the THREE SIGNS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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performance, man has the opportunity to exercise his thinking, and derive truths concerning G-d's will (His appointment of Moses) and His very existence.

## Creation: Arrived at Through Reason

I digress to focus your attention on a related and essential idea: G-d's position as the Creator is the most important concept of human comprehension. Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed", Book II, end of Chap XXV:

*"...Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe: and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent, and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it."*

Maimonides teaches "all depends on this question". What does he mean? It believe him to mean that by design, G-d wished that our conviction of this most central idea - G-d as Creator - must not be evidenced empirically. This idea, this primary realization is to be arrived at through thought, and understanding, not through amazement at marvelous feats. In other words, our recognition of G-d as the Creator 'must' be apprehended through our reasoning. This is the highest form of recognition of G-d, and the preferred method to knowing Him, and His works. "All depends on this question" means that proof of Creation was purposefully left to the realm of the "philosophical", and not to "emotional" via astonishing, miraculous displays. It is easy to witness a miracle, and be convinced, but in such a case, our mind forfeits the exercise of reasoning - THE mark of man's perfection. It is fitting that man use his crowned capacity in the pursuit of this question, of G-d as the Creator. I now return to our topic.

## The Serpent and Leprosy

Before resorting to blood, why did the staff transform into a serpent? On the surface, both the staff and a serpent have similar appearances, they are narrow, elongated shapes. Once transformed into a serpent, the viewer might second guess what he saw, "Was it in fact a staff before hand, or was it a serpent in some stiffened state?" Control of one's emotions and clear thinking are required so as not to dismiss a miracle. Moses was given these signs for the very reason that the Jews were bent on disbelief in G-d's appointment of Moses. Hence, subsequent to a sign, the Jews might seek to explain away the miracle. To say the very minimum about this specific sign, we may suggest that it teaches that G-d controls life. He can turn a staff into a living organism. G-d's control of life, would appear to offer the most impact on the Jews. Therefore G-d's signs were indications of His control of life. But this was yet animal life. More impressive, was Moses' hand becoming leprous. Here, G-d sought to teach that He controls human life. He does so in the negative (becoming leprous) as well as the positive (healing of Moses' leprosy). The fact that Moses own hand was smitten, may serve to teach again that it was not Moses who created such a feat, as one would not risk self injury. Similarly, one would not create a dangerous serpent.

Another observation of the serpent and leprosy, is that the transformation into a serpent displays G-d's control over the "matter" of creation, while leprosy displays His control of His "laws" of creation. Transforming a staff into a serpent displays G-d's control over matter itself. Disease has a natural process. Moses' leprous hand displays that G-d controls "how" things behave. These two, initial signs bear witness to G-d control of both aspects of Creation - of matter, and laws governing that matter.

Perhaps, in order to minimize the affect of "astonishment", G-d instructed Moses to first conceal his hand before it became leprous. For if a hand became leprous in plain sight, it would overwhelm the viewer, prohibiting his mind from fully functioning. This feat would startle him. Therefore, G-d told Moses to hide his hand. G-d also gave Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the Egyptians. And as Rabbi Mann taught, this was for our reason that the viewer use intelligence to

discern true miracles of G-d, from man's sleight of hand. We may also suggest that the "voice" of each sign refers to the underlying concept derived by the mind, as opposed to the apparent, illusory trick. G-d wished the viewer to understand each sign's message - its "voice".

Why did the first two signs return to their original forms? This is simply a practical issue, that Moses may once again perform these signs. I don't feel we need to look further, after suggesting this practicality.

Why does G-d not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? Mindful that G-d enabled these signs as a "response" to Moses' concern that he be validated, perhaps G-d did not inform Moses of the sign until it happened for good reason: G-d wished that Moses sense the effects of a these signs, just as would the Jews. By experiencing the sign without advance warning, Moses could identify with the perception and emotional impact afforded the Jews through these signs. Thereby, Moses' "first hand" knowledge gave him the security in these signs. His concern was answered by G-d in a primary fashion. He now knew how the Jews would react to these signs - that they were impressive. Had Moses been told by G-d what was about to happen, his expectation would lessen the emotional impact of these signs.

## The Fulfillment of G-d's Promise

Our final question was, "What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to G-d as "the G-d of their fathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob"? I believe this may serve to illustrate G-d's consistent kindness. As Moses was G-d's emissary for the Redemption, the Jews would be more inclined to accept this news and Moses' role, by recalling how G-d favored their ancestors, and not just on one occasion, but the lifetimes of many individuals. The Redemption was not a deviation, disbelieved by the Jews, but it was consistent with the manner in which G-d relates to His people - to His prophets' descendants. We learn from this that G-d saw it necessary that even prior to the act of redemption, the Jews required a psychological conviction in G-d's forthcoming salvation. This state of mind was necessary, and G-d reassured the Jews of His unchanging kindness through this statement. ■

# G-d Desires We Use Our Minds to KNOW HIM

**RABBI REUVEN MANN**

In this week's Parsha Vau-era, we read about the encounter between Moshe and Pharaoh. G-d instructed Moshe that when Pharaoh demanded proof that G-d had spoken to him, he should throw down his staff and it would turn into a snake. Moshe proceeded to do this before Pharaoh. Then something strange and unexpected occurred. Pharaoh summoned his magicians and they did the exact same thing. As might be expected, Pharaoh was unimpressed with what Moshe had done and obstinately refused to obey G-d. The episode concludes with the words, "And Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not listen to them as G-d had spoken."

