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Weekly Parsha

Vaeyra

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Egypt will know that I am Hashem when I stretch my hand over Egypt and I take out Bnai Yisrael from among them.”

(Shemot 7:5)

We have all been moved by the death and destruction brought about by the recent tsunami. I have received many emails from various

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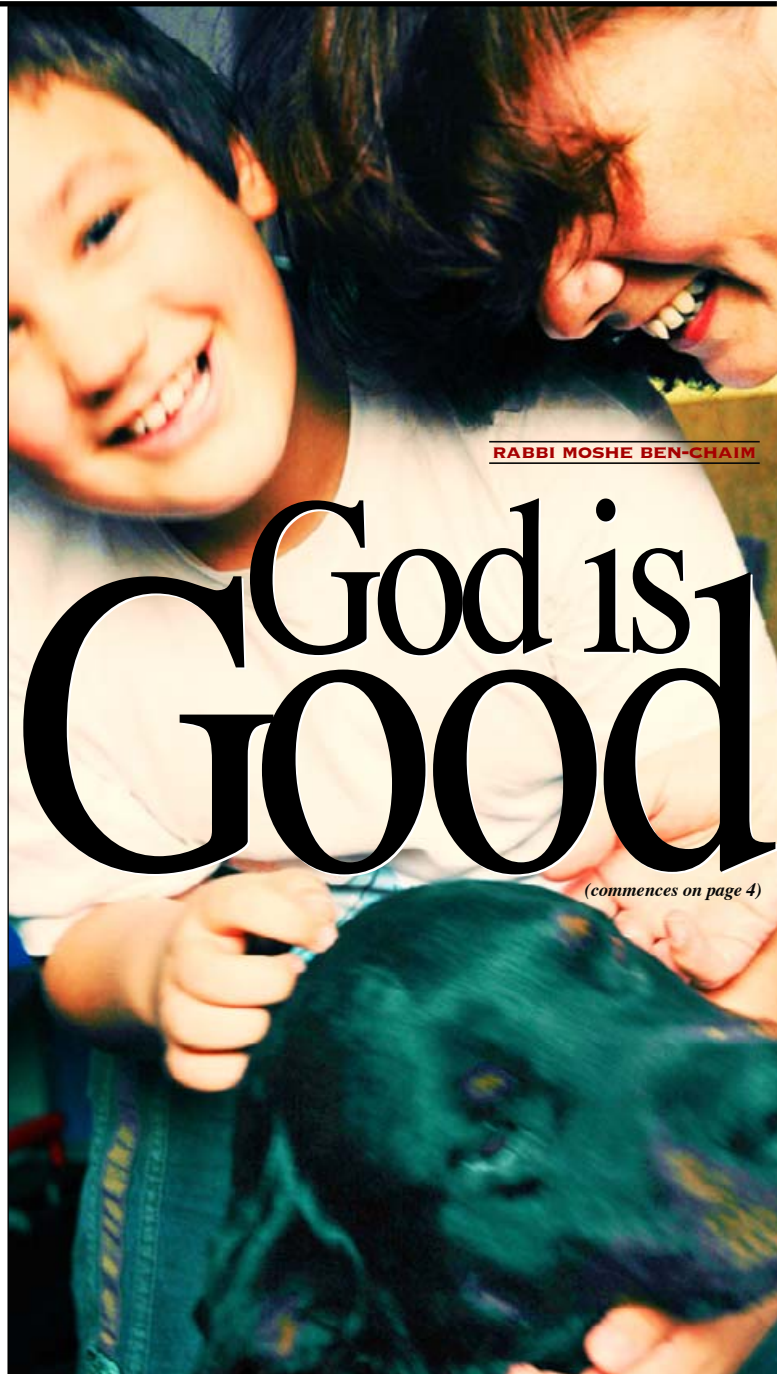
Honesty's Fortune

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

About a year ago, I recall discussing Lashon Hara (destructive speech) with a friend's wife. She said she could not truthfully commit to refraining from Lashon Hara, and wondered if she could recite Maimonides' formulation of repentance, “Please God, I have erred, I have been crooked and wanton, (speaking Lashon Hara), I regret my act, and I am embarrassed, and I will never again return to this matter”. I told her it would be a lie to recite her commitment to refrain, if she knew she could not yet control herself.

