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## Does God Give Man Powers?

MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The first page in Talmud Taanis quotes an interesting statement of Rabbi Yochanan:

"Three keys are in the hand of god and are not given over to a messenger, and these are they; the key of rain, and the key of life and the key of resurrection. The key of rain is derived from the verse 'God will open for you His storehouse of good, the heavens, to give you the rain (for) your land in its time'. From where do we learn the key of life? As it is written, 'And god remembered Rachel, and He heard her, and He opened her womb'. The key of resurrection is learned from where? 'And you will know I am God when I open your graves'.

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## Formulating Better Questions

MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This paper was written to be an aid in developing questions when studying Torah, and to help direct one to the main issues and understand a given area.

When one goes through an account of Jewish history found in either the Pentateuch, Prophets or Writings, or Jewish Law in the Mishna or the Talmud, it is essential to your understanding to keep the following in mind: the Pentateuch was designed word for word, letter for letter by God, as was the Oral Law. The Talmud was written by the extremely wise. One commits a grave injustice both to the ideas and to oneself by offering a simple explanation of any topic found in these areas, as they all stem from God Who has infinite wisdom, "For God gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Proverbs,2:6). Everything must be appreciated and understood on this level. Every sentence in the Pentateuch, for example, must contribute to the explanation of the area. In any given story in the Pentateuch, the Prophets or the Writings, the precise amount of information is disclosed to us by God so that we can detect the issues. Certain unusual words will be used to catch our attention. Certain passages will seem at first out of place, and seemingly impossible events are described which force us to delve onto the area. These are all generous clues for the investigation.

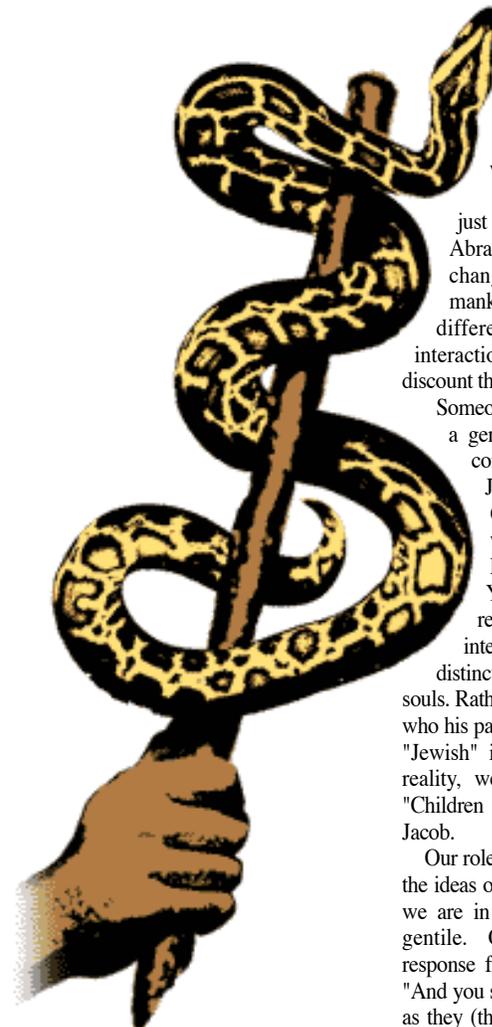
Besides having the correct appreciation for the design of the Torah, you must also approach your studies with the correct questions. As a great Rabbi once said, "asking the right

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## Questions, & Answers

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Reader: I recently wrote you a question, in response to which, you referred me to the articles on olam habah, soul and afterlife. The articles were interesting and enlightening, however they make absolutely no reference to the question of a non-Jew. I often hear people throwing out quotes from Jewish sources that a gentile has no soul, there is no prohibition to steal from a gentile and only Jews merit olam habah. Rationally it is difficult for me to accept that the Torah does not give the majority of the people in the world the status of being human. And if that's our view why should we complain when a gentile feels the same

way about a Jew? The point is, the Torah's evaluation of the non-Jew is one of the critical underpinnings of this religion. If you could clarify it for me I would be very appreciative.

Mesora: A gentile has a soul, just as Adam and Eve had, and as Abraham and Noach. God hasn't changed the way He creates mankind. The view that there are different laws regarding our interaction with gentiles does not discount their having a soul just like ours.

