



If we cannot discern “Divinely punitive” disasters from nature, is it not arrogant and foolish to claim otherwise?

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Weekly Parsha

Ki Tavo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And G-d will bring you back to Egypt in ships, along the way that I promised you would never see again. And you will try to sell yourselves as slaves and maids, but no one will want to buy you.”
(Devarim 28:68)

We Jews tend to identify our own heroes. The Torah does not encourage

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GOD OR NATURE: PART II



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Last week I misquoted a verse, referring to Hail, when the plague I should have quoted was Boils. To reiterate, there were three sets of three plagues each:

[Set I] A. Blood, B. Frogs, C. Lice;

[Set II] A. Wild Beasts, B. Animal Deaths, C. Boils;

[Set III] A. Hail, B. Locusts, C. Darkness.

(“Firstborns” was a separate plague).

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Fundamentals

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In each set, "A" required Moses' warning of Pharaoh at the Nile at "morning time"[1], "B" required Moses to warn him to "come" before Pharaoh in his palace[2], and "C" came without warning.

We stated last week that God desired the plagues to contain "God's" warnings, and did so in two manners: 1) via predictions (the first two in each set) or through their undeniable, Divine nature, as God delivered the third plague of each set, unannounced. We stated that these two methods were used to provide undeniable proof of God's existence and control over the universe. To do so, God manifested His control with either at predicted moments or via miraculous feats. Predictions and overt miracles cannot be explained away by nature, and are clearly what

God engages when He desires an unambiguous signals His disapproval of our actions. Thus, when something natural occurs, it is not God's warning, for God would not leave a message open to natural attribution. We cited Malachi 3:6, "I am God, I do not change" teaching that God continues to use these two modes of evidence of His will. And when these two modes are absent, man has no right to suggest an event is God's will, targeting some people or region.

The error I made last week was in citing Hail as the sixth plague, when in fact, Boils is sixth. I will now correct my error: As proof, we read the following in connection with the third plague of each set: "it (lice) is the finger of God" (Exod. 8:15); "And the astrologers could not stand before Moses due to the boils..." (Exod. 9:11); "And God gave grace to the Jews in Egypt's eyes, also the man Moses was exceedingly great in the land of Egypt; in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the Egyptian people." (Exod. 11:3) This last verse was after the plague of Darkness, when the Egyptians favored the Jews and Moses.

In all three sets of three plagues, in the third of each (viz, Lice, Boils and Darkness) the

Egyptians are described as recognizing God or Moses, even without a predicted arrival of that plague. For the third plague in each set came unannounced, and yet, produced the Egyptians' reactions quoted above.

Therefore, we learn that God either predicts a plague via Moses' warning, or constructs a plague like these three, where the Egyptians validate of God's "finger", His servant, or His nation, respectively. Again, the Egyptians admitted to God's "finger" (lice), Moses' greatness (Boils), or expressed admiration (Darkness).

A progression may also be seen in these successive plagues; at first the Egyptians attested to God's hand (finger) in the plague of lice. Then, with their inability to stand before Moshe

due to their boils, they conceded to Moses' superiority over themselves. And finally, we read, "And God gave grace to the Jews in Egypt's eyes, also the man Moses was exceedingly great in the land of Egypt; in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the Egyptian people." Not only did they concede to Moses, but an admiration followed, for Moses and the Jewish nation. The plagues evoked a positive emotion in the Egyptians. This was God's plan all along, that Egypt admires God, not merely seek the avoidance of His plagues.



Similarly, we are to strive towards a love of God, and not simply fear Him. For a love of God, means we understand and admire the wisdom that He embedded in the universe, arriving at a positive draw (love) towards the Source of the universe: it requires we use our minds to apprehend truths. However, fear is a lesser level of existence.

Now, some readers have voiced opposition to the view that natural occurrences as simply, "natural", and not God's will. However, their position would suggest that wind, rain, the sun (heat/growth), the moon (tides/light), air pressure, and temperature, are always functioning to teach mankind some Divine

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lesson, and never for the sake of sustaining this Earth naturally. This must be their position, for a hurricane is nothing more than the wind and rain interacting with changes in temperature and air pressure. Since the aforementioned elements and phenomena are essential to life, God created them. And since they exist, severe weather patterns must occur.

God created the Earth in a manner that wind is necessary, even if we are all perfect individuals! Will rain cease one Messiah comes? Will lightning and tornadoes also end at that time? Of course not. The Rabbis teach that the only change to occur in the days of the Messiah will be that our subjugation to other powers will end. All else continues, just as it exists today. All natural elements and phenomena are essential for life. They will not cease, and must continue, as God states, "Furthermore, all the days of the Earth, planting and reaping, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night will never cease." (Gen. 8:22). Now, if these are never to cease, then there will be times when they combine, as they are intermingled by nature (there's that word "nature" again) and this mix must generate reactions in the weather patterns.

If we are wise, we can use our minds to best avert problematic forces of nature. But realize something: God's plan that nature follows sustained and repeated behaviors is truly a blessing: such repetition in behavior affords our very understanding, and actually enables our accurate forecast of nature's occasional, powerful displays.