The question arises: What was sinful about Pharaoh's behavior? He certainly had a right to demand proof that G-d had appeared to Moshe. Moreover, he was correct to ascertain that the deed was truly miraculous. Thus he summoned his magicians and they were able to achieve the same result. We must ask: Why did G-d give Moshe a sign which could be duplicated by others? Isn't a miracle by definition a supernatural phenomenon which is beyond the scope of human power and thus can only be attributed to Divine intervention?

If we study the text carefully, we can find the answer. Superficially, the act of Moshe and that of the magicians appear to be similar. However, they were different. The Torah says, "And the Egyptian magicians did this with their "secret devices". When a skilled magician performs a trick, he controls the environment in which it is executed. He sets up a stage, keeps the

audience at a certain distance and manages all of the "props". It is very impressive but we know it is an illusion based on a very skillful sleight of hand. The miracle of Moshe was done in the open without any secret devices. A truly honest observer would recognize and acknowledge the difference. The Pasuk also points out that the staff of Moshe swallowed those of the magicians. Thus the act of Moshe was clearly superior to his opponents. If Pharaoh was genuinely interested in the truth, he would have investigated the matter carefully and recognized the difference between the genuine miracle of Moshe and the deceptive magic of the illusionists.

Yet we may ask: Why did G-d give Moshe a miracle which could be somewhat duplicated? Why not give him something which could not be imitated at all? The answer is that G-d wants man to recognize Him through the use of his mind and exercise of his free will. He doesn't want us to be emotionally coerced into accepting Him. Great miracles impress the emotions but since they don't engage the mind, their effect soon dissipates. Real change is achieved only through genuine knowledge and understanding. G-d wants us to use our minds in searching for Him, discovering Him and serving Him. Pharaoh sensed the significant difference between the miracles of Moshe and the counterfeit displays of his servants. That is why the Pasuk says that "he hardened his heart and did not listen..." Had he not been stubborn, he would have seen the truth.

Judaism is unique in affirming the supreme value of knowledge in the service of our Creator. We must, therefore, strive to cultivate a love and appreciation for the Divine Wisdom contained in our Torah.

Our Parsha has great relevance to the contemporary situation. In every area of significance; religion, societal morality, rightful ownership of Israel, we are challenged by false philosophies which masquerade as truth and ensnare the unlearned. Like Pharaoh, we must choose between the authentic and the illusory. May we fulfill the ideal of the Havdala prayer. May we have the wisdom to discern between the true and the false, the holy and the profane, Israel and the nations. □

**IBN EZRA**

## *the* **10** **Plagues**

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

*(continued from page 1)*

urges the reader to think into this specific commentary. He intimates that there is more here than meets the eye. He does not simply list each plague with its performer, or monitor the involvement of the staff. We are not interested in dry statistics when studying G-d's wisdom. Here, Ibn Ezra is teaching 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 specific plagues, in the lower and higher realms respectively, and they performed a similar number of plagues independently, 2) The presence of the staff only in certain miracles - its absence in others, 3) Moses joining with Aaron in a single plague of boils, 4) Distinguishing between Egypt and the Jews

through two plagues, in which no staff was used, and placed in the center of the series of plagues.

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 G-d, they too are worthy of man's honor. Eventually, man's sin increased as he replaced simple honor of stars with their worship as deities, until knowledge of G-d was lost. Star worship reveals man's false estimation that the heavens deserve more reverence than the Earth. (We see that man did not say this of our lower, sublunary Earth and its elements, only regarding heavenly bodies.) Man feared not only the spheres, but the heavens. Jeremiah 10:2-3 reads, "So says G-d, 'To the ways of the nations do not learn, 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 from reality. Jeremiah's lesson is insightful: he equates the fear of heavens with the idolatrous practice of prostrating to wooden idols. He wished to teach that the heavens do not hold any greater powers than does wood. Man's idolatrous emotions project the same flaw onto both heaven and trees.

The primitive view of the heavens determining man's fate was not alien to the Egyptians. G-d corrected this error with one aspect of His plagues. Commanding Aaron to perform the plagues limited to the earthly realm, and for Moses to perform those of the "higher", heavenly realm, G-d discounted the dangerous esteem man held towards the heavens. G-d 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. Both realms were controlled by laws, and both could be understood. Understanding a

*(continued on next page)*

## IBN EZRA

# the 10 Plagues

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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phenomena removes one's false, mystical estimations. Realizing they are 'guided' means they are subordinate to something greater. These realms did not "control", but were "controlled", teaching the Egyptians that their views were false. The Egyptians erred by assuming that the heavens were a governing and mystical realm. Earth, to Egypt, was not divine. G-d corrected this disproportionately high, heavenly grandeur. G-d did so in two ways: 1)By showing the heavens' subordination to a Higher will, G-d demoted heaven's status from the divine to the mundane. 2)By aligning the plagues with Moses' and Aaron's participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heaven's not divine, but they are in equal realms, just as Moses and Aaron are of somewhat equal status. 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 G-d's control, and that neither one is significantly greater. Egypt would then realize that Something higher was responsible for all creation. G-d wanted the good for the Egyptians. The 'good' means knowledge of what is true. As it says in the Torah (Exod. 9:16) with regards to these plagues, "...in order that they tell of My name in the whole world."