I then realized myself that this is fortunate. What I mean is, that by adhering to honesty, and not

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God is GOOD

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Weekly Parsha

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Jewish organizations that are involved in raising funds for disaster relief. Each of these organizations has contacted our school and requested that we make every effort to support their efforts. However, at the same time, I have been following an interesting dialogue on the web critiquing this massive fundraising effort. One of the issues alluded to in this dialogue relates to our responsibility as Jews for non-Jews. Are we responsible to respond to a tragedy that primarily affects non-Jews?

This week's parasha speaks directly to this issue. In the above passage, Hashem tells Moshe that He will punish the Egyptians with terrible plagues. Through experiencing this punishment, the Egyptians will come to recognize Hashem. In the context of our redemptions from Egypt, this is a strange statement. We generally assume that the events of the redemption were designed essentially or exclusively for the benefit of Bnai Yisrael. The Egyptians were punished in order to save the Jewish people. Yet, this passage seems to state that this popular view is not entirely accurate. According to the pasuk, the plagues Hashem brought upon the Egyptians were not solely designed to benefit Bnai Yisrael. The plagues had an additional purpose. Hashem's also intended – through the plagues – to educate the Egyptians.

Gershonides argues that there is no contradiction between our pasuk and the view that the plagues were designed exclusively for the benefit of Bnai Yisrael. According to Gershonides, Hashem was not interested in the perfection of the Egyptians. However, it was important to discourage the Egyptians from pursuing Bnai Yisrael. The plagues and the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Reed Sea would persuade the remnant of the Egyptian people that they could not overcome the will of Hashem. Hashem told Moshe that Egypt will be thoroughly defeated and through this defeat it will recognize that it cannot battle the will of the Almighty.[1]

However, Sforno has a completely different understanding of our passage. According to his view, Hashem was concerned with the perfection of the Egyptians. Hashem told Moshe that he would bring plagues upon the Egyptians and punish them for their treatment of the Jewish people, in order to provide a compelling moral lesson. The plagues and punishments were designed to save Bnai Yisrael and to demonstrate to the Egyptians Hashem's awesome power over the universe and His justice. Hopefully, they would learn the lesson communicated by their experience and repent.[2]

It is clear from Sforno's comments that Hashem is not concerned with the welfare of



only Bnai Yisrael. His attention is also directed towards the welfare of all peoples of the world. This outlook is reflected in many of the comments and observations of our Sages.

Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chajes discusses at length the Torah's attitude towards non-Jews and its expectations regarding our relationship with the non-Jewish community. His discussion begins with the investigation of an interesting paradox. Rav Chajes observes that the Sages instituted a number of restrictions regarding our interactions with non-Jews. For example, it is prohibited to travel or be alone with a non-Jew. It is prohibited to seek medical treatment from a non-Jew.[3] These and various other injunctions are indicative of a basic and intense distrust of non-Jews. But Rav Chajes observes that other statements of our Sages express a very different perspective. The Mishne teaches – according to Rav Chajes' interpretation – that we are not permitted to treat any person disgracefully.[4] Rav Chajes asserts that the requirement to treat others with respect applies to our interactions with all people – Jewish or non-Jewish. The Mishne also teaches that the human being must be regarded a precious creation; we are created in the image of G-d.[5] Rav Chajes quotes the comments of Tosefot Yom Tov on this Mishne. Tosefot Yom Tov observes that the Mishne is apparently referring to all human beings – Jews and non-Jews. We are all created in Hashem's image.[6]

How can we reconcile these two very different perspectives? We are instructed to conduct ourselves with extreme care and caution in our interaction with non-Jews. Yet, we are required

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Weekly Parsha

to treat all human beings with the greatest respect! Rav Chajes observes that the answer lies in understanding the context of the injunctions limiting our interactions with non-Jews. He explains that these injunctions reflect the reality of the historical relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Our Sages lived in an environment in which this relationship was predicated upon intense anti-Semitism. During much of our history – and even in modern times – the murder of a Jew has not been viewed as a crime or even worthy of casual condemnation. Our Sages were responding to this unpleasant and dangerous reality. Their injunctions were a response to this historical relationship and designed to protect the safety of the Jewish community.