Another verse from the Torah states one of

Adam's punishments for violating God's single command not to partake of the Tree of Knowledge, "thorns and thistles will sprout..." (Gen. 3:18). A wise Rabbi explained this to mean that the physical world will now contain frustration: you will plant one vegetation, but it will be overcome with thorns, metal will rust, meaning...the physical will now be a frustrating pursuit. What purpose did this Divine punishment serve?

The Rabbi explained that as Adam and Eve possessed all foods essential to their lives, and yet, violated God's command for the unnecessary fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, displaying an aspect of human nature that strives for what is not needed. They demonstrated an unruly part of the human design. God's mercy responded by altering nature, to spare them and us from further, unnecessary pursuits that might destroy us. How did God curb the desire for unnecessary physical pursuits? He did so by arranging the physical world to contain inherent frustration: things will break, novelty wears off of new purchases, overexertion breeds weariness, and indulging in any physical pleasure cannot be sustained. God made this so, that we redirect our energies from the temporal, physical world, towards the eternal world of His wisdom, to Torah. This area actually contains no pain, but the most pleasure once breaks his emotional attachments to his regular, physical lusts.

So in the course of our day or week, when something goes wrong, it is nature at work: a nature which God designed to redirect us away

from overindulging, as did Adam and Eve. This design of the physical world is by "design" for our good, but it is not happening "to me". I am not necessarily a victim of God's direct will when my new car gets its first dent: objects move, and metal dents. Simple. But we can use that accident to gauge how much the dent bothered us. If I was upset, it means my values are misguided: how does a dent in my fender change my pursuit of a Torah life? The same holds true when a hurricane develops: laws are constantly following their "design", meaning, repeating patterns of behavior, and not the Divine targeting of victims.

I will leave you with one final thought: Why has no one noticed that hurricanes continue to exist only in certain regions, and only at certain times in the year? I mean, if God is all-powerful, and wants to warn us with a hurricane, wouldn't His anger with us be more apparent, if a hurricane developed not in the summer, but in the dead of winter, over Central Park, NY? But the converse is true: hurricanes form yearly, at this time, and in only these regions. Does this not teach that "nature" is causing them, and not God? ■

[1] The word "boker" ("morning") is found in each of these first plagues: Exod. 7:15, 8:16, 9:13

[2] The word "bo" ("come", as in "come before Pharaoh in his palace") is found in each of these second plagues: Exod. 7:26, 9:1, 10:1

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KATRINA

Reader: Dear Mesora, Although you are certainly correct that Gods ways are inscrutable: “Your thoughts are not my thoughts” (Isaiah 55: 8); nevertheless, we are in no uncertain terms told, “The deeds of the Mighty One are perfect for all His ways are just. He is a faithful God never unfair; righteous and moral is He. Destruction is His children’s fault, not His own, you warped and twisted generation.” (Deuteronomy 32:4-5) Nothing in nature is by “chance” when it pertains to human beings. That would violate the concept of Divine Providence – another of Maimonides’ 13 Principles. This does not contradict the granting to man of “free will.”

Mesora: You write, “Nothing in nature is by ‘chance’ when it pertains to human beings.” Maimonides taught otherwise, quoting King David, that when one is not perfected, he is “like unto the beasts” who have no Providence regarding individual members in a species. Meaning, a boor will in fact be subject to chance, even though he is human, against your position. This makes sense when we realize that God relates to those, who relate to Him. “Close is God to all who call upon Him.” (Ashray prayer) This also means that God is far from those who are distant from Him, and they will in fact be subject to chance and natural law without God’s Providence. This means that when nature strikes such an individual, it will not be God: it can then, only be one other cause, and that is nature.

Maimonides writes:

“For I do not believe that it is through the interference of Divine Providence that a certain leaf drops [from a tree], nor do I hold that when a certain spider catches a certain fly, that this is the direct result of a special decree and will of God in that moment; it is not by a particular Divine decree that the spittle of a certain person moved, fell on a certain gnat in a certain place, and killed it; nor is it by the direct will of God that a certain fish catches and swallows a certain worm on the surface of the water. In all these cases the action is, according to my opinion, entirely due to chance, as taught by Aristotle. Divine Providence is connected with Divine intellectual influence, and the same beings, which are benefited by the latter so as to become intellectual, and to comprehend things comprehensible to rational beings, are also under the control of Divine Providence, which

examines all their deeds in order to reward or punish them. It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents, as in the above-mentioned instance, or the roof of a house falls upon those within; but it is not due to chance, according to our view, that in the one instance the men went into the ship, or remained in the house in the other instance: it is due to the will of God, and is in accordance with the justice of His judgments, the method of which our mind is incapable of understanding.” (Guide, Book III, chap. XVII)

At this point, the reader would assume Maimonides to mean that any time calamity befalls any person, it is God’s will, since Maimonides says, “but it is not due to chance, according to our view, that in the one instance the men went into the ship, or remained in the house in the other instance: it is due to the will of God.” However, Maimonides continues:

“...the greater the share is which a person has obtained of this Divine influence, on account of both his physical predisposition and his training, the greater must also be the effect of Divine Providence upon him, for the action of Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect, as has been mentioned above. The relation of Divine Providence is therefore not the same to all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence. This benefit is very great in the case of prophets, and varies according to the degree of their prophetic faculty: as it varies in the case of pious and good men according to their piety and uprightness. For it is the intensity of the Divine intellectual influence that has inspired the prophets, guided the good in their actions, and perfected the wisdom of the pious. In the same proportion as ignorant and disobedient persons are deficient in that Divine influence, their condition is inferior, and their rank equal to that of irrational beings: and they are “like unto the beasts” (Ps. xlix. 21). (Guide, Book III, chap. XVIII)

Maimonides concludes that irrational men are akin to beasts, and they are “ignorant and

disobedient persons deficient in that Divine influence.”