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 G-d responded with a hail/fire plague to display His exclusive control in this area. Wind was also a heavenly phenomena, 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, G-d displayed

control over the primary focus in heaven - the sun. Weather, the atmosphere and outer space were all shown as false deities and under the exclusive control of Israel's G-d. Additionally, the plague of "darkness" had one other facet - it was palpable, perhaps to show that it was not a simple solar eclipse.

Ibn Ezra also made specific note of two plagues where no staff was used. These two 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..." Exod. 9:4, "And G-d will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nought will die of the Israelites." Why were both of these plagues designed to distinguish Egypt from Israel? I believe the answer is that by designing not just one plague - which could be viewed as a freak incident, but two plagues which differentiated "Egyptians" and "Jews" - the goal was to teach that G-d works differently than Egypt's view of the 'divine'. The Egyptians thought that to please their gods was man's correct obligation, and precisely how gods operated - a natural outgrowth of a child/parent relationship. How would such an infantile idea be corrected in order to teach G-d'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 relationship to 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 G-d is not for G-d, but really only for man. G-d does not need man. 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 G-d 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.

Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods; animals. Their own animals died, and then, wild animals attacked them. It was a devastating blow to their esteemed deities. Their deification of animal gods was destroyed. Pharaoh's response (Exod. 8:21), "sacrifice to your G-d" confirms his lowered estimation of animals, to the point that he encourages Moses to slaughter them, and to do so to his G-d. 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 G-d." I believe the Torah includes these words of Pharaoh to inform us that the plague had

the desired effect on Pharaoh. G-d understands what will effect 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 sends messengers to see if Israel was harmed. This plague of the animal's death concerned him greatly.

Why were these two plagues 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, G-d 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 the plague.

I heard another explanation for the use of the staff: Although G-d did not need it (He needs nothing) for Moses and Aaron to initiate the plagues, it's presence was to remove any divinity projected by Egypt onto Moses and Aaron, lest onlookers falsely believe these two mortals possessed some powers. By seeing the staff incorporated into the miracles, Moses' and Aaron's significance was diluted in Egypt's eyes. But wouldn't people then believe the staff to have those powers? I believe for fear of this erroneous notion, G-d created a miracle where the staff itself turned into a snake. This was to show that it too was under the control of G-d.

Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? My friend Jessie made a sharp observation. She said that just as Moses and Aaron addressed both the higher and lower forms of matter in their respective plagues, the plague of boils executed by both Moses and Aaron included the higher and lower matter - ashes are from Earth, and they were commanded to be thrown towards the heavens (Exod. 9:8). Her parallel revealed another facet of the boils, as G-d'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 separate, encapsulated systems. The very act of throwing ashes towards the heavens teaches that both Earth and heaven work together. This was a necessary lesson in the reduction of the heaven's exaggerated 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 a king who spends his time with commoners will be viewed by others 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.

One question remains: Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues? ■



# Parashas VaEyra

RABBI BERNARD FOX

(continued from page 1)

Ahron performed in Egypt are referred to with two terms. These terms are ote and mofait. What is the difference between these terms?

Sforno explains that these terms have very different meanings. These meanings can be understood through better appreciating Moshe's situation. Moshe claimed to be the messenger of a G-d. This G-d was represented as the absolute ruler of the universe. Moshe's credibility depended upon his response to two issues. He must prove that he was the messenger of Hashem. He must also prove that Hashem is omnipotent.

The term mofait is best translated as wonder. A mofait provides evidence of the Almighty's authority over the physical universe. Paroh denied that Hashem possessed this power. Paroh required a mofait. He could only be convinced by a wondrous act that would testify to the awesome power of the Almighty. The transformation of Ahron's inanimate staff into a living creature served this purpose.

The term ote means sign. Bnai Yisrael accepted the existence of a Creator. The Creator rules the universe He formed. However, Moshe was required to establish that he was the messenger of Hashem. They needed an ote or sign that Moshe was Hashem's servant. Moshe's ability to alter nature indicated that he had been empowered by Almighty.

Sforno notes that the same act can function both as an ote and mofait. The purpose of the act will determine the term by which it is described. Therefore, the transformation of the staff before Paroh was a mofait. The same act performed in front of Bnai Yisrael was an ote.[1]

**“And the magicians said to Paroh. “It is the finger of the L-rd.” And Paroh’s heart became hard and he did not listen to them as Hashem had spoken.”** (Shemot 8:15)

Paroh's magicians could not duplicate the plague of Lice. They told Paroh that this plague was the “finger of the L-rd”. Rashi seems to indicate that the magicians were attesting to the authenticity of Moshe's claims. This plague was caused by the G-d of the Jewish people. Moshe was His agent. Hashem was intervening in nature to save His people.[2]