Someone suggested foolishly, "When a gentile, who has no Jewish soul converts to Judaism, he is given a Jewish soul". My rebuttal is that God had no problem talking with Adam, Eve, Abraham, and Noach who were all non Jews. Yet they were perfected, and reached the levels that God intended. God does not have the distinction of Jewish and non Jewish souls. Rather, man has a soul, regardless of who his parents are. The entire category of "Jewish" is really man's fabrication. In reality, we are simply "Bnei Yisrael", "Children of (the man) Israel", who was Jacob.

Our role in existence is actually to bring the ideas of the Torah to the other nations, we are in fact serving the needs of the gentile. God desires the following response from the gentile: (Deut. 4:6-8): "And you shall watch them and keep them as they (the commands) are your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these statutes and declare 'what a wise and understanding people is this great nation. Because what great nation has God close to them like God, whenever (they) call to Him? And what great nation has statutes and laws as righteous as this entire Torah'....."

When Abraham changed his ways from idolatry to monotheism over a 40 year period of intellectual probing, he had no conversion or no new soul blown into him. He simply elevated the level of function of his one soul given to him at birth, and God then related to him directly. It is foolish to say otherwise when the Torah itself bears no support for such theories. It is even more foolish to hypothesize in areas one does not even understand the basics (metaphysics, how the soul is created).

We have shown clearly that all men and women have a soul, not that "types" of men have types of souls.

## Does God Give Man Powers?

(CONTINUED)

In the West they also included the key of livelihood, as it is written, 'He opens His hand and satisfieth every living thing with its wants'.

It is essential to note that when it says that "God never gives over the keys", it means, according to Tosafos, that He never allows a messenger to have complete dominion over the key always. But the keys are in fact given over to a messenger at times.

I have a few questions:

1) What does Tosafos mean that "He never allows a messenger to have complete dominion over the key always?"

2) Rashi adds that when it says "God opens" it means God Himself, and not another. How do these cases of miracles differ from others? Doesn't God perform all miracles, Himself? What is Rashi teaching?

3) These verses don't seem to teach what the Talmud started out saying, "they are given over....". It actually teaches how God Himself is performing all these feats.

4) Why is the term "key" used? Why not use the term "miracle"?

5) Does this teach that God does not decide everything Himself?

6) Tosafos asks why the key of God's anger is not mentioned, as the verse also refers to it as a "key". He answers that only those keys of good are handed over to messengers. What does Tosafos teach here?

7) How can it be that God gives over these keys, when we see that in the case of Eliyahu's resurrecting the boy, Eliyahu prayed to God to revive him? Eliyahu himself attested through his very action that he had no abilities. The commentators say the reason why Eliyahu laid on the boy was to either warm so as to ready him for revival, or to assist in his concentration during his prayer to God to revive him. So if Eliyahu did nothing but pray, why does the Talmud say, "God gives over these keys?"

8) What does "in His hand" teach us? Are these miracles any more "in His hands" than others?

9) Why is the term "messenger" used?

The approach to answering these questions must be predicated on the idea that God does all. The reason, we have stated before; man came onto the scene after the King already established all laws. This means that man is created, not the creator. As such, man follows God's laws, as his very

existence is a design of God. More importantly, man's knowledge cannot grasp the immense knowledge in the physical world. He therefore cannot manipulate what he does not understand.

This being true, we must deduce what could be meant by the statement "God gives these keys over to a messenger".

If man does not have the ability to perform these miracles, what is man's involvement? Tosafos hints at it and says only "good" keys are handed. If we think about it, "good" refers to justice. That is, what is good for man. In other words, God gives the keys of justice to man somehow, but not via giving man powers, that is impossible. We can safely take the next step in deduction: Although capabilities for miracle working are not in man's hand, however, but the area of justice is, then what is given over is "man's direction" of when justice must be employed. At times, man is given the right to request when birth, rain, and resurrection should occur, and God responds to man's request. God allows certain men to direct these occurrences. He gives them these "keys". "Keys" means that these areas are understood by man as something completely closed off to him, "locked", as with a key. Man never asks in his prayers that he can fly. He understands that human flight is impossible. Here too, man would never ask God to resurrect someone. It is understood that the dead remain dead. But in rare cases, God allows man the key to open up what is normally a closed possibility. The question of course is why. Why can't man simply follow the rules; those who die, are dead. What necessitates God's handing over these three keys at times?