In the first quote, Maimonides means to distinguish inanimate objects (ships and roofs) from man: the latter possess intellect, so only he may receive Divine Providence. (Divine Providence relates only to intellectual beings, not to inanimate matter like ships.) The second quote clarifies “which” members of mankind receive Divine Providence. This should be understood clearly, and Maimonides complete chapters deserve your reading.

Reader: Furthermore in his Laws of Repentance, Maimonides teaches us in Chapter 3, “A person whose sins are greater than his merits immediately dies in his wickedness...and so too countries whose sins are greater (than merits) is immediately destroyed.” Maimonides, in the same chapter, immediately qualifies this statement saying, “This calculation is not based on the number of merits and sins but rather on their (relative) size. There is a merit whose quality exceeds many sins and sins whose (weight) is against many merits. And the only measurement is in the understanding of the All-Knowing – who uniquely knows how to value merits against sins.”

While we cannot ever hope to fathom Gods mind, nor his calculation of each individual, nor of a particular city or society – that does not, and should not prevent us from examining our ways – seeking to find instruction and positive meaning in everything that occurs to us in life.

Is this not the lesson taught us by Abraham Avinu’s dialogue with God pending Sodom’s destruction? “Shall not the Judge of all the land, not do Justice?!” Abraham is then taught that indeed God’s actions are just. The individual, with a modicum of merit, Lot and his daughters, are spared destruction. God does not “destroy the righteous with the wicked.

Mesora: That is true: God does not destroy the righteous with the wicked. But what about cases where destruction is not an element? What about cases where there are no righteous, but only average beings?

This case of Avraham you cite, is a case Divine Intervention, and any abiding principles therein, may not be transposed onto natural phenomena, like Katrina. Furthermore, the lesson you wish to derive, “seeking instruction and meaning in everything that occurs,” Maimonides has sufficiently refuted: according to Maimonides, it would appear that many, if not most people, exist completely without Divine Providence. Maimonides proves from the Torah’s verses that God’s intervention relates to each man based on his respective perfection: meaning intellectual and moral perfection. And societies that are idolatrous or deity man are far from God’s providence. Thus,

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Letters

Maimonides demonstrates that greater individuals receive greater providence than lesser individuals. And as he stated, boors, or those ignorant of God receive no providence at all.

Reader: The bottom line here is that it behooves us – as the Sages of the Talmud teach, that when bad things happen to us – “that we examine our ways”, “Yefashfesh be'ma-asav.” Conversely when good things happen to us we are taught the same lesson – to examine our ways!

Mesora: You jump from cases of Avraham and clearly proven Divine intervention, to a case regarding individuals. Your equation is unwarranted, as the cases are dissimilar, so your conclusion is inapplicable.

But I agree: when negative things happen to us, and we can learn from them, then we should learn. But this does not equate to God's intervention. For example, when I dent my new car, why shall I say that God did it? There is no proof for such a claim, nor do I believe the Rabbis meant to view such events as Divine. A more plausible explanation of the Rabbis' words, is that I should reflect on why I dented my car: perhaps my over involvement in this new car fantasy distracted my view of the road, and that is why I crashed. We need not bring God into the picture. Yet, I can learn something about my values from this accident: I should not invest more energy into how beautiful my car looks – or how I look sitting in it – as I cruise the avenue. I should pay attention to pedestrians and other vehicles.

Reader: In the absence of Prophecy in our time, we have no choice but to examine our ways understanding that it is vital to seek out Gods presence and lesson in all that we do – knowing well that a full understanding is ultimately impossible. Nevertheless this is the human condition – it is our calling: “I sought Him whom my soul loves. I sought him but I found Him not.” (Song of Songs 3:1)

We do not have the luxury of a definitive understanding of Gods will in the absence of a bona fide prophet. I agree with you that it is arrogant to feel we know God's mind by making claims of Divine, natural messages. We cannot and dare not assert with certainty that hurricane Katrina was Divine punishment for the United State's support for disengagement from Gaza, nor can we say that God punished New Orleans for its lax moral code. We can and must however examine and improve our ways and know that it is wrong to expel Jews from their homes, that moral lassitude is not to be tolerated in our society, and that individuals and societies ultimately are punished or rewarded for their actions – or inaction. At the end of the day we must “walk humbly with our God.”