This interpretation is supported by Maimonides' treatment of these injunctions. He includes his description of these injunctions in his discussion of the laws governing our obligation to care for our health and well-being. The inclusion of these injunctions in this discussion indicates that these prohibitions are not designed to foster segregation or inform our attitudes towards non-Jews. Instead, they are intended to protect and insure the safety of the community.

Based on this understanding of these injunctions, Rav Chajes explains that they do not at all contradict the imperative to respect and cherish all human beings. Every person is a reflection of the Creator and we must build our relationships upon that foundation. However, this does not mean that we can act without caution or disregard our personal safety.

Perhaps, the most interesting part of Rav Chajes' discussion deals with the Torah's attitude towards other major religions – specifically Islam and Christianity. The level of religious tolerance expressed in these comments is remarkable. In order to appreciate his comments we must first acknowledge that conventional religions are not generally notable for their tolerant attitudes. Many of the most vicious wars and persecutions have been justified on religious grounds. In our own time this remains true. If we consider the various conflicts around the world, differences over religious doctrine remain a common element underlying many of these conflicts – or at least a basis used for their justification.

In general, each religion claims to be the absolute and incontrovertible truth. The corollary of this contention is that all other religions should be suppressed. Followers of other faiths are condemned to damnation and should be either converted or eliminated. Rav Chajes contrasts this general, prevalent outlook with the Torah's perspective. Rav Chajes must acknowledge that we contend that the Torah is a

divinely revealed truth. However, this conviction does not generate the intolerance commonly associated with organized religion. The Torah does condemn – in the most unequivocal terms – idolatry. However, the Torah establishes specific perimeters for classifying idolatry. Religious faiths that do not fall within these perimeters are not condemned. The Torah does not endorse the details of these faiths, but neither does it suggest that we should persecute or mistreat the adherents of these religions. Rav Chajes – in a lengthy analysis – concludes that neither Christianity nor Islam come close to falling within the perimeters of idolatry. Therefore, we are required to demonstrate uncompromised tolerance towards these religions.

Rav Chajes closes his comments with another remarkable observation. Most religions contend that its adherents have the exclusive rights of entry into heaven. One who accepts the tenets of the faith is assured eternity and those who reject the religion are condemned to eternal damnation. Rav Chajes' observes that this is not the view of the Torah. According to the Torah, a non-Jew who accepts the seven Noahide laws as a revealed truth is worthy of eternity.[7] Furthermore, we are required to care for and sustain these individuals.[8] Rav Chajes observes that both Christianity and Islam accept these laws as a revealed truth and direct their adherents to observe these laws. On this basis, they are worthy of eternity and deserve our support.[9]

I realize that this brief summary is not a comprehensive treatment of these issues and certainly additional issues can be raised. But I hope that these thoughts will provide some insight and direction. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 30.

[2] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 74.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach U'Shemirat HaNefesh 12:7-12.

[4] Mesechet Avot 4:3.

[5] Mesechet Avot 3:14.

[6] Rav Yom Tov Lippman, Tosefot Yom Tov Commentary on Mesechet Avot 3:14.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 8:11.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Biah 14:7-8.

[9] Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chajes, Teferet LeYisrael (Collected Writings, pp 483-491).

Perfection

Honesty's Fortune

(continued from page 1)

reciting repentance, one is faced head-on with this realization that they have this flaw. If one were to go merely verbally enunciate the teshuva formula so as to alleviate guilt, they lie, fooling themselves as penitent, when they are not. Therefore, although well intended, one must not lie and verbalize that, to which he or she cannot commit. By refraining from this worthy act of repenting, since one cannot do so properly, one is faced with his or her flaw, which they can now reflect on, and make real change.

Another observation I made is Maimonides' inclusion of the term "embarrassed" in his repentance formulation. I wondered, if we are already stating we "regret" our act, what more is gained by stating we are embarrassed?