Factually, we are saying that God shows flexibility with man's tolerance of what is justice. Normally, one who is dead, is dead. However, I believe Rabbi Yochanan is teaching us a unique principle: God recognizes man's inability to adhere to God's absolute system of Justice. God's knowledge is absolute, and His system is based on flawless knowledge of good and evil. Man however, is not God., and cannot grasp God's supreme system of justice, let alone live by it. This being so, man is ignorant of many of the rules which God's designed in His justice system. Ironically, God's justice demands that man have a tolerable existence on earth. For this very reason, I believe Rabbi Yochanan teaches that God will allow His own 100% true system of justice to be compromised for the sake of man. Thereby, allowing man to abide in his own system. Man must

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## Sanctifying God's Name

Reader: I believe I remember reading in Maimonides' rules for the critical number of Jews present that dictates if, above this number you should admit your heritage/belief and suffer martyrdom as an example, and below this number you should deny it in order to preserve yourself and the line. I'd like to know, if I didn't dream this, what the number is and how it was arrived at.

Mesora: In laws of the "Foundations of Torah", Chapter V, Laws I, II and III, Maimonides states the following:

V.I: "The entire house of Israel is commanded on sanctifying God's great name, as it is stated, 'And you shall sanctify me in the midst of the Jews'. And we are (also) warned not to defile Him, as it states, 'and do not defile My distinct name'. What is an example of how one does this? When an idolater rises and forces a Jew to (either) violate any one of the commandments stated in the Torah, or face death, one must violate and not be killed, as its states, 'the commands by which man should live by them', live by them and not die by them. And if he (selects) to die and not violate, this person is culpable with his life".

V.II: "In what circumstances does this apply? In all other commandments aside from idolatry, murder and adultery. But in these three commandments, if he tells you to violate or suffer death, one must suffer death and not violate. But this (that suffering death is limited to these three alone) applies only if the idolater intends to satisfy his desires, for example, if he forces you to build his house on Sabbath or cook him foods (on Sabbath), or he forces a woman to have intercourse, or similar cases. But if he intends for you to violate the command alone, (for no other reason than to violate the Torah) if just the two of you are there, and there are not ten other Jews, then you must violate (and not be killed), but if he forces you to violate with ten Jews present, then you must suffer death and not violate, even if he intends you to violate any of the other commands."

V. III: "And all these matters are dealing in the case when there is no oppression, but in a time of oppression, that is, as a wicked king as Nevuchadnezzar and his friends, and they decree upon Israel to nullify their religion or a command from the commands, one must suffer death and not violate, even on one of the rest of the commandments (aside from the three mentioned), whether one is forced in front of ten Jews or forced between him

and the idolater alone."

We learn a number of lessons from Maimonides' words. He teaches us that satisfying the needs of the idolater does not necessarily demand we forfeit our lives, even if by doing so we violate God's commands. In such a case where the idolater merely wants his passions fulfilled, one must violate the law, and not sacrifice his life. The reason is, that there is no defiling of God in such a case. This is not the intent of the idolater. But if he forces a Jew to publicly violate the Torah for violation's sake, then he must suffer death, and not defile God's name. This is clear from the command "And you shall sanctify me in the midst of the Jews." But when alone with the idolater, since there is no sanctification in the "midst of the Jews", (a quorum of 10) there is no obligation to suffer death.

A rabbi once noted, the fact there is a separate verse in the Torah of, "the commands by which man should live by them", teaches that this separate verse is a new permission to violate commandments, and not die. Without this verse, one would have to die for any command, not just the three. The lesson? Each and every commandment is essential to man's life, and worthy of death. So why did God make exception, and allow us to violate the commands? A "permission" indicates just how essential each command is. Permission means that we must take into consideration ALL commands, and that their violation is not obvious, even to save life. Their violation requires consideration, and permission. Life then, does in fact outweigh violation of all commands in general. Not because of the dispensibility of the commands, but actually the opposite. It is because these very commands are so important to our perfection, that God says "break the commands now, so we may keep them later", by remaining alive. This I believe is the exact meaning of "Live by them".

We see that man's reason for martyrdom is to demonstrate that our lives are meaningless without the system of the Torah. In terms of God, sanctification of His name comes about when man lays down his life instead of violating His word. Such an act of devotion teaches others that God's word is absolute truth, and God's truth is the goal of human life.

