

**Cats and Dogs:
Mankind on the leash**

ESTD
1997

JewishTimes

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

Volume V, No. 15...Feb. 3, 2006

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Weekly Parsha

Parshas Bo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“This month shall be for you the head of the months. It shall be for you the first of the months of the year.” (Shemot 12:2)

This pasuk introduces the first mitzvah that Hashem revealed to Moshe. We are commanded to establish a calendar. The calendar is to be based on the cycles of the moon.

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Egypt: Cat Cult

The Egyptians found cats fascinating, even regarding them as godlike. Because cats were deeply respected, they were often mummified and even buried in great tombs with their owners. So highly regarded were cats in Egyptian society that it was considered a high crime to kill a cat, punishable by death. Families owning cats took care that they received attention and respect.

Animal Behavior

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

When studying the 10 Plagues, it is quite easy to get “distracted” by their miraculous features, thereby losing sight of the verses’ subtleties. More than anything, the Torah is intended to reveal God’s wisdom. To this end, millennia of Torah students, Sages and Rabbis have toiled in Talmud, Mishna and Scripture, training their minds, and as they learned the same areas year after year, they unlocked arrived at greater depths of God’s wisdom. We must be sensitive to what at first seems like unimportant data, and ask ourselves why God deemed “this” verse or idea to be included: “What is its lesson?” Let us take the plague of the mixture of wild beasts from last week’s Parsha Vaeyrah as an example (Exod. 8:16-28):

“And God said to Moses, ‘Arise in the morning and stand before Pharaoh as he goes to the river and ay to him, ‘Send My people that they will serve Me. For if you do not send My people, behold, I will send unto

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Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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The emergence of the new moon will determine the beginning of each month. The courts are charged with the responsibility of accepting testimony regarding the appearance of the new moon and declaring the new month. Today's Rabbinic courts do not have the authority to accept this testimony and cannot declare a new month. We determine the date of the new month based upon a calendar developed our Sages.

The first day of the month has some special observances. One of these observances is that the Hallel prayer is recited in the morning service. The Talmud explains that the recitation of the Hallel on Rosh Chodesh – the new month – is not a Rabbinic decree. It is custom – a minhag.[1]

In order to appreciate this observation some background is required. The Sages enacted the practice of reciting the full Hallel on festivals. The Sages established an obligation to recite the complete Hallel on eighteen days of the year. These are, the eight days of Chanuka, the seven days of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, the first day of Pesach and on Shavuot. Outside of Israel, the complete Hallel is recited twenty-one days. In addition to the days it is recited in Israel, it is recited on Simchat Torah, the second day of Pesach and the second day of Shavuot.[2]

Although the complete Hallel is recited only on the first day of Pesach – or the first two days, outside of Israel – an abbreviated version of Hallel is recited on the remaining days of the festival. This abbreviated Hallel is also recited on Rosh Chodesh.

Why do we sometimes recite the complete Hallel and on other occasions an abbreviated form? The Talmud explains that the Sages established a Rabbinic obligation to recite the complete Hallel on the eighteen days outlined above. However, the custom developed to recite Hallel on additional occasions. This custom is not part of the original decree of the Sages. In order to identify the occasions on which the recitation of Hallel is customary but not part of the original decree, an abridged Hallel is recited on those occasions that are established through custom. In other words, when Hallel is recited in response to the original decree of the Sages, the complete Hallel is read. When Hallel is recited in response to custom, an abbreviated Hallel is read.[3]

What is the reason for the custom to recite an abridged Hallel on these additional occasions? Tosefot explain that Hallel is recited to recognize a miracle or to celebrate as festival.[4] Based on this criterion, we can easily explain the custom to recite Hallel on all of the days of Pesach. Although the original decree of the Sages only requires that the complete Hallel be recited on the first day of the festival, the custom extends the requirement to the entire festival. The custom is consistent with the original decree and is an extension of this decree.

However, the custom to recite an abridged Hallel on Rosh Chodesh is more difficult to understand. Rosh Chodesh is not a festival. What is the basis for this custom?

Aruch HaShulchan offers an interesting explanation of this custom. Before we can review his explanation, an introduction is required. The Sages established a blessing that is recited each month at the appearance of the new moon. This blessing – Birkat HeLevanah – is composed of two themes. The blessing begins with recognition that the renewal of the moon reflects the system of natural laws that Hashem created to govern the universe. We acknowledge the wonders of this system and that the natural laws are an expression of Hashem's majesty. The blessing then takes up a second theme. We compare the cyclical renewal of the moon to the inevitable redemption and renewal of the Jewish people. We declare that the renewal of the moon is symbolic of the eventual salvation of our people.