I believe this causes us to compare our need of approval from man, to that of God. Who should we fear more? Of course it is God. But do we? My sense is that we don't, as we are naturally social, and unnaturally philosophical. Thus, we are naturally inclined to fear man, and desire his approval, while God is absent from our thoughts all day. Therefore, if one does not feel embarrassed for a sin, he is again afforded the opportunity to ask himself why. He can strive to remove his need for approval from man, and come to a realization that he denies God's presence when he sinned. For if he were convinced that God exists, as much as he knows man does, he could not sin. Each sin carries with it some denial of God. Certainly, if while sinning he were caught by man, he would feel embarrassed.

With this word "embarrassed" included in the formulation repentance, one gains the opportunity to determine if he truly views God, as real as he views man. If he senses he is not embarrassed before God when reciting his repentance, he now learned his overestimation of man: an opportunity to improve. Honesty affords us an unmitigated allegiance to what is real.

With Maimonides' example, we learn that the Rabbis' formulations of blessings, prayers and repentance are quite deep, availing us to methods of perfection, for which, we must feel fortunate. ■

Letters



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God is GOOD

Reader: Assuming the things (actions, etc.) that God does or ‘believes in’ are good, are they “good” because God ‘thinks’ so...or is God good because He does these good actions? If we can for a moment forget about the anthropomorphisms, does anyone have a clear answer to this question that follows both logic and Torah ideas independently? I understand God doesn’t ‘think’ or ‘believes in’ things per se, which is why I put it in quotes. What I meant was simply that we say that God is good and the actions He does are good. So the question is this: which is predicated on which? In other words, are the actions God does good on their own merit of some sort, and since God does them, “He” is good; or do we define good by what is done by God?

Mesora: This is an important issue and I am glad you raised it. Only the latter possibility can be true. That possibility being: what God does, is by definition, “good”. To suggest the former – that actions are defined as “good” separate from God – is to suggest that there is something other than God that determines what is “good”. But since God created everything, then He alone determines its value, be it good or evil. Nothing other than God dictates what is good or not, and all things follow God’s definitions, with no authority or ability to differ. Accordingly, God does not ‘follow’ some good action, and this somehow makes Him good. This is how man works: he is born ignorant, learns what is good later on, and then follows it. To suggest God mimics man’s feeble framework, suggests that an act is good of its own nature, without God’s designation. But that is impossible, for God

created everything, and therefore, He alone defines all that is “good”. We will soon see this last idea is an essential part of a verse in Isaiah.

As always, God includes in His Torah all fundamental truths, and this discussion regarding what is “good” is no exception. However, God’s Torah is a deep science, and cannot be fully appreciated with a cursory read. His verses are cryptic, containing literal truths, which also point to additional, profound, underlying principles. It is only with the method of Torah and Talmudic deciphering that we might uncover those concepts.

Isaiah 45:6,7 says: “In order that those (people) shall know, from the east of the sun and her west, that there is nothing but Me, I am God and there is no other. Forming light and creating darkness, making peace and creating evil – I am God doing all these things.” With these words, God declares exclusive responsibility for everything, “There is no other.” But He also says He creates evil. How do we understand this?

Radak and Maimonides explain that evil is merely the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light. In as much as God created peace (good), when man does not follow it, (i.e., unwarranted war as Radak cites) then evil exists. But evil itself cannot be created, as it is not a positive thing. God is also not the cause of evil in an intentional sense: it is man. Maimonides explains that creation cannot apply to that which is a negative. Another example is sickness: it cannot be created, for it is merely the absence of properly functioning organs. It is only the organs that can be created. Darkness cannot be created, for it is merely the absence of light, but the

light’s source can be created. And evil cannot be created, for it too is merely the absence of goodness or peace. What can be ‘created’, must be a positive entity. It is impossible to create an absence. That is illogical: I cannot create a “lack-ing”. Only once a positive thing is created, then its removal can exist. But one cannot “create a removal”. Creation is of a positive thing. Thus is a subtle point, so I feel repetition is necessary.

God did not “create” darkness, but He created something positive, light. Subsequent to its creation, its removal is what we term darkness. In that sense, God created darkness. Similarly, hunger cannot be created, but a stomach and nerves can be created, which, when empty, will sense hunger. This explains, as Maimonides teaches, why the term “yatzar” is applied only to light and peace in our verse, for these are real creations. (See the Hebrew of the verse) But darkness and evil are termed “bara”, which does not imply positive creation, rather, a causal relationship. God is the creator of darkness, in as much as He created light with the ability for it to be diminished.