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra disagrees with this interpretation. The magicians did not say that the plague was from Hashem. They counseled that



the cause was the L-rd. Ibn Ezra explains that the Egyptians did not deny the existence of a Creator. They understood that this Creator ruled the universe through a system of natural law. The issue in dispute was the Torah concept of a Creator with a providential relationship to His people. This understanding of G-d is expressed by the Tetragrammaton – the name we pronounce as “Hashem”. The Creator fashioned a universe in which natural disasters occur. Floods, earthquakes, terrible storms destroy cities and even civilizations. The magicians did not understand such phenomenon to be providential. The magicians acknowledged that this plague was not merely an illusion or impressive trick. It was the work of the Creator. But, they claimed, it did not support the concept of Hashem.[3]

Nachmanides offers a third interpretation. The magicians accepted Moshe's claim that the plague was from Hashem. They did not use this name. It was a foreign term to the Egyptians. Speaking

among themselves, they would not refer to G-d with an unfamiliar name. However they claimed it was only the “finger” of G-d. The plague caused discomfort and some suffering. However, it was not catastrophic. They advised Paroh to be calm – to recognize the limited effect of the plague and maintain his resolve.[4]

**“And I will separate on that day the land of Goshen, that my nation stands upon, so that there will not be there wild beasts; so that you will know that I, Hashem, am in the midst of the land.”** (Shemot 8:18)

G-d tells Paroh, through Moshe, that the upcoming plague of Wild Beasts will affect only the Egyptians. Bnai Yisrael will be protected from the infestation.

Nachmanides explains that Bnai Yisrael were also spared the suffering caused by the previous plagues. The waters of Goshen were not affected by Blood and Frogs. There was no outbreak of

(continued on next page)

# Parashas VaEyra

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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Lice in Goshen. However, this aspect of these plagues was not stressed. Moshe could not point to this localization as proof of the plagues' Divine origin. It was understandable that these plagues were localized phenomena. However, the infestation of Wild Beasts should not have been localized. There was no natural reason for the beasts to stop at the border of the Jewish province. Only providence could explain this behavior.[5]

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra disagrees. He maintains that the Jews were not exempt from the effects of the previous plagues. Bnai Yisrael also suffered from lack of water and infestations of frogs and lice. These plagues did not threaten lives. Hashem did not insulate His people. However the wild beasts were an actual danger. This infestation would result in death not mere suffering. In order to protect the lives of His people, G-d shielded the Jewish people from this plague.[6]

**“And Moshe said to him, “When I leave the city, I will spread my hands to Hashem. The thunder will cease. There will not be any more hail. This is so you will know that the land is Hashem's.”** (Shemot 9:29)

Our pasuk describes the conclusion of the plague of hail. Paroh beseeches Moshe to pray to Hashem. He should appeal to the Almighty to end the plague. Moshe responds that he will comply. However, he adds an important phrase. He tells Paroh that first he will leave the city. Only then, will he spread his hands to Hashem in prayer. Why did Moshe stipulate that he must first leave the city?

Rashi quotes the Midrash Michilta in response to this question. The Midrash explains that the city was permeated with idols. Moshe would not pray in this abominable environment. First, he would remove himself from this city of idolatry. Only then, would he pray to Hashem.[7]

Moshe was waging a battle against idolatry. He was asserting that Hashem is the only true G-d. The deities of Egypt were false gods. He would not pray in a place dominated by these idols. Perhaps, he feared that his prayers might be misinterpreted as appeals to the abominations of the Egyptians. He would leave the city and its idols. He would pray to Hashem only in a place free of these false gods.

The commentaries are troubled by the Midrash's

comments. This was not the first occasion on which Moshe prayed on behalf of Paroh and the Egyptians. On these other occasions, Moshe did not stipulate that he must first leave the city. Why, now, does Moshe add this requirement?

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin Zt"l – the Netziv – offers an answer to this question. His answer is based upon a previous passage. Let us consider this pasuk.

As we have explained above, Moshe was not immediately successful in winning the support of Bnai Yisrael. His initial appeal to Paroh resulted in an intensification of the bondage. Bnai Yisrael sharply criticized Moshe for this outcome. Moshe sought an explanation from Hashem. The Torah uses an interesting phrase in describing Moshe's communion with the Almighty. The Torah says that Moshe "returned to Hashem" and sought His counsel.[8]

Netziv asserts that this phrase should be understood somewhat literally. Moshe actually went somewhere. He went to a place that he had designated for prayer and prophecy. He had established a synagogue – a Bait HaKenesset. Moshe retreated to this sacred place to commune with the Almighty.[9]

Netziv explains that this provides a partial answer to our question. Actually, each time Moshe prayed to Hashem he carefully considered his environment. He was consistently concerned with the problem of praying to Hashem in place associated with idolatry. In order to address this issue, Moshe established a special place that was sacred and devoted to the worship of the Almighty. Each time Moshe prayed or sought prophecy, he retreated to his Bait HaKenesset.

Netziv acknowledges that this insight does not completely answer our question. Why did Moshe now insist on leaving the city? Why did Moshe not follow his established practice? He should have entered his synagogue and prayed to Hashem?

Netziv explains that the answer is provided by another stipulation made by Moshe. He told Paroh that his prayers would be accompanied by a physical demonstration. Moshe would spread his hands to Hashem. Netziv explains that Moshe intended to spread his hands towards the heavens. This could not be done inside a building. Moshe intended to pray outside.