– Joseph, Rananna Israel

Why such Severity in Punishments?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Howard: Why are the punishments for Torah violations so severe, as we read in this week's Parsha Ki Tavo: light-hearted women become so callous eating their own children out of starvation; we are smitten with boils; ultimate despair sets in; kidnappings and the sale of our children into slavery in front of our eyes? Why so severe?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: God wishes the best for all of mankind. This means that man lives as God intended, following the Torah, as it is the best life. We read in this week's Parsha, that we receive punishments for not “serving God with happiness, and with a good heart, because of the abundance of everything.” (Deut. 28:46,47) The laws are clearly a good, and contain joy. By abandoning the Torah, our severe punishments render us a “sign and a wonder, as well as our children, forever. For we did not serve God with happiness.” Next week's Parsha also states, “And all the nations will say, ‘For what did the Jews commit that God did this to the land...why this great, flaming fury? And they will say, ‘For they forsook the treaty of God, the God of their fathers which He cut with them when He took them from the land of Egypt.’” (Deut. 29:23,24)

The Torah says the nations will see our utter devastation and will affirm that this tragedy is due to our abandonment of the Torah. How will they know this? Why does God record their response in His selected, Torah verses?

It is because God wishes to validate the Torah by removing all doubts. What doubts? That the Jewish nation might experience harm “accidentally”. God delivers a fate to us so severe, not only as a deterrent to keep us on the proper track, but also, that our severe destruction becomes clear lesson that “God” caused our destruction: it could not have occurred through nature...no, not this level of severity. God's warnings and punishments came true. Thus, Torah is true.

Just as we are rewarded as a testament to the fulfillments of God's oaths for our good, we are tragically punished when we deviate, and history has validated this time and time again. Our ruin serves the same purposes as our grandeur: God wishes all people to see His Torah as truth, and therefore, their disturbed and alarmed response to our devastation is a proof, and God desires this response in Torah: He desires the nations to react with this affirmation of His fulfillment of His words. With such fulfillment – good or evil – God's words become a reality, and hopefully, all mankind will subjugate themselves, for their own good, to God's Torah. Be it a minimum of the 7 Noachide Laws, or the Jews' 613 Laws. □

Taken from "Windows to the Soul"

Ki Tavo

RABBI MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

Thanks for the Fruit

Every year, when the first fruits appeared, the landowner would bring them to the Temple in Jerusalem and make a special declaration (26:1-10). "And it will be when you enter the land that God your Lord gives you as an inheritance . . . then you shall take of the first of every fruit of the earth that you bring forth from your land that God your Lord gives you . . . Then you shall call out and say before God your Lord, 'An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather [Jacob]. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, strong and numerous . . . and now behold I have brought the first fruits of the ground You have given me, O God.'" This declaration is known as Vidui Bikurim, the Confession over the First Fruit.

The question naturally arises, what is so monumental about this offering that it should call for such an elaborate recital?

The Talmud states (Rosh Hashanah 43b) that upon seeing the first blossoms of a fruit tree in the spring we must bless God "who did not leave anything lacking from His universe, and created in it good creations and good trees with which to cause pleasure to mankind." Once again, we encounter an unusually elaborate blessing over fruit. More curiously, the blessing acknowledges God as the source of the pleasures we will have from the fruit tree only much later. Why did our Sages institute the blessing well in advance of the benefit we will derive from them? In fact, our Sages generally require that there be no interruptions between a blessing over a pleasure and the experience of the pleasure itself.

Of all naturally existing foodstuffs, fruit is unique in that it provides pure palliative pleasure. Even when our hunger is sated, we still find room for a fruit because of its delicious taste. In this sense, fruit represent a pleasure that is not necessary for our basic sustenance, a bonus from God that attests to His benevolence. Upon seeing the first bud of a fruit tree, we are reminded of His benevolent nature. We recognize that He created a world that provides not only our needs but also contains objects that exist only for our pleasure. And we bless Him for it.

Likewise, this reality underscores the Temple

declaration over God's enveloping benevolence³⁴our redemption from Egypt, the gift of His holy Torah, the gift of the land of Israel. Appropriately, we express these thoughts when we bring the first fruit. This is when we should feel the greatest surge of hakaras hatov, recognition and appreciation of God's benevolence.

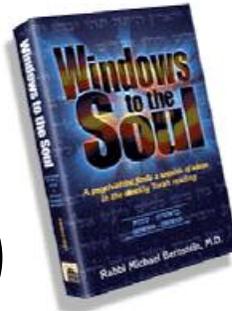
Gaze Down Blessings

After the third and sixth years of the seven-year agricultural cycle, the Jewish landowner made a declaration that he had fulfilled all his obligations for agricultural tithes. He then petitioned God for His blessing (26:12-15). "When you have finished tithing every tithe of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithes, you shall give to the Levites, to the proselytes, to the orphan and to the widow, and they shall eat in your citadels and be satisfied. Then you shall say before God your Lord, 'I removed the holy things from the house, I have given it to the Levites, to the proselytes, to the orphan and to the widow, according to whatever commandments You have commanded me . . . Gaze down from Your holy abode, from the heavens, and bless Your people Israel and the earth you have given us . . .'"