Now, as mentioned earlier, God alone defining all that is “good” is an essential part of a verse in Isaiah. The end of our verse reads, “I am God doing all these things”. It expresses an important idea, but it also seems redundant. God just told us He created all these things, i.e., light, darkness, etc. Therefore, we wonder why He needed to say, “I am God doing ‘all’ these things”. What more is added?

I suggest that God’s exclusive role in creating everything, is precisely the reason why all other things (peace, evil, etc) have these definitions:

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God's act of creating something gives that thing its unalterable definition. So when God tells us at the very end of the verse, "I am God doing all these things", He means to say, "My 'exclusivity' in the creation of everything is the precise reason why something is either peace or evil." Since God alone causes all, He alone determines its value. Nothing else might override the Creator's intent. If I create a chair, another person cannot suggest it is really a table, since I alone brought it into existence for an objective and with design; I alone define its role. Here too, God is teaching us that all creation receives its truth definition, be it good or evil from God alone. For nothing else exists that contributed to its creation, thereby defining its purpose and role.

In Genesis during each day of creation, God said, "and it was good". Rashi asks why on the second day, God did not say "and it is good" as He stated in connection with the other days. Rashi answers that due to the incompleteness of the waters, 'goodness' could not yet be ascribed to them. But on day three, when the waters were completed, along with another matter that was commenced and completed, the term "good" is used twice, each instance of "good" correlating to one of the two completed matters. Rashi proves his point well. Rashi explains that when something is completed, it is called "good". This teaches us what the term good means: "good" refers to anything that has arrived at its objective form and purpose. Now, as God decides whether something exists or not, He alone determines when it has reached its completion. And when it has, then it is called "good".

Thus, we learn that we must replace our infantile idea of good, with the true idea. "Good" does not mean that something conforms to our notions of good vs. evil. Good means that something exists as God wishes. Thus, when creation was complete for that day, it was "good": the created entity of that day was complete as God planned. When man lives in accord with the Torah, man is good. He is acting in line with God's intent.

And we can also go so far as to say God is good, with this understanding. We learn that God's perfection is a good, and all His actions are good. There is no deficiency in Him, or in the actions and creations, which emanated from Him, since nothing could cause any deficiency or ignorance in Him. When He creates something, it is good, as it reaches its objective. God defines what is good, and not that He follows what something else defined as good. There is nothing else: "I am God and there is no other". (Isaiah 45:6)

What is good, equates with what is real and true. It may take something getting used to, but

we must update our definitions so that they conform to reality, not to our subjective feelings. We conclude that all that exists is a reflection of God's will: nothing as God created it is lacking in anyway, so all of creation is fulfilling its objective, and what we call good. And since God is the source of all that exists, we say that He too is good, meaning, He is reality. What is real, equates with what is a good, for God would not will that which is harmful, as learned by studying creation, His actions towards man and animal, and His just Torah laws.

Finally, of what necessity did God say in connection with each day, "and it is good"? What need in the Torah is there to include these words? I believe this teaches us that there is nothing that could prevent God's intended creation from reaching their objectives. This teaches that God is the exclusive Creator, and nothing opposes His will. God stating each day "it is good" emphasizes this notion, that all reached its objective, all exclusively due to God, unimpeded by anything else, for there is nothing else.

We learn that an essential idea in Creation is this idea that God is the "Exclusive Cause" for our universe, and our very existences. For without this notion, we imagine falsehoods, and enter the world of idolatry. So important is this idea, God said it each day, and Maimonides includes this in his fourth of his 13 Principles: God preceded everything. ■

We must replace our infantile idea of good, with the true idea. "Good" does not mean that something conforms to our notions of good vs. evil. Good means that something exists as God wishes.