Moshe could not fulfill this requirement in his

Bait HaKenesset. Therefore, he was confronted with a problem. He would not pray to Hashem in a place associated with idolatry. Yet, his accustomed refuge was indoors and consequently inappropriate for the prayer he planned. Moshe solved his dilemma by leaving the city. In this manner, he was able to pray outside in a proper environment.[10]

Netziv's insight provides an explanation for an amazing halacha. Tur explains that one should always pray in a Bait HaKenesset. He adds that the synagogue must have a minyan a quorum of ten males. Bait Yosef observes that there is an obvious implication in Tur's formulation of this halacha. If a synagogue does not have a minyan, one is not required to pray there. Bait Yosef questions this formulation. He explains that many Sages maintain that one should pray in a Bait HaKenesset regardless of the presence of a minyan. He explains the reason for this position. A synagogue is designated for prayer.[11]

Why is this designation important? According to the comments of Netziv, we can answer this question. Prayer involves making an exclusive commitment to the service of

Hashem. Like Moshe, we live in an environment that is dominated by the expressions of other religions. It is appropriate for us to remove ourselves from our ambient surroundings when demonstrating our exclusive devotion to Hashem. The synagogue provides this opportunity. It is our refuge. It is a place completed designated for the service of the Almighty. ▣

[1] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 7:9.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 8:15.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 8:15.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 8:15.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 8:18.

[6] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 8:18.

[7] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 9:29.

[8] Sefer Shemot 5:22.

[9] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Shemot 5:22.

[10] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Shemot 9:29.

[11] Rabbaynu Yaakov ben HaRash, Tur Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 90.



# The Plague of Hail

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Parshas Vau-Ayra, at the end of the ninth chapter, we find Moshe (Moses) not only responding to Pharaoh's plea to halt the plague of hail, but also giving Pharaoh rebuke: Exod. 9:30, "And you and your servants, I know that you have yet to fear G-d." Why, during the plague of hail, unlike other plagues, does Moshe suddenly rebuke Pharaoh? Is there something we may derive from this story that may explain Moshe's behavior? It doesn't appear that G-d instructed Moshe to rebuke Pharaoh, so Moshe's words here could be his own. What did Moshe see in this plague, and what was his purpose in this dialogue?

We must understand that each plague was not randomly selected, but each was carefully designed by G-d. Each one contained some unique idea. Moshe understood better than any man, the depth which can be discovered by studying G-d's creations, including these plagues. I am certain Moshe pondered each plague, but saw something unique in hail.

After Moshe says "And you and your servants, I know that you have yet to fear G-d", these two verses follow, "The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk. And the wheat and the spelt were not struck for they ripen later." There is a question as to who said these two verses. Ramban says these words are spoken by Moshe. I agree, and would like to pose my own interpretation based on Ramban.

G-d intended to awaken the Egyptians and Pharaoh to His unique distinction as the Creator of heaven and Earth, Exod 9:16, (G-d instructing Moses what to tell Pharaoh) "However because of this have I sustained you, on account that I shall show you My strength, and that you shall declare My name throughout the land." G-d desired not only to show His might, but to counter obstacles in this society's corrupt nature so they may arrive at the truth.

What obstacle did Pharaoh have? Moshe said, "You and your servants have yet to fear G-d". Pharaoh's obstacle was obstinacy. Moshe was

first telling Pharaoh his exact flaw in recognizing G-d. Moshe then viewed the hail, and pondered the different affects it had on various crops. Moshe saw that stiff plants broke, while flexible ones survived. He then thought to himself why G-d created a plague with such a characteristic of affecting plants in two manners. Perhaps Moshe gained insight into this specific plague and into G-d's approach in reprimanding the Egyptians. G-d designed the specifics of each plague. But we may question whether these specific plagues were pre-designed from the outset, or did G-d design each plague in line with what was needed at each juncture, depending on Pharaoh's current response.

Pharaoh was now being obstinate, as Moshe pointed out to him "you have yet to fear G-d". Obstinacy had to be pointed out to Pharaoh if he was to understand Moshe's next statement which was in direct response to his character. Stripping Pharaoh of his defenses would be the best method for him to finally recognize G-d. Perhaps G-d included other messages in the plagues for Moshe to derive through his own keen analysis of their unique properties. Moshe therefore intimated to Pharaoh his character flaw via a parallel: "The flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stalk." Meaning, "you Pharaoh are going to be broken" as you are stiff like the flax and barley. "And the wheat and the spelt were not struck for they ripen later." Again a parallel, "you Pharaoh would be spared if you were flexible", as are the wheat and spelt.

Moshe attempted to teach Pharaoh that "this current plague was designed as a parallel to you". The goal being that Pharaoh repent and follow G-d, as G-d wishes this for all mankind, "For I do not desire the death of the dead (the wicked) says G-d, but (in his) repentance and in his living." Pharaoh was being taught by Moshe that there is in fact a G-d Who knows all man's thoughts. Hopefully Pharaoh would be impressed and acknowledge the Creator.

This taught Pharaoh an essential lesson about G-d: He not only recognizes man's thoughts and actions, but He "interacts" with man. How else could G-d design a plague to address a single man's (Pharaoh) specific nature? This is a great lesson.