The blessing can be understood on a deeper level. Most people take for granted the regularity of the physical laws. We go to sleep at night certain that the sun will rise in the morning. We are sure that just as the moon renewed itself this month, so too it will renew itself next month. Yet, it is more difficult to affirm with absolute conviction that we will be redeemed from exile. We are aware of the promises of the Torah that the Jewish people will be redeemed. But our exile has extended over a period of centuries. It seems far less certain than the renewal of the moon and the rising of the sun.

The blessing responds to this confusion and insecurity. It declares that the physical laws operate in conformity with the will of the Creator. Their regularity and consistency is a reflection of His will. So too, our eventual redemption is promised by the Creator. Therefore, the certainty of our redemption is as absolute as the regularity of the physical laws.

Aruch HaShulchan suggests that this blessing identifies a basic theme of Rosh Chodesh. He suggests that Rosh Chodesh is associated with the theme of the redemption of Bnai Yisrael. As we explained above, Hallel is recited on the occasion of a festival or in response to a miracle. The miracle of our redemption has not yet occurred. However, on Rosh Chodesh we acknowledge the inevitability of the miracle of redemption. The recitation of the abbreviated Hallel on Rosh Chodesh is an affirmation of our conviction in the certainty of this future redemption.[5]

Our parasha suggests an alternative explanation of the custom to recite an abridged Hallel on Rosh Chodesh. In order to develop this explanation, we must consider our pasuk more carefully. As we have explained, the courts are charged with the responsibility of accepting testimony regarding the new moon and declaring the new month. This obligation is a positive mitzvah. The declaration of

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Weekly Parsha

Letters

the new moon is fundamental to establishing the dates of the festivals and – the annual Torah calendar. However, the annual calendar cannot be put in place simply by declaring each new month. The courts must consider another issue. Another passage in our parasha identifies this issue.

“Today you go forth in the month of the springtime.” (Shemot 13:4)

Hashem identifies the month of the redemption from Egypt as the month of the springtime. From this passage, the Sages understood that Pesach must be celebrated in the springtime. However, this requirement creates a dilemma. The seasons are determined by the solar year. In other words, each season occurs at a specific point in the solar year. The lunar year – composed of twelve lunar months – is shorter than the solar year. Pesach occurs on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. If every year of the Torah calendar were composed of twelve lunar months, it would be impossible for date of Pesach to consistently occur in the springtime. Because a lunar year of twelve lunar months is shorter than a solar year, each year Pesach would occur at an earlier date on the solar calendar. The first Pesach – that was observed in Egypt and the wilderness – occurred in the springtime. However, without some adjustment, in a few years, Pesach would have occurred in the winter! Therefore, the Torah authorized the Sages to occasionally add a thirteenth month to the lunar year. This thirteenth month was used to reconcile the lunar and solar calendars. This reconciliation assures that Pesach always occurs in the springtime.[6] In short, in order to set the annual calendar, the courts must take two steps. First, they must declare the new months. Second, they must occasionally add a thirteenth month to the lunar year – creating a leap year. This additional month reconciles the lunar and solar calendars.

The responsibility of declaring the new month is a positive command. According to Maimonides, the responsibility of the courts to declare an occasional leap year is also included in this commandment. Nachmanides and other disagree. They argue that these two functions are authorized by two separate mitzvot. One mitzvah authorizes the courts to declare the new month and the other authorizes the courts to reconcile the lunar and solar calendars through creating an occasional leap year.[7]

Superficially, Nachmanides position seems to be compelling. The declaring of the new month and the considerations involved in declaring a leap year are two separate functions. How does Maimonides include these two separate functions in one commandment?

It seems that according to Maimonides both of these functions – declaring the new month and creating an occasional leap year – are aspects of one single function. This function is the establishment

of the annual calendar. According to Maimonides, there is a single mitzvah. This mitzvah is for the courts to establish the calendar. This single mitzvah includes two elements – declaring new months and creating an occasional leap year.

This explanation of Maimonides' position has an important implication. According to his position, the courts are charged with the responsibility of establishing the annual calendar. The Torah calendar is lunar. So, the courts must declare each month. But part of the courts obligation in establishing the calendar is to declare an occasional leap year. This implies that the placement of the festivals in their proper season – for example, Pesach in the springtime – is an integral element of the task of establishing the annual calendar. Therefore, the mitzvah of creating the annual calendar requires that the courts consider the seasonal timing of the festivals and evaluate the need for a leap year. Let us express this in simpler terms. The single mitzvah that Maimonides describes can best be defined as an obligation upon the courts to establish the times of observance of the festivals.