God Does Not Create Evil

The Guide for the Perplexed

Book III, chap. X

MAIMONIDES

“The Mutakallemim, as I have already told you, apply the term non-existence only to absolute non-existence, and not to the absence of properties. A property and the absence of that property are considered by them as two opposites, they treat, e.g., blindness and sight, death and life, in the same way as heat and cold. Therefore they say, without any qualification, nonexistence does not require any agent, an agent is required when something is produced. From a certain point of view this is correct. Although they hold that non-existence does not require an agent, they say in accordance with their principle that God causes blindness and deafness, and gives rest to anything that moves, for they consider these negative conditions as positive properties. We must now state our opinion in accordance with the results of philosophical research. You know that he who removes the obstacle of motion is to some extent the cause of the motion, e.g., if one removes the pillar which supports the beam he causes the beam to move, as has been stated by Aristotle in his *Physics* (VIII., chap. iv.): in this sense we say of him who removed a certain property that he produced the absence of that property, although absence of a property is nothing positive. Just as we say of him who puts out the light at night that he has produced darkness, so we say of him who destroyed the sight of any being that he produced blindness, although darkness and blindness are negative properties, and require no agent. In accordance with this view we explain the following passage of Isaiah: “I form the light and create (bore) darkness: I make peace, and create (bore) evil” (Isa. xlv. 7), for darkness and evil are non-existing things. Consider that the prophet does not say, I make (oseh) darkness, I make (oseh) evil, because darkness and evil are not things in positive existence to which the verb &c to make” would apply; the verb bara “He created” is used, because in Hebrew this verb is applied to non-existing things e.g., “In the beginning God created” (bara), etc.: here the creation took place from nothing. Only in this sense can non-existence be said to be produced by a certain action of an agent. In the same way we must explain the following passage: “Who bath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or the deaf, or the seeing,” etc. (Exod. iv. 11). The passage can also be explained as follows: Who has made man able to speak? or can create him without the capacity of speaking, i.e., create a substance that is incapable of acquiring this property? for he who produces a substance that cannot acquire a certain property may be called the producer of that privation. Thus we say, if any one abstains from delivering a fellow man from death, although he is able to do so, that he killed him. It is now clear that according to all these different views the action of an agent cannot be directly connected with a thing that does not exist: only indirectly is non-existence described as the

result of the action of an agent, whilst in a direct manner an action can only influence a thing really in existence; accordingly, whoever the agent may be, he can only act upon an existing thing.

After this explanation you must recall to memory that, as has been proved, the [so-called] evils are evils only in relation to a certain thing, and that which is evil in reference to a certain existing thing, either includes the nonexistence of that thing or the non-existence of some of its good conditions. The proposition has therefore been laid down in the most general terms,” All evils are negations. “Thus for man death is evil: death is his non-existence. Illness, poverty, and ignorance are evils for man: all these are privations of properties. If you examine all single cases to which this general proposition applies, you will find that there is not one case in which the proposition is wrong except in the opinion of those who do not make any distinction between negative and positive properties, or between two opposites, or do not know the nature of things,— who, e.g., do not know that health in general denotes a certain equilibrium, and is a relative term. The absence of that relation is illness in general, and death is the absence of life in the case of any animal. The destruction of other things; is likewise nothing but the absence of their form.

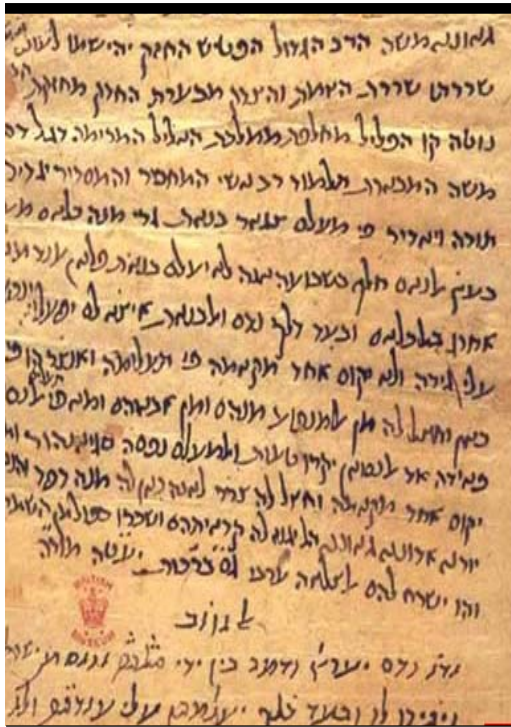
After these propositions, it must be admitted as a fact that it cannot be said of God that He directly creates evil, or He has the direct intention to produce evil: this is impossible. His works are all perfectly good. He only produces existence, and all existence is good: whilst evils are of a negative character, and cannot be acted upon. Evil can only be attributed to Him in the way we have mentioned. He creates evil only in so far as He produces the corporeal element such as it actually is: it is always connected with negatives, and is on that account the source of all destruction and all evil. Those beings that do not possess this corporeal element are not subject to destruction or evil: consequently the true work of God is all good, since it is existence. The book which enlightened the darkness of the world says therefore, “And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen.i. 31). Even the existence of this corporeal element, low as it in reality is, because it is the source of death and all evils, is likewise good for the permanence of the Universe and the continuation of the order of things, so that one thing departs and the other succeeds. Rabbi Meir therefore explains the words “and behold it was very good” (tove me’od): that even death was good in accordance with what we have observed in this chapter. Remember what I said in this chapter, consider it, and you will understand all that the prophets and our Sages remarked about the perfect goodness of all the direct works of God. In *Bereshit Rabba* (chap. i.) the same idea is expressed thus: “No evil comes down from above.” ■