The proof that this was a central theme in G-d's plagues, is Moshe and Aaron's initial address to Pharaoh. In Exodus 5:1-3, Moshe and Aaron approach Pharaoh for the first time: 1) "So says G-d, the G-d of Israel, send My people that they may celebrate Me in the desert. 2) And Pharaoh said, 'Who is G-d that I should listen to His voice, to send Israel, I do not know G-d, and Israel I will not send.' 3) And they (Moshe and Aaron) said, 'The G-d of the Hebrews called unto us, let us go a journey of three days in the desert and we will sacrifice to G-d our G-d, lest we be afflicted with plague or the sword.'" Pharaoh responds in verse 2, and then in verse 3, Moshe and Aaron attempt to clarify something to Pharaoh. What point is repeated in verse 3? They now state "The G-d of the Hebrews called unto us..." This reiterates their initial address of "So says G-d, the G-d of Israel..." Moshe and Aaron wished to communicate a new idea to Pharaoh, that the Jewish G-d "calls" to man. He is unique, and far above the lifeless Egyptian gods. However, Moshe and Aaron saw that their initial attempt to deliver this novel concept to Pharaoh was glossed over. They repeated their words, but now with more clarity, "G-d called to us". This time, in verse 3, they did not use the passive "G-d said" as in verse 1, but the active "(G-d) called to us". The G-d of Israel actually communicates with man. This was what Moshe and Aaron wished to impress on the leader of a culture, whose idols were stone and metal. A "knowing" and "powerful" G-d was Moshe and Aaron's message.

Thus, if they disobeyed, this "powerful" G-d would bring plague or death (sword). Moshe and Aaron wished to teach Pharaoh the two most primary concepts that distinguish G-d from all other deities: He is omniscient and omnipotent, all knowing and all powerful. G-d's system of reward and punishment is also based on this idea, and Pharaoh was taught reward and punishment through G-d's distinction between the Jewish and Egyptian livestock. Only the latter were plagued. We see a theme permeating the plagues.

Returning to the metaphor used by Moshe about the stiff and soft crops, why did Moshe tell Pharaoh this through metaphor, and not directly? When someone is faced with a self-realization that conflicts with his ego, he will not be able to tolerate such a stark reality, and he will deny it in defense. To allow Pharaoh a path to accept this idea, Moshe used a method which does not generate a strong, defensive response, but one wherein the listener may ponder. Moshe used a metaphor which can, after time, appeal to the person more casually, thereby avoiding a direct onslaught of the person's self image. A direct approach would only result in Pharaoh's reluctance to hear G-d's message, and the loss of any good for Pharaoh.

We see a clear proof against those self-righteous Jews who falsely assume they have more purpose than Gentiles. If this were so, G-d would not be so concerned with Pharaoh's and the Egyptian's knowledge of G-d. G-d told Moshe at the very outset that Pharaoh will not hearken to him. Yet, G-d instructs Moshe to perform the plagues, "on account that I shall show you My strength, and that you shall declare My name throughout the land." G-d is concerned that all nations recognize the truth of His existence. □

Stiff (stubborn) barley was broken



Unripe (flexible) wheat bent, & survived





# Sabbath/New Moon PRAYER



This Sabbath is also the New Moon of Shvat 5764. On this day, our regular, Additional (Musaf) service is altered. Instead of the regular prayer, we recite "Atah yatsarta olamcha m'kedem", "You formed Your world from long ago." We must ask: Why was this prayer changed on account of the Sabbath/New Moon combination?

Looking at the altered text, we notice the concepts underlined are; 1) G-d's creation, and 2) from long ago. The first step in approaching this question is to define the two days of Sabbath and the New Moon, independent of each other. We will then be better equipped to understand what concept their combination highlights.

The Sabbath has the unique distinction of G-d's creation of the universe from nothingness, "creation ex nihilo". All matter was brought into existence and completed, and G-d refrained from any additional creation from the seventh day and forward. The Rabbis even teach us that the miracles throughout time were "programmed" into Creation. G-d did not enact new changes "in time", primarily because He is above time. Maimonides teaches that time itself is also one of G-d's creations. We might then ask, if this is so, that Creation was complete, why then do we recite "You formed Your world from long ago" only on the Sabbath/New Moon combination? We should recite it every Sabbath!

What is the New Moon? The New Moon is different from the Sabbath. On it, we do not commemorate the completion of Creation, but the completion of the circuit of the Moon. How is the Moon's circuit different than Creation? It too was designed by God!

There is a distinction. Creation, celebrated by the Sabbath, addresses G-d's creation of the universe from nothingness. Sabbath addresses the "substances" of creation. The New Moon embodies a different phenomenon; not the substances of creation, but the "laws" of Creation.

G-d created two things; 'substances', and

'laws' governing those substances. On the first Sabbath, although all matter was complete, the laws governing their behavior could not be seen in their completion. For example, the Moon's orbit of the Earth is about 30 days. By definition, on the first Sabbath, the fulfillment of the Moon's cycle had 23 more days to go. In truth, all of Creation could not be witnessed on the first Sabbath, as many of G-d's laws would not display their complete cycles of behavior for months, and for the planets and stars, even years.