Sanctification of God's name may be defined as: the demonstration that God is the source of all reality, and all truth.

## Does God Give Man Powers?

(CONTINUED)

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 lis all man can do. If Eliyahu would not see God revive the child when the mother was so distraught, specifically after she requested of Eliyahu not to give her a child temporarily (Rashi), it would be a poor reflection of God's management of man's affairs if the child would remain dead. God therefore allowed Eliyahu to pray for the child's resurrection, and God responded. This miracle was clearly not in line with the course of nature, or even other miracles. In order than man be satisfied with God's justice, God will deviate at times, and He will not subordinate man's affairs to nature. At such times, God reverses matters, subordinating nature to man's affairs. Therefore, God allowed Eliyahu to pray for the child's revival. God allowed a barren Rachel to give birth, and God allowed man to determine when rain should fall.

God created a perfect system of justice. His knowledge dictates this to be so. Simultaneously, man must lead a peaceful life, a life that incorporates the ideas of a just God. But man has a limited view of justice. Therefore, God works within man's system. I feel the verse in Genesis 18:17 supports this view, "Shall I keep hidden from Abraham that which I will do?" (Referring to the Divine system of justice which demanded God's destruction of Sodom). God teaches us here that there are areas of justice which even the likes of Abraham could not determine.

However, God allowing man to request changes in world order, is limited to men with the utmost knowledge, and not fools. Sometimes people generalize the stories from the Talmud, to others, viz., "just as Eliyahu made miracles, so too my rebbe makes miracles". There are three grave errors these people make. The first is, Eliyahu didn't perform the miracles, he prayed to God, (Kings II, 4:33). It also says there in 4:35, that after Eliyahu laid upon the boy, he then went back to his own house to pray to God again for his revival. I believe this is to teach that subsequent to Eliyahu's act, God acted in response to Eliyahu's prayer. It wasn't any power of Eliyahu which revived the boy. The second mistake made is their belief that today's rebbes are Eliyahu's peers in perfection and are worthy of miracles. And the third error is their belief in all sorts of stories due to mass acceptance of those stories.

Returning to the main topic, I believe we can now answer the remaining questions.

Not allowing the messenger to have complete dominion also teaches that the miracle is God's handiwork, not man's. "Messenger" also teaches that man is only requesting that which God already decided. A messenger means one who is in line with God's existing plan. This means that man cannot come up with his own plan of action, to which God would comply. Rashi's statement that God does these without a messenger, means to say that man views the area of life (birth, sustenance, revival) as completely controlled by God. Whereas miracles such as frogs, locusts and the like accept some natural explanation. nature there being referred to as a messenger.

One question I have not answered is how man knows that he can ask for those miracles that are normally closed off? When God said to King Solomon, (Kings I, 3:5) "ask what I should give you", it was said to Solomon because knowledge is not something man feels he obtains by asking. The only route to knowledge is study. God therefore informed Solomon that in this one instance, He will circumvent natural law so he could become instantly, and miraculously wise to judge the people. But where do we see God indicating to Eliyahu that resurrection was possible through prayer?

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## Lashon Hara

RIVKA OLENICK

Shimon, the son of Rabban Gamliel said: "All my days I grew up among the Sages and did not find anything better for one's person than silence. Study is not the essential thing - deed is, and whoever engages in excessive talk brings on sin." (Pirkei Avos)

How easy it is to engage in excessive talk. Do we stop and think about what is considered excessive? When we are alone we think, "I just wish I could talk to someone." However, from the statement above by Shimon, "he did not find anything better for one's person than silence."

When we are part of a group/family, the need for continuous talk is satisfied. I can say whatever I want, with my group/family. And since everyone has something to say, then what I say won't sound so negative, or like gossip and maybe won't be repeated, probably won't even be remembered.

In Pirkei Avos, it says: "whoever engages in excessive talk brings on sin." The Rambam says that when a person speaks excessively, he will surely sin because within his words, there will be at least one concept that was unnecessary to mention. So, clearly excessive talk always leads to sin. It leads to forbidden speech, loshon hora. What is considered excessive? The Rambam says most of what we say is superfluous, unnecessary. So if most of what we say is unnecessary, then it is also excessive. Excessive talk is an indication of foolishness, as it is written: "A fool's voice is known by a multitude of words."