Pirkei Avos - Ethics

LOVE *of* GOD PART II

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by student



“Ontignos, the man from Socho... said: Don’t be like servants who serve their master to receive ‘pras’. Rather, be like servants who serve their master not to receive ‘pras’ and let Fear of Heaven be on you.”

We last left off with an analysis of the comments of the Rambam on our Mishna, where he says that while one must strive to serve God from love, he must also serve God from fear. In trying to appreciate to this relationship between the commandments to love and fear God, we came upon a contradiction within the Rambam’s Laws of Repentance: on the one hand, he says (10:2) that love of God, meaning involvement in Torah because it is the truth and the ultimate good, is not a level that is attainable for everyone, even for all the wise and scholarly. Yet, Rambam also says (10:5) that with the correct training and education, every individual has the ability to serve God out of love. How are we to resolve these seemingly contradictory statements of the Rambam?

The description of ‘love of God’ may refer to two different individuals. One type may be a person who is moved by an idea that he learned so that he gains an appreciation for God and is motivated by this appreciation. Due to this experience, he is moved to serve out of love. However, this doesn’t mean that the whole individual has changed: in a couple of hours, he will still return to the same level he was at before. Another type of individual is one who the Rambam describes as ‘lovesick’ with God. Just as when a man falls in love with a woman, she absorbs all his psychological energies, so too when one becomes lovesick with God, all of his energies are directed towards God. In this person, there has been a fundamental change within his internal makeup so that there is a new level of constancy of the emotion, always feeling drawn towards God.

With these two categories, we may now understand the statements of the Rambam. When the Rambam says “the level of serving God out of love can be reached by everyone”, he is talking of the experience and motivation of love, the first type in the above paragraph. Any individual with the proper training and educa-

tion may have the ability to hear a beautiful idea and be moved by it so that he will act out of love. However, this experience may be limited in that when the experience is over, the person returns to the level he was at before. In contrast, there is the other type of person who becomes lovesick with God, making changes within his internal being so that he is a different person who is always drawn to God. It is to this level that the Rambam says that only a few people, not even every wise man, can reach. The two statements of the Rambam no longer are contradictory: they are each referring to a certain type of ‘love of God’ and each one is accessible according to the nature of its level.

With these ideas in mind, we may now understand the comment made by the Rambam on our Mishna, that one must serve God with love and with fear. We asked what the relationship between the two commandments is. If love means serving God out of an appreciation for the truth and the ultimate good, fear means that the person doesn’t fully recognize this to appreciate it. Thus, there is still some part of him that desires something else. Fear of God allows him to keep his desires in check so that he may always overcome those desires to do what is correct due to the recognition of the greatness of God. Since it is difficult for a person to constantly be in a state where his energies and desires are directed in the pure form of love, meaning towards the truth, the element of fear must always exist. In this way, the person will always be able to move towards perfection, for even when he doesn’t have the pure form of “love” of God, he will still be able to check his emotions and channel them through “fear” of God.