Let us now return to the custom of reciting an abridged Hallel on Rosh Chodesh. As Tosefot explain, the Sages enacted a requirement to recite a complete Hallel on festivals. The recitation of this Hallel is part of the observance of the festival. This is directly relevant to the custom of reciting an abridged Hallel on Rosh Chodesh. According to Maimonides, the declaration of Rosh Chodesh is part of a more general mitzvah of establishing the times for observance of the festivals. It is reasonable to assume that in our observance of Rosh Chodesh, we are fulfilling the same mitzvah. By observing each Rosh Chodesh, we acknowledge the new month and participate in the establishment of the annual calendar and the times for the observance of the festivals. This fundamental element of our observance of Rosh Chodesh is expressed through the recitation of an abridged Hallel on these days. The recitation of the abridged Hallel expresses the relationship between our observance of Rosh Chodesh and the observance of the festivals. Through reciting the abridged Hallel we are acknowledging that this observance is directly related to our observance of the festivals. ■

[1] Mesechet Ta'anit 28b.

[2] Mesechet Ta'anit 28b.

[3] Mesechet Ta'anit 28b.

[4] Tosefot, Mesechet Ta'anit 28b.

[5] Rav Aharon HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chayim 422:6

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Kiddush HaChodesh 4:1.

[7] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 4.

Sinful Thoughts

Reader: As a Catholic I was raised to believe I would sin in the same way with improper thoughts, as I would with improper acts. I try hard to put away every bad thought that comes into my mind and if I can't, I can feel very guilty. Are thoughts considered that important in Judaism?

Mesora: Catholic notions are riddled with guilt, and in no way conform to God's system of human design and development, and realistic expectancies. You have realized this already. Catholicism creates saints out of humans: when saints are merely imaginary and impossible heroes that man cannot possibly portray. Through His prophets, God taught that all men sin. The very inclusion of a day of Atonement "every year" teaches that mankind needs this regular atonement. Man must accept his instinctual faculty, and instead of denying it as other religions ask, he must embrace it, train it, and harness it for the good life and actions, intended by God. As God gave us each an instinctual component – a Yetzer Hara – it is inherently valuable. It is not evil by nature, as deemed so in Catholicism, and with their view of Satan. The instincts are an essential component for a perfect life, when directed by the intellect.

Regarding God's value of our actions vs. our thoughts, we must study His words to determine His reality. The Rabbis do say in connection with Job, "although 'Job did not sin with his lips' he sinned in his heart." The quote, "he did not sin with his lips" teaches that there is a distinction, and praise in refraining from verbalizing something negatively felt. But it also teaches that some flaw is attributed to Job for harboring wrong ideas and emotions. From here alone, we learn that sinful thoughts do not equate to sinful actions. I feel the understanding is quite obvious: man is more responsible for his actions than for his thoughts, since actions are completely in our control, but not our thoughts, at all times. Thoughts too must be distinguished: we may ascribe to wrong ideas like idolatry, which is a sin, and we may have sudden thoughts of revenge, lust, anger and the like, which we then recognize as evil, and do not act upon. There can be no equation between these two types of thoughts. The former is a commission of the mind – a far greater sin, as the mind is man's highest component – while the latter is a sudden emotional urge, which at times is unavoidable. It just happens. A rabbi once taught that even performed sins, if generated from momentary passion, are not viewed as evil as those performed in a premeditated manner. There is far more to discuss on this matter, but I hope this addresses your basic question. ■



you, unto your servants, and unto your people and into your homes the Mixture [of wild animals] and the Mixture will fill the houses of Egypt and also the land that they are on. And I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen on which My people stand, that there will be no Mixture, in order that you shall know that I am God in the midst of the land. And I will place a salvation between My people and between your people: tomorrow this sign shall occur.' And God did so, and the Mixture came heavy [on] Pharaoh's house and his servants' homes, and [in] the entire land of Egypt the land was destroyed due to the Mixture. And Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, 'Go sacrifice to your God in the land'. And Moses said, 'This is not proper to do so, for it is an abomination to Egypt to sacrifice to God our God; for behold, if we sacrifice the abomination of Egypt in front of their eyes, will they not stone us? A journey of three days we will travel in the desert and we will sacrifice to God our God as He has told us.' And Pharaoh said, 'I will send you and you will sacrifice to God your God in the desert, however, do not travel too far, pray for my sake.' And Moses said, 'Behold I will exit from you, and I will pray to God to remove the Mixture from Pharaoh, from his servants and from his people tomorrow, however, let Pharaoh not lie, not sending the people to sacrifice to God.' And Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to God. And God did as Moses' word, and He removed the Mixture from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people...not one was left. And Pharaoh hardened his heart also this time, and he did not send the people."