What happens on the Sabbath/New Moon combination? On this day, both systems coincide, displaying a completion of both; G-d's physical creation of substances (Sabbath) and the fulfillment or completion of the universe's laws (New Moon). On this special day, it is appropriate to offer this unique praise to G-d, "You formed Your world from long ago": "formation" of the world corresponds to the Sabbath, but "long ago" corresponds to a system which although enacted at a prior time, only fulfills its mission "in time". "Long ago" is a reference to time, not substance, describing that which only bears G-d's creation, after some time, i.e., the behavioral aspect of Creation. Physical creation can be beheld in a glance, but a system of operation unfolds its design only through a 'span' of time.

Both aspects of Creation are witnessed on this special Sabbath/New Moon: Sabbath recalls physical creation, and the new Moon testifies to G-d's laws operating in their completion.

## Postscript

While it is true that sunrise or sunset can teach this idea observed in the New Moon, perhaps its frequency and familiarity diminishes its significance in man's eyes. Therefore, the New Moon was selected by the Rabbis as the more impressive phenomenon on which to establish praise to G-d.

I believe this second aspect of Creation - its laws - are alluded to in Genesis 2:4. ■

# The New Moon BLESSING

This article will describe the concepts found within the "Kiddush HaChodesh", the blessing upon the New Moon.

First, let us familiarize ourselves with the actual text:

*"Blessed are you God, our God, King of the world, that with Your statements (You) created the heavens, and with the breath of your mouth, all the hosts thereof. A statute and time did You place for them, that they should not deviate their circuits. Happy and joyous (are the heavenly spheres) to do the will of their Creator. Worker of truth Whose works are truth, and unto the moon You declared that it should renew (itself), a glorifical crown to those (mankind) born of the womb, as they (mankind) will eventually renew themselves as the moon, and to exalt their Creator for the name of the glory His kingdom. Blessed are You God, Who renews the months."*

Now we will address each section. **"with Your statements (You) created the heavens, and with the breath of your mouth, all the hosts thereof."** This first praise deals with the heavens and their contents. As God does not "speak", and of course prior to man's creation, speech would be superfluous as there are no beings existing who can hear, therefore the concept of "statements" and "breath" teach us something else in connection with God. Speech is a very simple activity, and when applied to God, it denotes that His mere will suffices to create the most awesome, physical bodies. Additionally, it is a general principle that one cannot offer partial praise in connection with God. The Talmud teaches that if one visits a place where one of the miracles wrought on his behalf took place, it is not sufficient if he praises God for that miracle alone, but he must also refer to and bless God for other miracles which were wrought on his behalf. Daniel also followed this principle when God had revealed to Daniel, both, Nevuchadnezzar's dream content, and interpretation. Upon Daniel's receipt of an answer to his request from God for this information, Daniel praised God for His ability to

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# The New Moon BLESSING

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set up and dethrone kings, and for His ability to reveal knowledge to wise men in general. Only subsequent to this praise, did Daniel praise God for the specific information revealed to him in response to his request.

I believe that this teaches us what true praise of God consists of. It is not merely praise in response to an individual act performed for oneself. Such a praise would dwarf the true, immense scope of God's Omniscience and Omnipotence. To praise God as accurately as humanly possible, man must speak of God's might and Knowledge in the most broad and all-inclusive sense. True, full praise of God therefore must describe universal phenomena, not subjective, individual events.

Therefore, we first praise God in general terms - we exalt Him for the works of the heavens as as a whole independent of man, prior to exalting Him on account of the moon.

**"A statute and time did You place for them, that they should not deviate their circuits."** Here we find the blessing referring not to the physical creation, but to the other half of creation, I refer to the governing laws. All matter was created in a physical state, but that such a state continue in a specific behavior is not a natural result of the physical body's existence. Matter must also have governing laws so that, i.e., all trees reproduce their own kind, all animals beget their own kind, etc. Laws of gravity, inertia, and all other constants did not come into being simply because matter was created. As well, all members of mankind partake of similar psychological characteristics due to governing laws.

In creation therefore, God brought into being two distinct categories; 1) matter, 2) laws governing that matter. (I believe the second chapter in Genesis alludes to the second category.)

In application to the heavens, we would be remiss in our praise of God if we did not include praise for God's wisdom manifested through the relentless paths in which the heavenly spheres travel.

**"Happy and joyous (are they) to do the will of their Creator."** This statement on the surface implies awareness on the part of brute creation. Animals have no self awareness, much less inanimate objects. How then are we to understand this? I believe "happiness" here denotes the removal of conflict. Meaning, the spheres function with exactitude, as there are no impediments between God's will for the spheres to rotate and revolve, and between their physical performance.



So there are 3 praises thus far; 1) Praise for the physical heavens, 2) Praise for their governing laws, 3) Praise for harmony, the perfect system of creation, where God willed something, and there is no conflict intervening between God's will and the immediacy of the reality of His will. God's will is all that is real and all that stands. He has no opponents.

**"Worker of truth Whose works are truth."** This statement I believe is connected with the next, indicating that God's works have a purpose. They aim towards propagating some true idea, as the physical for the sake of the physical is of no purpose. This King Solomon said in the very beginning of his work, "Koheles". The spheres therefore - as is the case with all creation - must have a purpose outside of themselves. "Truth" indicates that there is a purpose in the works of God. This is the new concept indicated here.