Although the expression "gaze down" seems innocuous, it is really quite ominous. Rashi comments (Genesis 18:16), "Every mention of 'gazing' (hashkafah) in Scripture connotes something bad, except in the verse 'gaze down from Your holy abode . . . for so great is the power of giving to the poor that it transforms God's anger into mercy.'"

Granted that the word gaze in this case has been transformed into an expression of mercy, as Rashi indicates, still, why did the Torah choose to have the landowner ask for God's blessing with that particular word? Why not petition for a "looking" with no negative connotations?

The Midrash comments that the account of creation begins with the exclusive use of Elo-him, the Name that refers to God's attribute of din, strict justice. Only afterward is the Tetragrammaton, the Name that refers to His attribute of mercy, attached to it. The Midrash explains that God initially intended to create the world according to din. When He saw that man could not withstand such a high



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standard, He added the quality of mercy (rachamim).

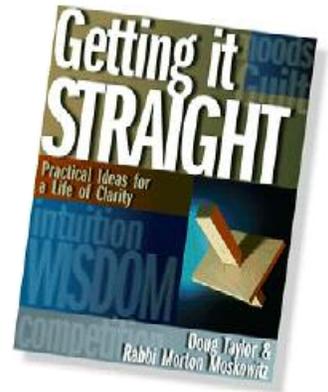
Ultimately, then, the world was created through a combination of strict justice and mercy. In His infinite wisdom, God determined that man would benefit most from fulfilling His will according to the letter of the law (din). In this circumstance, man is most responsible for his actions and thereby gains the most benefit to his soul through free-willed moral choices. However, man is unable to attain this ideal potential; therefore, God introduced the attribute of mercy (rachamim) in the equation of man's judgment. The result of this combination of attributes is that God tempers His judgment, delaying or meting out punishment piecemeal in order to allow penitence to modify the judgment. According to our Sages, mankind in the messianic era will reach a level of existence high enough to live according to the attribute of din, which is the ultimate divine kindness in that it maximizes the benefit man can attain through his free choices.

At the end of the three-year agricultural cycle, the Jewish landowner declares that he has properly used the physical bounties God has bestowed upon him, that he has fulfilled his obligations of kindness and generosity to his fellow man. Within this framework of correctly fulfilling God's purpose in creation, man is entitled to ask for God's further blessing even according to the highest level of existence, which is strict justice, din. By saying "gaze down" he invokes the attribute of strict justice and demonstrates that he has transformed his own existence and earned the right to God's kindness. ■

Taken from "Getting it Straight"

Moods

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ



"What's wrong?" he asked.

I downshifted my Schwinn mountain bike and swerved to avoid a chuckhole in the trail. Next to me, gliding along like he did this every day (and for all I knew, he did), my friend, the King of Rational Thought, rode effortlessly beside me. We had traveled the first mile of this made-over railroad trail south of Duvall in silence, finally broken by his gentle question.

"Nothing," I said, not convincingly. Then, "no, everything. I mean- oh, I don't know. It just seems like nothing's going right."

"Such as?" he inquired.

"Well, let's see," I said, sighing heavily. "Where should I start? My house needs re-roofing. Some developers bought a golf course near my home and plan to inundate our quiet dead-end street with over 100 closely-packed urban dwellings. One part of my investment portfolio has gone incredibly sour. I broke the stem off one of the control knobs on our kitchen stove.

nothing to worry about?" I said, my voice rising. "You think I enjoy feeling this way? Doesn't anything ever bother you? Don't you ever get upset, or troubled, or angry?"

"Of course," he replied. "But I've learned to deal with it. I'll show you. You say you're in a bad mood. Have you ever been in a bad mood before?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess so."

"And what happened?"

I thought about it. "Well, I got over it somehow."

"Ok then. Here's the problem. You get into a bad mood. It's not a catastrophe. It just happens. We could explore all the psychological ramifications of it and spend the next 100 years analyzing it, but the fact is, you occasionally get in a bad mood. Now when that happens, you have a feeling that this state - this lousy, nothing-ever-works-right-for-me-and-nobody-likes-me state - will go on forever. Right?"

"And," I added with emphasis, "my birthday went by and none of my friends called me."

We rounded a bend and caught the warm morning breeze full in the face. The day was already shaping up to be a scorcher.

"Sounds like you're in a bad mood," said the King of Rational Thought.

"I am."

"Nothing to worry about," he said, almost nonchalantly.

I turned my head so sharply to glare at him that I almost rode into the ditch.

"What do you mean,

"Yes," I said. "In spades."

"But that's not reality, is it? Reality is that you've been in a bad mood before, and you've gotten over it. True?"

I didn't want to admit it, but he was right. "Yes," I finally said.

"In fact," he continued as we crossed a bridge, "if you look back on your life, how many times have you been in a bad mood and then gotten out of it?"

"I suppose lots of times."

"So what makes you think this situation is any different? You're in a funk, true. Will it last forever? Almost certainly not."

I saw his point. I had been in these spots before and I always got over it.

"If you're deeply depressed or suicidal," he said, "that's different. Then you need professional help. But otherwise, your life will be a whole lot more peaceful if you just recognize the temporary nature of moods... and situations."