A number of questions arise:

1) Why did God deem the Mixture as one of the 10 Plagues? What is specific to this plague that it was perfectly appropriate for afflicting Pharaoh and Egypt? What were its lessons?

2) Unlike other plagues, here alone we see an emphasis of "sacrificing" to God, mentioned six times. Is this significant, and if so, how?

3) Why does God refer to this plague as (Arove) "Mixture"? Is this title significant?

4a) Pharaoh says, "Go sacrifice to your God in the land". Moses said, "This is not proper to do so, for it is an abomination to Egypt to sacrifice to God our God: for behold, if we sacrifice the abomination of Egypt in front of their eyes, will they not stone us?" Besides the practical ramifications of shielding the Jews from Egypt's attack, is there another idea Moses instills in Pharaoh, with his "own" address?

4b) In general, aside from God's administering

of the Plagues, we find Moses addressing Pharaoh in his own words. Was Moses instructed to do so? We certainly do not see so in the text. And if he was not instructed, why did he address Pharaoh? Another instance is Exodus 9:31 and 9:32, where Moses is about to pray to God to halt the Hail. But before he does so, he tells Pharaoh, "the stiff plants broke from the hail, while the softer plants survived"(paraphrased). Why this interruption, and again, why was Moses addressing Pharaoh? We do not read that God commanded Moses to address him, other than the announcement of the plagues, and their description as per God's words. Why the additional address by Moses?

5) When commanding Moses to warn Pharaoh, God instructs him to say the following: "And I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen on which My people stand, that there will be no Mixture, in order that you shall know that I am God in the midst of the land." We wonder what is this rarely seen objective of "distinguishing" Israel from Egypt. Is this God's primary goal with this Mixture of beasts, and that is why it is stated? If so, what is the underlying message? "Distinguishing" cannot be a lesson in itself. "Distinction", by its very definition, is concerning some 'area' of distinction; as in a distinguished scholar, where his 'knowledge' is distinct from others. So we must ask, in what area did God distinguish the Jews via this plague? This question is compounded by the next verse where God states He will render a salvation for the Jews, not to be harmed by the Mixture. The distinction is made again. Why?

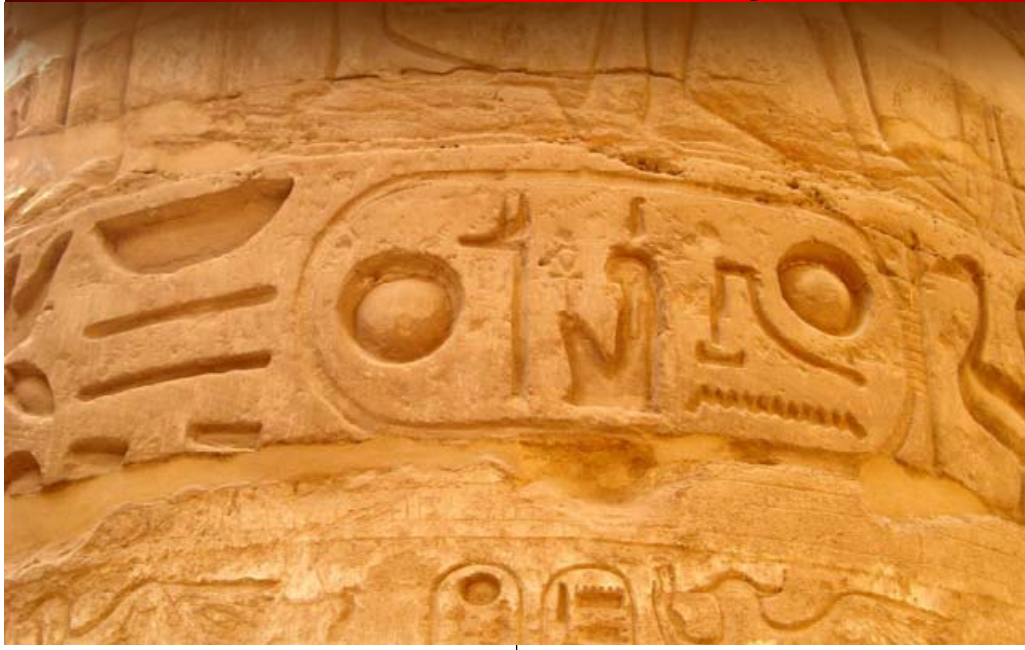
Moses' Role

I believe Moses address to Pharaoh teaches us a number of ideas. One idea stated by a Rabbi, is that Moses was necessary for the plagues, but not that God could not perform them without Moses. The Rabbi taught that Moses was necessary, so as to communicate the deeper ideas contained in each Plague. God did not merely plague Egypt with arbitrary miracles, but with signs and wonders which addressed certain flaws in Pharaoh and the Egyptian culture. They were intended to reveal insights necessary for the potential repentance and perfection. Without someone as wise as Moses, the perception of the plagues' underlying ideas would be missed.