That purpose follows: "and unto the moon You declared that it should renew (itself), a glorious crown to those born of the womb, as they will eventually renew themselves as the moon" Here we find the purpose and essence of the distinction which God gave to the moon. The moon is the singular object in the heavens designed by God to pass through phases of waxing and waning. The purpose is stated, that it should be a crown to man. A "crown" means that which marks the elevated distinction of something. Man's elevated distinction

is his free will, in specific here, the free will that follows the path of a righteous life. Just as the moon grows full and then loses its grandeur, man too goes through cycles of perfection and sin. But man is given a great gift by God through the moon, as God placed the moon's phases as a sign to all mankind that man too can once again become great, just as the moon. The moon then is a parable to man's constant failures and victories, to remind man that although he stumbles, he can - like the moon - become "full" once again. Teshuvah is well within reach.

This teaches us the level of import which God wished to give to repentance. Nowhere else do we see God creating a unique behavior in creation solely for the purpose of reminding man that repentance is always within his grasp.

One more idea contained in these words is the meaning of "those born of the womb". I wonder why man is referred to in this peculiar fashion, as opposed to saying "a glorious crown to man". I think however, that the idea is to draw a distinction between man and the cosmos. The moon, that which is unchanging in its laws, is a crown - a mark of distinction - to man, a being borne of the womb, who is destined to human error. The idea is that the moon's phases are a reminder to man who always "phases" from sin to repentance. Referring to man as "borne of the womb" highlights - via contrast to the moon - that man is only human.

My friend Howard explained well that "those born of the womb" also teaches that just as an infant prior to exiting the womb is free of sin, so are we able to be via repentance. This statement alludes to our inherent capacity to be as pure as we were before birth.

The new moon symbolizes free will. When man uses free will, his whole being is "illuminated" by truth and he is in line with the will of the Creator. That is man's crown of "elevated distinction". The renewal of the moon each month is to remind man that he was created with and has the ability to exercise his free will - which is what distances him from sin. His continuous reflection removes man from his desire to sin.

**"and to exalt their Creator for the sake of the glory His kingdom."** This teaches that repentance is not a goal, but the goal is to finally recognize God's greatness.

**"Blessed are You God, Who renews the months." □**



# G-d's Providence

## for the NON-RELIGIOUS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

*This week, a longtime friend posed an important question that I reprint with a response below. I thank him for his following question:*

**Reader:** Rabbi Chait's "Faith or Beetachon" article brought my lack of understanding of this subject into stark relief:

Isn't it correct that Yosef, was under direct providence from Hashem because of the level that he was on? Is it rational then, for regular individuals (like me), to have this sort of trust in Hashem? Is it not probable that many of the things I experience, unlike a Yosef or the Avot, are merely accidents/coincidences, or worse yet, due to faults (stupidity) of my own? It seems that in order for Beetachon (as described by Rabbi Chait) to be real, the individual must have a closeness to Hashem, not an illusionary closeness. Do you agree that many people today feel very close to Hashem, but in actuality are very far away?

My questions really boil down to: What is the place of Beetachon in the life of non-righteous individual? Is it possible for a non-righteous person to have "real" Beetachon? Is the Beetachon by a non-righteous individual rational and reciprocated by Hashem, or merely placating emotional insecurities?

Any light you can shed on the subject is much appreciated.

**Mesora:** Yes, even a non-religious person can benefit from G-d's providence. In his Moreh Nevuchim on this very topic, Maimonides states that G-d's involvement in one's life is proportional to his perfection:

Lesson #1: The very fact that there are "levels", clearly teaches that one on a lower level does have some providence.

Lesson #2: And although a non-religious person may be far away from G-d relative to others, this (less-religious starting point) is where every person commences his mission to come closer to G-d and His ways. Therefore, such a starting point is inevitable for all

mankind. G-d knows this, and "regardless", He created man! He surely helps direct the genuine searcher towards new insights into Torah and personal growth. This must be.

And yes, many who are far from G-d can very easily fool themselves into believing things happen due to G-d's direct involvement in their daily lives. But we cannot have such knowledge without either a prophet telling us, or G-d Himself telling us. But as we do not have these two indications, it is quite haughty of a person to feel that G-d did in fact just enact a specific event for him, when in fact, G-d's natural laws repeat their specific and respective operations. Natural laws exists, and man exists. Therefore, many times, these two meet, and man derives either benefit, i.e., eating a fruit, or harm, i.e., he suffers injury while slipping on ice. While this is true, we must not discount the very real possibility that something may have been G-d's providence. Therefore, man must be both humble and realistic at the same time. Humble, that he does not feel convinced that something was G-d's intervention, and realistic, that it could have been.

One's Beetachon (trust in G-d) must, by its very definition, be proportionate to his knowledge of how G-d works. This is important. One must know the justice system of G-d, in order to have Beetachon in it. One cannot be trusting in someone who does not exist. Similarly, one cannot have Beetachon in the fact that G-d will do something, if in fact, G-d does not operate in the way imagined. The more knowledge man attains of G-d, that is how much more Beetachon he can have. A person is right to feel unsure whether G-d will step in to assist him, just as we learned that Jacob said, "I have grown small from your kindness." He too felt he might not be deserving of G-d to save him from his twin Esav. This was philosophically honest. This sets the right example for us.

We must continually learn more about G-d and His laws, making certain all we learn resonates 100% clear and true, and finally applying new these newly learned truths to our lives. □