We crossed another bridge. The background chorale of bird songs and rustling trees was surpassed by the distant whistle of the Remlinger Farms steam train.

"I suppose you're right," I said, knowing full well he was right. "It's just so hard to imagine not being in a lousy mood when you are."

"Remember King Solomon?" asked the King of Rational Thought.

"Yes," I replied. "Purported to be the world's wisest man, if I recall."

"It's said of him that he wore a ring bearing the words, 'This will also pass.'"

"Hmmm," I said thoughtfully. "Nothing like a constant reminder."

"Speaking of which," he said, "what if I could show you an unusual technique that could simultaneously change your mood, cool you off from this hot ride, and has no long-term after-effects?"

"Sounds great," I said.

He squirted his water bottle at me. ■

adoration of heroes. In fact, the Torah and NaCh consistently describe the greatness of our ancestors and also their failings. This inclusion of the failings of such great people as Moshe and King David indicates that the Torah does not encourage the elevation of human beings into near-deities. Yet, it is difficult to avoid the human tendency to seek out individuals that we can adore as perfect. However, the converse is also true. Human nature can also incite us to denigrate or fail to appreciate some of the great personalities in TaNaCh and Jewish history. We must be wary not to succumb to the urge to bring these special individuals down to our own level. In our study of the Torah, we inevitably encounter instances in which we cannot explain the basis for actions or behaviors that we encounter. We must avoid the urge to resolve these mysteries by attributing to the great personalities of TaNaCh and our history the failing that we recognize in ourselves.

Maimonides was one of the greatest of our scholars. He is renowned for his wisdom and righteousness. Yet, there seems to be one commandment that Maimonides openly violated. Maimonides lived for a portion of his life in Egypt. In Egypt, he combined his research and writing on Torah topics with the practice of medicine and rose to the position of court physician. However, we are commanded in the Torah to not return to Egypt. How is it possible that Maimonides apparently violated this commandment? It is easy to simply respond that no one is perfect and this was a failing. Alternatively, it is tempting to resort to farfetched explanations designed to preserve Maimonides' status as an untainted hero. Yet, the best approach is to consider the issue carefully. Evaluate whether Maimonides did violate this commandment. Perhaps, we will discover that a careful analysis of the commandment reveals an explanation. If it does not, we should be willing to leave the issue as an unresolved question and avoid resorting to desperate explanations that lack any real credibility.

Let us begin our analysis with the above passage. The above passage is part of the admonishment that Moshe delivers urging the nation to be faithful to the Torah. He describes the punishments that we will experience if we abandon observance. One of the punishments is that Hashem will return us to Egypt. This is one of the three passages in the Torah that refers or alludes to a prohibition against living in Egypt.

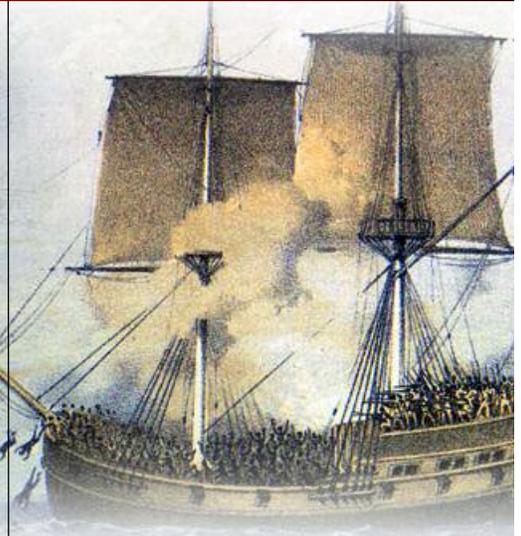
Nachmanides offers an explanation for the prohibition. He explains that the people of Egypt are characterized by the Torah as unusually corrupt and degenerate. We cannot allow ourselves to be influenced by this corrupt and degenerate culture. Therefore, we are prohibited from living in Egypt.

Based on Nachmanides' comments, Rabbaynu Yom Tov ben Avraham Isbili – Ritva – concludes that this commandment does not apply in our times. Ritva explains that the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib

conquered most of the Middle East and displaced and relocated the various nations he overpowered. Among his conquests was the land of Egypt. Its population was exiled and replaced by refugees that Sennacherib relocated from other conquests. Ritva argues that it is not the Torah's intention to prohibit us from living in the land of Egypt – a geographical location. The Torah forbids us to live among the Egyptians. After Sennacherib exiled the Egyptians and replaced the native population of Egypt with other nations, the prohibition against living in Egypt became meaningless. The population that the Torah forbids us to live among no longer exists as a distinct nation.[1]

Although it has been suggested that according to Ritva, Maimonides did not violate any commandment by living in Egypt, it is unlikely that Maimonides agreed with or relied upon Ritva's position. This conclusion is based on a comparison of two relevant rulings of Maimonides. Maimonides explains that we are commanded to destroy the seven nations that inhabited the land of Israel before the conquest of Bnai Yisrael. However, Maimonides explains that this commandment has no practical application in our times because these nations have completely assimilated and are no longer extant.[2] Rabbaynu David ibn Zimri – Radvaz – explains that this is a result of the activities of Sennacherib.[3] However, Maimonides in his discussion of the prohibition against living in Egypt does not indicate that the commandment is inapplicable in our times.[4] Therefore, it seems that he does not agree that the activities of Sennacherib impacted the prohibition against living in Egypt.