Purpose of Prophets

This also teaches that God desired that Pharaoh realize another concept: there is immense wisdom out there, and it can only be arrived at with use of the mind. God needs no emissary, but God sent Moses as a primary lesson to Pharaoh that man (Moses) arrives at true knowledge only

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very problem of animal worship: sacrifice is the antithesis of animal worship! So the repetition of “sacrifice” in this plague alone indicates that sacrifice is central to the purpose of the plague of the Mixture. (God uses word repetitions in other Torah instances too, as subtle suggestions of an underlying Torah theme.)

Now, as Egypt deified animals, Moses directed Pharaoh to recognize this flaw. He told Pharaoh the Egyptians would not stand idly by as animals were sacrificed. For this reason, the Jews were required to offer the Paschal lamb to earn God’s salvation: they had to demonstrate their disregard for animal deification, their trust in God’s salvation from any stoning, and His deliverance of the nation to Israel.

But how did this plague attempt to correct Egypt’s animal deification? It was through psychology. God sent multiple species of beasts that destroyed Egypt, including snakes and scorpions as Rashi stated, the very beasts we find on Pharaohs’ headdresses. Thus, the Egyptians should no longer deify that which causes them much grief. When a person is alarmed at some phenomenon, he tends to no longer gravitate towards it, and this I believe was one of the objectives in this plague: to sever ties between man and animal.

Why were a “mixture” sent, and not a single species? A mixture was used as it generates a feeling of disdain toward animals “in general”, not just a single class, which would allow the Egyptians to retain their deification feelings for all other beasts not sent. This explains why this plague was called “Mixture” (Arove). For the Mixture targeted this concept of diluting the Egyptian deification of elevated species, by generating disdain for animals in general.

Why did God desire to distinguish the Jews in this plague, in the “land of Goshen”. The Rabbis answer (Ibn Ezra 9:1) that God displayed His control over all creation: Earth, the heavens...and all that occurs in between, such as all actions. Blood, Frogs, and Lice emanated “from” the Earth. The Mixture, Animal Deaths and Boils occurred “on” the Earth. And Hail, Locusts and Darkness occurred in the air or the “heavens”. God successfully displayed His control over all creation, by categorizing the plagues in this manner. (Nothing else exists but Earth, heaven, and all events) Of course, God also wished to smite the Egyptians’ god, the Nile River with Blood, and there are many other facets to these plagues that we have not begun to detect or examine. As we stated at the very outset, God’s wisdom is never ending. But man’s is...so I will end with one last question: Why was the next plague Animal Deaths? Was it to act as a follow-up of sorts to the Mixture? Write in with your thoughts. ■

when using the mind...as Moses portrayed to Pharaoh.

This is quite a fascinating idea to me. We are so ready to accept Moses’ leadership and role as emissary, but we overlook the very basic question: Why did God desire to send Moses, or send prophets in general? God could have accomplished the plagues on His own. This is a Torah and Maimonidean fundamental: Prophets were sent, not because God needs anyone or anything, but because God wishes to teach man at every turn. And with the sending of prophets, man must realize that a great level of wisdom is required to understand our reality...God’s created reality. The prophet is being sent, for he – to the exclusion of others – is fit to understand God, and teach man. This was a primary lesson to Pharaoh: “Your life of idolatry is based on the absence of reasoning, and you require education, through Moses.” The most basic lesson to Egypt, and to all cultures today that are idolatrous, is that the mind is not being engaged. If people did use their minds, even to a small degree, they would wonder why they are bowing to stone gods, and deifying men like Jesus.



Pharaoh’s Headdress

Pharaoh’s headdress was adorned with the very beasts God sent in the plague of the Mixture, “Arove”. (Rashi) Perhaps God sent these very beasts to harm Egypt, so as to force a break in the Egyptians’ attraction to animal deification in these species.