We mentioned previously another comment of the Rambam on our Mishna: love of God is tied to fulfilling positive commandments and fear of God is tied to the safeguarding of the prohibitions of the Torah. At first glance, this statement is perplexing: why should it be so? Why should my love or fear towards God differentiate based upon the commandment that I am keeping? Either way, they are all commandments of God! To be continued. ■

Reason & Tradition

Kabbala vs. Torah

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: After reading your 1/20/2006 JewishTimes "Letters", I am very confused on where you stand regarding your answer to the reader who inquired of the acceptability or recognition of Kabbala and Zohar. Your answer, I quote: "The correct question to be posed is which 'ideas' are true. For this is all that God desires: that you follow truth – not people, and not movements." But then you contradict your self with the next statement, "the bottom line to all your questions is this: follow the Torah [Tanach]". Here is the contradiction: Talmud is a man-made, and you say to follow it. But you also say not to follow man. Please explain. Thank you, Greg

Mesora: Greg, Good question. Talmud is comprised of conflicting positions. It is replete on every page with one Rabbi who disputes another. Thus, all of the Talmud cannot be truly 'correct' in the sense that it reflects God's knowledge, for two opposing views cannot be correct. God knows the right position. The very fact that one Rabbi disputed another means he did not accept the other's view as truth. These types of disputes must exist, when we have lost much knowledge, and now must discern for ourselves. Simultaneously, both Rabbis in every Talmudic dispute are functioning as they should, regardless of the outcome, or their ideas. All we have is our best capabilities, and whatever knowledge we can amass and understand. Man must err.

However, it must be understood that Talmud study is not about finding out what God knows as truth, which we cannot without prophecy. Rather, Talmud it is about understanding the analysis of the Rabbis. The theories of all Talmudic Rabbis are equally worthwhile, and deserve our study. And what they discuss in Talmud, is the Oral Law, which is directly from God.

When I say to follow the Talmud, as opposed to later works, I mean to follow it for Halacha, for its theoretical beauty, and its aid in learning how to think. This work alone is written in such a fashion. For it is from Talmud, and no other source, that the Shulchan Aruch – code of Jewish law – was derived. The Talmud is also a direct result of the Oral Law, by those who received the Oral law with no break in its transmission. Talmud qualifies as true Oral Law. And the analysis of these brilliant sages is unparalleled for sharpening our minds and

conceptualizing ideas.

Conversely, Kabbala according to Maimonides, no longer exists. What is written down is not Kabbala, by definition. Kabbala requires verbal transmission man-to-man, and not in written form, in order to retain its status as true Kabbala. It is for this reason that I differentiate Kabbala on one hand, from Talmud and Torah. The latter alone are traced directly back to God's words at Sinai. I don't mean that everything found in today's "Kabbala" is false, for any idea proven true is valid. But it certainly is not true Kabbala. The word Kabbala, means "receipt", as in what was received from one's Rabbi. But no one today can claim to possess verbal transmissions directly back to Moses and God. Therefore, no one today has authentic Kabbala, or rather, authentic Torah directly traced back to God. Only the Torah, Prophets, Writings and Talmud possess this status.

Thus, I remain firm that we must judge ideas, and not people, such as those who claim Kabbala is beyond reproach. The only sources beyond reproach are those divinely given, such as the Torah, Tanach, and the Oral law, or that which was received man-from-man, in an unbroken chain back to Sinai: back to God. The only criteria defining a matter as beyond reproach, is verification of its origin with God's word. God is the only One beyond reproach. So only God's works or divinely inspired words maintain this level of reverence.

Today's Kabbala and Zohar have no validation of an unbroken transmission, linking directly back to Moses, and God's words. Therefore, we do not claim as we do with the Torah, that all found in today's Kabbala is from God. This is why I say; "follow reason, and not people or movements". For reason and proof are the real and only methods for uncovering what are in line with God's will, when we are not dealing with authentic Torah, which we know reflects God's will true through tradition.

What oath did God make? "...and the words that I placed in your mouths will never be lost from your mouths, your children's mouths, and your grandchildren's mouths, so says God, from now until eternity." (Isaiah, 59:21)

Radak quoting his father says that which will never cease from us refers to the Torah. From here we distinguish the Torah, from everything else, in that only Torah is secured throughout time. ■

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