This raises a subsidiary question. In discussing the reason for the prohibition against living in Egypt, Maimonides offers an explanation that is very similar to Nachmanides'. It seems that if this explanation of accepted, Ritva's ruling is not only reasonable, it is compelling. How can Maimonides imply that the prohibition against living in Egypt applies in our times if the nation of Egypt no longer occupies its homeland and does not even exist as a unique people? There is a hint to Maimonides' answer to this question in his wording of the prohibition. Maimonides explains that if the land of Egypt would be conquered by Bnai Yisrael, it would be permitted to live there. However, as long as the land is ruled by non-Jews, it is prohibited to live there because "its behaviors are more corrupt than other lands." It is noteworthy that Maimonides associates these unacceptable behaviors to the land not to the Egyptians. In fact, he states that it is prohibited to live there as long as the land is controlled by non-Jews – any non-Jews. He does not seem to relate the prohibition to the nation of Egyptians. This suggests that according to Maimonides, the prohibition is not against intermingling with the nation of Egyptians. Instead, according to Maimonides, the Torah has established an association with the land of Egypt and



perversity. We are forbidden to live in the land of Egypt because we are prohibited to identify ourselves with a land associated with perversity and degeneracy. Therefore although Maimonides acknowledges the activities of Sennacherib and their effect, he does not regard this factor as relevant to the prohibition against living in Egypt.

It might be suggested that Maimonides lived in Egypt based upon another ruling. Some Sages argue that the prohibition against living in Egypt only applies at times during which we are in possession of the land of Israel. However, at a time that we are in exile the prohibition does not apply.[5] However, there are a number of reasons to reject this ruling as a basis for Maimonides' activities. First, let us begin with a question. According to these authorities, what is the reason for the prohibition? Do they agree with the explanations offered by Nachmanides and Maimonides? It seems unlikely that they agree. If we accept the explanations offered by Nachmanides and Maimonides, then the prohibition is based on the requirement to avoid association with corrupt influences or to even identify with a land associated with perversity. It is difficult to imagine that a prohibition based on these considerations would be impacted by whether we are in possession of the land of Israel or in exile. So, according to these authorities – who limit the prohibition to those times in which we occupy the land of Israel – what is the basis or foundation of the prohibition?

It seems that according to these authorities, we are not prohibited from living in Egypt. Instead, we are prohibited from rejecting the land of Israel and the significance of our redemption from Egypt. The ultimate rejection of the land of Israel and our redemption is to return to the land from which we were redeemed. However, these authorities argue that living in Egypt can only be regarded as a rejection of our redemption and the land of Israel when we are in possession of the land. However when Hashem exiles us from the land of Israel, we are free to settle wherever we please.

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Weekly Parsha

Halacha: Jewish Law

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Second, Maimonides does not say that it is prohibited to return to Egypt or to forsake the land of Israel to live in the land of Egypt. Instead, he states that it is prohibited to live in the land of Egypt. This indicates that he would not distinguish between periods during which we are in possession of the land of Israel and times during which we are in exile.

Radvaz suggests that we must carefully consider Maimonides' specific language in describing the prohibition against living in Egypt. He notes that according to Maimonides, it is not prohibited to travel to Egypt or even to live there temporarily. He rules that it is prohibited to settle there – to establish permanent residency in Egypt. This is an interesting distinction but it makes perfect sense if we consider Maimonides' explanation of the prohibition. According to Maimonides, the prohibition is not against intermingling with the nation of Egyptians. The prohibition is against forming an association with a land identified with corrupt and perverse values and behaviors. This association is not formed by merely traveling to the land of Egypt or spending time there. The association is established by creating a relationship with the land – by settling there.

Radvaz observation suggests a very obvious explanation for Maimonides' behavior. Maimonides did not travel to Egypt with the intent to settle there. Therefore, Maimonides did not violate any commandment by fleeing to Egypt in order to avoid persecution. However, once he was appointed physician to the ruler, it became impossible for him to leave. It seems likely that this could not be characterized as settling in Egypt. "Settling" implies a willful and self-determined decision. This did not take place in Maimonides' case. Even if this characterization of settling is challenged, it seems that Maimonides was not permitted to leave and would have been at great risk if he had attempted to abandon his position at court.[6] So, although this explanation is not eloquent or remarkably scholarly, it does seem to provide a simple explanation for Maimonides' behavior. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Yom Tov ben Avraham Isbili (Ritva), Commentary on the Talmud, Mesechet Yoma 38a.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:4.

[3] Rabbaynu David ibn Zimra (Radvaz) Commentary of Radvaz on Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:4.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:7-8.

[5] Rav Matis Blum, Torah LaDa'at, volume 2, p 455.

[6] Rabbaynu David ibn Zimra (Radvaz) Commentary of Radvaz on Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:7-84.