Animal Behavior

Moses too understood this; he understood his role and that is why he addressed Pharaoh: to explain the underlying messages, and have the effect on Pharaoh and Egypt desired by God. In the plague of the Mixture of beasts, Moses tells Pharaoh that sacrificing to God in Egypt will get the Jews stoned to death. Moses means to address the very concept of animal worship. I believe this explains why God – in this plague alone – mentions the word “sacrifice” six times, for it is this plague that was sent to address the

Pirkei Avos - Ethics

LOVE

of

GOD

PART III

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 questions on the commentary of the Rambam on our mishna. In explaining the concept of love of God, the Rambam says that love of God is tied to fulfilling positive commandments whereas fear of God is tied to safeguarding the prohibitions of the Torah. We asked why this should be the case; if they are all the commandments of God, why should it matter which one is being performed? The only factor would seem to be the attitude of the person involved!

It is interesting to note that the Ramban uses the same idea to explain a famous legal ruling of the Talmud. Whenever a person is confronted with a situation in which he must choose between safeguarding a prohibition or fulfilling a positive commandment, the Talmud rules that the positive obligation overrides the prohibition so that one may transgress on the prohibition in order to fulfill that commandment. In his commentary on Exodus (Chapter 20, verse 8) the Ramban explains that this ruling is based on the idea that positive commandments are greater in that they are tied to love of God whereas Prohibitive commandments are tied to fear of God. Here, too, we need to understand how this works; for example, why can’t a person avoid transgressing a commandment out of love?

Let us start by examining a relationship between two people. When two people want to interact, there needs to be some positive activity between them; just avoiding negative actions will not create anything. While it is true that once a positive relationship is forged, avoiding negative actions will maintain that relationship. However, a lack of action to avoid transgression, alone, will not create a relationship.

When we speak of a person pursuing perfection, we must refer to positive actions. Why? Because the very nature of perfection is a relationship with God. The avoidance of transgressing the word of God sets the stage for the experience of relating to God, but that experience demands positive action on the part of man.

Now we can understand the meaning of the comments of the Rambam and Ramban. Fulfilling positive commandments is a means for man to be actively involved in his relationship with God. This is what is meant by love of God, where the person can engage and enjoy his relationship with God. If he isn’t active, then the prohibitive commandments keep man in a state where he can maintain that relationship and not violate it. This is what is meant by fear of God, where man safeguards the word of God in order to uphold his relationship with God. These prohibitions, however, can’t be a source of love of God since, by nature, they demand of man to be passive. It then follows that man’s greatest involvement, that of perfection, will only be through the positive commandments.

The Rambam, commenting on our mishna, continues with the story of Tziduk and Bitus, students of Ontignos, the author of our mishna. He says that they misunderstood the statement in our mishna to mean that there is no system of reward and punishment at all according to the Torah. They tried to gather a following; known as “Tzidukim” and “Bitusim”. However, they failed to convince people of this belief so they began to argue that they believed in the Written Torah but not in the Oral Law of the Torah, arguing that the Oral Torah transmitted was incorrect. The Rambam says that they did this in order so that they could excuse themselves from many obligations and so that they could choose how to explain certain verses in the Torah according to how they liked, and not according to the interpretations and rulings of the Rabbis.

In this account given by the Rambam, there is a seeming contradiction regarding the motives of Tziduk and Bitus. First, the Rambam says that their motivation was to lead a movement, trying to convince people to follow them. Then the Rambam says that they were motivated by their desire to rid themselves of the obligation to keep many of the Rabbinic laws. How do we resolve this seeming contradiction? We may also ask another question on the Rambam: how did he know that they had these motivations? Perhaps they were sincere in their doubt about the validity of the Oral Law that was in the hands of the Rabbis! To be continued. ■

Weekly Parsha

First Born

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Immediately prior to Moses' descent to Egypt to address Pharaoh for the first time, we read the following:

"And Moses took his wife and his sons and rode them on the donkey and returned towards the land of Egypt, and Moses took the staff of God in his hand. And God said to Moses, 'When you go to return to Egypt, see all the wonders that I have placed in your hand and do them before Pharaoh, and I will harden his heart and he will not send the people'. And you will say to Pharaoh, 'So says God, 'Israel is My firstborn'. And I say to you, 'send My people and they will serve Me, and if you refuse to send, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons'." (Exod. 4:20-23)

We wonder what God's message is here, "Israel is My firstborn". What does this mean, and what is the objective in Moses telling this to Pharaoh? Another central question is why God saw it necessary to plague the Egyptians by killing their firstborns. What is the reason for this plague? It is difficult to understand this seemingly "tit for tat" response: since the Egyptians abused the Jews (God's "firstborn") so God kills 'their' firstborns? It smacks if an incomprehensible sense of justice. For God's firstborn Jews, are only "firstborns" in a metaphoric sense, while God is attacking the very real firstborns of the Egyptians.