What about the person/people who listen to loshon hora, forbidden speech? Have they sinned by listening? Our Sages say that the person who receives the loshon hora, forbidden speech - is more severely affected than the one who speaks it. The Chofetz Chaim adds, that the punishment for accepting loshon hora is more severe than the punishment for speaking it! How can the person know before that what he is about to hear will be loshon hora? Why should he/she be punished more than the person who first thought it, found someone who would listen to it and then said it? What is the difference between being affected by loshon hora and accepting loshon hora?

A person is affected by the forbidden speech - just by listening to it. It is still considered forbidden even if by listening to it your intention is not to accept it. Accepting loshon hora, forbidden speech is a more severe punishment because although you heard negative information about a person you still are not permitted to accept this information without further investigation. This applies only with regard to your business dealings or a

match for marriage, shidduch it is permissible to accept the information and protect oneself by acting on the information, but not to accept the information as fact. So, imagine the negative information you heard was about your sibling - naturally you would not want to accept this information and you might immediately think: this information could be false. You would use the information to serve your situation only. That is exactly how we should feel about our fellow Jew, as protective as we would be of our own sibling, by using the information but still giving the benefit of the doubt. This means not to use the information to act against the person. Since we said, that the information should not be accepted as fact, feelings of hate or revenge are forbidden.

There are five categories of speech according to the Rambam. What I refer to above is the second category of speech that includes: false testimony, lies, gossip, curses, vile speech and slander. The Torah is specific in what is included in this category.

The first category is what we are commanded to speak: reading from the Torah, Torah study, and looking into its meanings.

The third category includes information spoken about by everyone, which is not positive or negative. This is called idle talk. Examples of this would be: How so and so became wealthy (the most popular "idle" talk!) how a public figure acted a certain way, how a building was built, etc.

The fourth category, which can be called "derech erez" the way of the world - describes acquiring desirable attributes and avoiding negative ones, speech about emulating others with positive traits. Traits that are ethical, intellectual, praise of the wise, their conduct and how important their virtues are and how we should strive to emulate them. And conversely, speech that discourages undesirable traits, and how not to emulate their behavior and their ways.

The fifth category is left to us. This includes one's personal agenda. One's livelihood, food, clothing and other needs. A person can speak about these needs as much as he/she wants. However, it is beneficial to minimize even this type of talk when possible.

How encouraging it would be if people invested more energy and effort into the first category and less energy and effort into the second category!

"Lashon Hora kills three people: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the person about whom it is spoken." Arachin 15b, Jerusalem Talmud (Pe'ah 1:1)

## God's Plan for Abraham

Question: Why did God start Judaism with Abraham? Why was their a need for a change?

Mesora: Abraham was an individual who understood and could teach the right ideas of life, God, and the world. God desired that all mankind be aware of truths, and follow lives discovering ideas about the world, and ultimately about God. This is man's purpose, as is seen from man's exclusive gift of a mind. No other being has this faculty.

Abraham spent many years pondering the universe, arriving at profound ideas of philosophy, and monotheism. Since Abraham followed what God's original plan was for man, a life in pursuit of truth, God desired that the rest of the world benefit from Abraham's findings. He therefore selected him to become a leader of a nation, a nation which would be provided with a system (the Torah) for guiding man towards these truths. This is expressly stated in Genesis, 18:19, "For I know (him) that he will command his children and his household after him and they will keep the way of God to do charity and justice...."

Abraham had a very unique mind and not all of mankind could arrive at truths without the guidance he had. The system of knowledge enclosed in the Torah affords mankind the ability to discover the profound ideas as Abraham did. Man is commanded to be the teacher in his home, as he is more available to spend hours in daily study. He is most fit to teach and direct his household. Similarly, the Jews (Abraham's nation) are entrusted with the study of Torah to teach the rest of mankind.

## Christianity: OK For Christians?

Reader: Thank you for a quick response. If you don't mind I'd like to ask you a few more questions. One other person with whom I discussed this topic, told me that the information about Christians not having share in olam haba is totally incorrect, since Christianity is considered permissible for Gentiles (but not for Jews). He used the term "shituf" when referring to Christianity and claimed non-Jews are not commanded against shituf. What do you think about this opinion Rabbi?