SHABBAS:

WHAT IS "MUKZA" AND WHEN MAY WE MOVE IT?

RABBI DANIEL MYERS

Q. Shmuel Myers: Regarding the permission to move an item whose function is prohibited, but one "needs the location it occupies", what is the definition of "need" for that location? For example, if the children decide to sleep in the guest room on Friday night and there is a pen (prohibited object) on the bed, can it be moved: they do not 'need' the location, they would simply 'like' it!

A. Excellent question! The Shulchan Aruch (308:3) writes that one can move a utensil, which is primarily used for prohibited Sabbath labor, such as a hammer or a pen, for a permitted use of that object, or for its location. Therefore, one could move a hammer if he needs it to crack open a coconut, or if he needs to use the chair upon which the hammer is placed. The Mishna Berura (308:12) writes that one should use the hammer only if he does not have a permitted tool, like nutcracker. Therefore, one should not use a hammer to crack open nuts if he already has a nutcracker.

It is interesting to note that the M"B does not write a similar comment regarding one's need for the location; i.e. he does not write that one could move hammer for its location, only if there is no other place available for use. Does this omission imply that one can choose to sit wherever he wants, although there are other chairs available, even if he needs to move the Mukza (hammer) from the chair that he chooses to sit on?

Rav Binyamin Zilber (Az Nidbaru 8:64) deals with this discrepancy in the Mishna Berura. He writes that the Mishna Berura maintains that once a person desires (Yaish Lo K'paida Laishaiv Davka B'safsal Zu) to use a specific space, then, that space is defined as "need", L'zorech Mikomo, regardless of the availability of other seats. If he has no desire to sit in a specific seat, then that is not defined as L'zorech Mikomo, and he does not have permission to move the Mukza hammer off of the chair. This Halacha is in contrast to the permission of L'zorech Gufo (need of the object, not its place); in the latter case, the permission only exists if he does not have a permitted item to



use. If he does have such an item (like a nutcracker) then he should not use the hammer, since his desire is simply to accomplish a specific, permissible goal, which could be achieved without the hammer.

In conclusion, once there is a desire to use a specific place, even if there is no need for that place, one has a right to move the Mukza, the hammer in our case. Therefore, in our case, one can move the pen or hammer off the bed even if he could sleep elsewhere.

Q. According to the Mishna Berura (308:12) one should use a hammer only if he does not have a nutcracker. How far must one go before he uses the normally prohibited hammer? For example, must he borrow a nutcracker from his neighbors before he uses a hammer to crack open the nuts?

A. Rav Moshe (Saifer Tiltulai Shabbat Kuntus Hatshuvot number 5) maintains that one could use the hammer without having to first go to the neighbors to borrow the nutcracker. He extrapolates this from the Mishna Berura (ibid.), who writes that one could use a Mukza hammer if he does not have (Sheain Lo) a nutcracker; the Mishna Berura does not write that he can not attain (Sheain Yachol L'hasig) a nutcracker. This implies that he does not have to bother himself that much to find a nutcracker; rather, if he does not already have a nutcracker, he can use a hammer L'zorech Gufo. ■

PRESS RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 19, 2005

Fulani Dumped *after* Rambam Rallies

"Jews function as mass murderers of people and color" (and Jews) "had to sell their souls" (to acquire the State of Israel), are just a few of the anti-Jewish rhetoric espoused by Lenora Fulani of the Independence Party's Executive Committee. "It's an outrage", says Rabbi Zev Friedman, Rosh HaMesivta of Rambam Mesivta High School, "that Lenora Fulani, is given such prominence in the Independence Party when she has a track record of inflammatory and venomous anti-Semitic comments."

Hundreds of protestors from the Rambam Mesivta High School of Lawrence, NY held a protest rally in front of the Independence Party's headquarters at 225 Broadway in New York on September 15, 2005 to show support for the Independence Party Chairman, Frank MacKay's push for Lenora Fulani's ouster from her function on the Executive Committee.

Fulani has been given many opportunities to retract her statements but flatly refuses giving excuses saying "it's impossible to have a serious dialogue and discourse in the city at this time on those issues". Regarding 9/11 Fulani has been quoted, -that America was "made vulnerable" to terrorist attacks as a result of "our government's aggression and arrogance". Rabbi Yotav Eliach, Principal of Rambam Mesivta High School says, "The fact that she attempts to justify the Muslim terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center is obscene".

"I'm very excited to hear she's gone", says Rambam senior, Zoli Honig, "because, an 'anti-Semite' like that has no place operating in government. I'm sure the rally influenced the vote. When you see 200 Yeshiva kids on a Thursday afternoon rallying in front of the Independence Party's Headquarters, chanting to 'kick her out' and 'clean up your party', the Party's attention focused on us as they came out of their building for their lunch break."

The students of Rambam Mesivta from Lawrence, New York, have a long standing history of activism for Jewish and American social justice. Their voice has been heard at rallies against Saudi support of terror and in support of US troops, against Nazi War criminals living in the United States, as well as Democratic Congressman's Moran anti-Semitic remarks. ■