What is also interesting is that there is no mention here of the intervening nine plagues. In this warning, God outlines His response to Pharaoh's refusal, with the Plague of Firstborns – jumping to the last plague with no mention of all He planned to do prior to that final blow. Why then is the Plague of the Firstborns the only plague mentioned here, if God was going to also plague Egypt with nine others? To compound this question, we notice the Torah's prescribed response to our sons, that we only mention this Plague of Firstborns:

"And it will be when your son asks you tomorrow saying, 'What is this?' and you shall say to him, 'With a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery... And it was when Pharaoh hardened his heart from sending us, that God killed the firstborns of the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man until the firstborn of beast, therefore, I sacrifice to God all male firstborn [animals], and all firstborn sons I redeem'. And it shall be a sign on your hand and frontlets between your eyes that with a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt." (Exod. 13:14-16)

It is clear that there is a special significance of the Plague of Firstborns: this plague alone is

included in our address to our children. Additionally, of the Tefillin's four sections, two sections deal with the firstborn. The significance of firstborns is also evident in the Torah command of redeeming our firstborn sons. So we see that this is a theme in Torah, and not a one-time occurrence.

We also wonder at the reason why God killed not only the firstborn humans, but also the animals. (ibid, 11:5, 12:12) We must note that in this latter verse 12:12, God includes therein that He will not only kill the firstborns from man to beast, but also the Egyptian gods:

"And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will smite all firstborns in the land of Egypt – from man to beast – and in all the gods of Egypt I will do justice, I am God."

What is the connection between killing firstborns and God's act of defaming the god's of Egypt (the idols) that God joins these two themes in one single verse?

Ibn Ezra: Wrong Prioritization

Ibn Ezra states: "The reason behind 'My firstborn son' - this is the nation which their forefathers served Me in the beginning, and I have mercy on them, as a father has mercy over his son who serves him. And you (Egypt) desire to take them as eternal slaves?! Therefore, I will kill your firstborn sons." (Exod. 4:22) Ibn Ezra points to the core issue: the Egyptians did not recognize the Jews as observing the proper life for man. This is expressed in their enslavement of this people. Ibn Ezra is elaborating on God's sentiment that He will kill the firstborns. For some just reason, God must kill the Egyptian firstborns as the correct response. But what is correct about this response? As we mentioned, it seems tit for tat, with no apparent relationship between a metaphoric firstborn Jewish nation, and the real, Egyptian firstborn sons. What is correlative between a metaphor and a reality? But in fact, God does go so far as to engage the very institution of firstborns, recognized by the Egyptians. Let me explain.

To threaten anyone, the object of a threat must target something of value. To "threaten", means to make one feel he will lose something valued. God is thereby teaching us that the Egyptians cared quite a bit for their firstborns. But why did they? Is there anything in the Torah's verses, which may teach us about this value placed on their firstborns?

We notice that God did not only threaten the human sons, but God also said He will kill firstborn animals. We also noticed, this was stated in a single Torah verse together with God's plan to destroy the Egyptian idols. There must be a

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Weekly Parsha

relationship between firstborn sons, firstborn animals, and idolatry. What is it?

Firstborn's Preeminence

I believe this flaw of the Egyptian culture was the overestimation of anything firstborn – even beasts. For some reason, they imagined a firstborn to possess a superadded quality, which all other living beings were denied. The proof that this value was unreal, and was manufactured from their imagination is their overt expression that firstborn beasts too possessed preeminence. With that, their idolatrous emotions are exposed: they equated man to animal.

God's very response of destroying firstborn beasts, addresses the precise flaw: God addresses that which is corrupt, i.e., their notion that "firstborns are of elevated status", and animals share prominence with man. The very equation the Egyptians made between animals to man, in that even firstborn beasts were celebrated, was idolatrous in nature. God underlines this idolatrous current by joining to the firstborns, His plan to abolish the idols...and in the very same verse. God equated the preeminence placed on firstborns with idols. "Idolatry" is not limited to idol worship, nor is it limited to man's approach to a deity - but to any expression not based in reality, and projected from man's fantasy. Therefore, idolatry will include acts such as tossing pennies to a well for success; assuming black cats cause bad "luck"; believing that 'luck' exists; that Hebrew prayer books will protect our cars; that Mezuzas protect us; that keys in Challas are protective; or that red bendels affect reality. All these and unfortunately more acts are idolatrous.

Regarding Egypt's idolatry in this case, reality bears no evidence of greatness in that which leaves the womb first. The Egyptians' only imagined there to be some greatness in firstborns. Living life based on imagination is idolatrous in nature. Death played a major role in Egyptian culture (pyramids are their eternal resting places) so life too - as the other pole of this highlighted spectrum - shared their primary focus. That which was first in receiving life from a parent was imagined to be special. We see a close tie between the fear of mortality, and the elevated status Egypt placed on firstborns. Thus, life and death were central focus in Egypt. [1] And he who was firstborn, they felt, possessed a greater distinction in that his "life" was even more prized.