Mesora: "Shituf" means partner, or in

this context, dualism - believing in more than one god. Judaism follows reality, which dictates that as we trace the steps of creation backwards, we must eventuate at a cause which preceded all other causes, and was in fact the "First Cause", i.e., God Himself. Parenthetically, speculation in matters prior to the first acts of creation are prohibited by the Mishna in Chagiga, 11b. Similarly, scientists teach that the laws we use to understand the world cannot be applied to studying anything prior to the Big Bang. Since these laws (cause and effect) at that time were not yet established, we are inherently crippled from pondering this era. This truth that the scientists arrived at through reasoning, complies with the Mishna we received on Sinai.

By definition, there can be only one "First Cause". Christian dualism, (i.e., the father, son and holy ghost) is a theory which goes against reason. The Torah does not say anywhere that Christianity is acceptable for Gentiles. Conversely, the Torah prohibits Jew and Gentile alike in the area of knowing God. It is an open verse seen by anyone with clear vision, (Exod. 20:20) "Do not make with me gods of silver, and gods of gold do not make to yourselves". We just read this last week. The person you have been talking with is not following reason, nor the Torah's own words. God Himself says do not follow dualism, and this is part of the Noachide laws which all Gentiles must follow. Again God says, "Hear O Israel, God is your God, God is One". Gentiles must accept God, and all that the Torah says about Him. He is One.

There are a few essential problems with this person's statements. First of all, he accepts a dualism for Christians. This means that God is not independent - He has needs, another god. In truth, God has no needs, as reason dictates, and as Ramban points out on the verse quoted above, "God needs no other". By claiming a dualism, a few gods in need of each other, he denies the concept of an all knowing and all powerful God which Judaism firmly teaches. See our Rosh Hashana prayers. The entire foundation of these prayers is that God is omniscient and omnipotent.

His second mistake is he believes there is more than one reality, as he says, Christianity is fine for Christians. Would he say "gravity works for blacks, but not for whites?" Certainly the absurdity of the latter applies to the former. Just as there can be only one scientific reality, there can be only one theological reality.

His third mistake is his belief that the fabrication of Christianity at a point in history affects what a follower of this religion must now believe as truth. My

response; Objective reality and God's existence are independent of foolish peoples' fabrication of man-gods throughout history. Just as there was truth before Christianity, this objectively true system can in no way be corrupted by the fantasies of Jesus' disciples. Claiming Christianity is acceptable for Christians means to say that after Christianity was developed, all reality in the universe conformed to Christianity's tenets. This is absurdity taken to new heights.

## Formulating Better Questions

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□ question is 90 percent of the answer."

You will notice that many times when asking a question, you already have more information than you may think, and by using that information in your question, you will more likely arrive at the correct answer. For example: When you see a flat tire on your friends car you can ask "what happened?" But you already know what happened. He probably drove his car over some sharp object. The question should really be formulated as "What did you drive your car over?" By asking the question in this way, you will start pondering what could have done this. You've directed your thoughts directly to the area that will contain your answer - namely, the type of sharp object. If you would have persisted with your first type of question, "what happened?", you would have placed your mindset in an astonished state, as opposed to an inquisitively directed state. Being astonished sets up the emotional state in a person to await a response from another. What we really want, is to position the mind to answer the question. This can only come from direct questions on the facts. This type of approach to questioning commences an intellectual search, better suited to result in answers.

The following area in the Pentateuch will illustrate this point. I will first give a brief summary of the area. Then I will show an indirect and direct way of asking questions:

The area is in Numbers, chapter 21, sentences 4 through 9. It states that the people traveled towards the land of Edom, and their patience grew short on the way. They complained regarding God and Moses that there was no bread and water and that they were tired of the "light bread" (the manna). God then sent fiery serpents to attack and kill the people, and many died. The people saw their wrong and went to Moses and

confessed that they spoke wrongly about God and about Moses, and asked that he pray that the serpents be removed. After Moses prayed, God told him to create a serpent and to place it upon a pole and that any who looked at it would be healed. Moses did so, and made a brass serpent and placed it on a pole, and any man that was bitten gazed at it and was healed. This is the basic story. Keep in mind also that you must keep to the main issues if you are going to successfully answer an area. Distinguish between main questions and side questions.