God's Justice

Now we understand from where came this firstborn status. We also understand why God would seek to remove a wrong idea maintained by the Egyptians. But why was God going to kill the firstborns, in response to their enslavement of the

Jews? For this, we refer back to the original quote, "Israel is My firstborn". And I say to you, 'send My people and they will serve Me, and if you refuse to send, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons'." If firstborns in truth possessed no real difference in status, why does God call Israel HIS firstborn? I believe this had to be, as God wished to talk "in their language". God wished to express to the Egyptian culture who was truly the prized personality. And since this designation was the firstborns in Egyptian culture, God used their jargon, calling Israel the real firstborn of nations.

God wished to correct the Egyptians' opinion of who is truly the most celebrated individual, or who would truly be called a "firstborn" metaphorically in God's eyes. Ibn Ezra assists us here. As he stated, God was reprimanding the Egyptians for having enslaved the people whose forefathers worshipped God. These righteous people, God said, are the true "firstborns" or the people who live life properly. But at this point, Egypt maintained that even a firstborn animal was more celebrated than a Jew, so much, that the Jew could be enslaved, while a firstborn animal was free. This is intolerable in God's system: he who follows God is the most celebrated individual. And to point this out to Egypt, to dispel this foolish notion that a firstborn carries any significance, God warned the Egyptians to recognize the Hebraic, monotheistic life and free these Hebrews to practice, or suffer the consequence of realizing how little import your firstborns are...they will be killed.

This is God's ultimatum to Pharaoh: "Recognize whose life is truly valued most, or you will lose your purpose for living. Projecting fantasy onto reality, assuming firstborns – even animals – possess greater status, while Abraham's descendants are imprisoned, is a worthless life, and My destruction of your firstborns will teach this to you Pharaoh". This is the sense of God's message. We may also answer why God killed any firstborn Jew who did not kill the Paschal lamb: this lack of adherence to God, displays a stronger bond to Egypt, than to God. Hence, these Jews also partook of the idolatrous way of life, and did not deserve salvation. In fact, Rashi teaches that four fifths of the Jewish population was destroyed in Egypt.

Why was God's initial warning to Pharaoh bereft of any mention of the other nine plagues? Why does our response to our children's question on Passover include the statement, "And it was when Pharaoh hardened his heart from sending us, that God killed the firstborns of the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man until the firstborn of beast"? Sforno answers. (Exod 4:22) Sforno says that only the Plague of Firstborns was intended as a "punishment" while all others were

intended to display God's control of the Earth. Only the Plague of Firstborns was an act of "measure for measure" says Sforno. Therefore, it makes sense why God tells Moses upon his initial address to Pharaoh to say, "Let the Jews go, or your firstborns will be killed." Herein is an act of punishment, not so with regards to the other plagues. (It makes sense, that God will threaten Pharaoh with that, intended as punishment) And when we answer our children on Passover, we remind them of how God punished the Egyptians. Perhaps this is to also instill in them an appreciation that God defends us, and saved us. The central theme of Passover is that God is our Savior.

Summary

From our study, we learn that the Exodus has an additional facet: God's deliverance of the Jew from under the hands of those who valued firstborn animals over intelligent man, was a lesson in "who is the most celebrated personality": it is not he who projects imagined status onto senseless beasts, but he who adheres to the reasoned lifestyle. He who adheres to Abraham's model follows God's choicest lifestyle – extricating himself as did Abraham, from idolatry with reason alone, and finding God.

Ultimately, the Plague of Firstborns teaches us that a reasoned life is God's desire, and he, who lacks reason, and projects imagination onto reality, is against God. ■

Footnotes:

[1] History shows that the Egyptians painted idealized scenes from daily life on the walls of their pyramid tombs which included agricultural work, tending cattle and fishing, artisans at their work, including gold workers and boat-builders, and domestic scenes of banquets with musicians, dancers and guests. The scenes in the tomb represented the hoped for after-life, in which there were fertile fields and harmony and happiness at home. Representing it in the tomb was thought to 'ensure' an ideal existence in the next world: the tomb-owner would continue after death the occupations of this life. Therefore, everything required was packed in the tomb, along with the corpse. Writing materials were often supplied along with clothing, wigs, hairdressing supplies and assorted tools, depending on the occupation of the deceased. Often, model tools rather than full size ones, would be placed in the tomb; models were cheaper and took up less space and in the after-life would be magically transformed into the real thing.

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