The main questions on this section are: What was the fault of the people? Why did God choose to give "fiery serpents" as a punishment here, as opposed to something else? What does the added affliction of "fiery" serpents come to accomplish? Why did Moses have to make a serpent if the people already confessed? Why put it on a pole? Why did Moses make it out of "brass"? How did looking at this serpent heal?

Rashi said, "let the serpent who was punished due to his evil talk (the section dealing with Adam and Eve) come and exact punishment from those who spoke evil. Let the serpent come, to who everything tastes as one, and exact punishment from those who denied the good. That one thing (manna) was changed for them to many things." According to Rashi, the Jews received a corrective measure through snakes because of evil talk. However, this isn't the first time someone spoke evil. Why didn't Miriam receive snakes when she spoke against Moses? Why didn't the Jews receive snakes long before this? They spoke evil before.

These are the basic questions. It is very possible to work with them as they are. But if we make slight changes to their structure, we will direct ourselves closer to the answers.

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## Formulating Better Questions

(CONTINUED)

□ to their structure, we will direct ourselves closer to the answers. Remember, all of the information we need to answer these questions is in the passages.

The main question should be addressed first. Why snakes? We know why. They spoke evil. So we must ask more directly: "What was the difference in the evil talk of the Jews here, that they received the snakes? After asking the question this way, you direct yourself at their actions for the answer. You know that in other cases the Jews complained to God and Moses, and they didn't receive snakes, let alone "fiery" snakes. So speaking evil per se cannot be the cause of their extraordinary punishment. What is different here?"

The difference is that it never mentions anywhere else that the people "grew tired on the way". This first passage seems extraneous at first. But now, rephrase the question using this information from the first passage: "What is it in the fact that they were tired, that the ensuing evil talk should be punished with serpents?" You can almost immediately make the connection that their evil talk was the direct result of being tired. Meaning, that their evil talk was unjustified in relation to the object of their complaint. It was just talk used to vent their emotions regarding something else. Their was no inherent flaw with the manna.

Talking can be used for one of two things: 1) communication of an idea or of a complaint, 2) an outlet for the emotions, as one does when hot tempered and breaks something. Instead of breaking something, people often whine and complain.

This first passage is here to hint towards the underlying cause for their complaining. They were tired of the journey and didn't control their feelings, and began to displace their frustration to outlet their emotions. We also understand now why they received such a different punishment here than in other areas. Here, their complaining wasn't based on any real problem. They covered it up with a rationalization of the lack of bread and water. But in reality they shouldn't have complained. This explains why they received serpents.

Serpents were given to them because they represent what the original serpent was punished for - evil talk - and to point out to them that they were victims

of an emotion of outletting their feelings through speech. Had there been another incident in Scripture where an individual, or people, had outletted their emotions in this manner, and were on a level for God to administer a corrective measure, we would witness another case of "fiery serpents". However, this is the only account where this specific flaw occurred, and therefore, the only account where fiery serpents comes to correct the situation.

With this information, we can also answer another question: Why the additional aspect of "fiery"? The reason is because they denied the good of the manna. This is what Rashi was pointing to. If there were two aspects to their punishment (serpents and fiery), there must be a reason for both. So "serpents" comes to correct evil speech, and "fiery" comes to correct their denial of the good manna. Tangentially, Miriam wasn't punished with serpents because her degrading talk wasn't to outlet an emotion. Contained in her words was an incorrect notion regarding how God relates to man. She however expressed this with a boastful overtone. Thus, she fell prey to two faults; 1) She misunderstood how God relates to Moses, (as compared to herself) 2) She gave in to the feeling of haughtiness. Since Miriam faulted in these two, God corrected her in both. He taught her how His relationship with Moses differed from His relationship to her, and He gave her leprosy which lowers ones self esteem. This is another example of how God's punishment differs from man's. When God punishes someone, or a people, it is an act which corrects a fault. It's not just a deterrent. This is the basic concept behind "Mida k'neged mida", (measure for measure).

What about the question as to why God told Moses to make replica of the serpent? Didn't the people repent already? This is one way of asking this question. But we can deduce from the facts that there must have been something lacking if God told Moses to do something further. The question should be rephrased as the following: "What was it in the Jews request for the removal of the serpents which demonstrates incomplete repentance?" You can see the answer clearly. Their confession to God and Moses is immediately followed by their request to have the serpents removed. (An important point about this is that they both take place in the same passage. When one passage contains a few thoughts, they are related.) Their repentance was only for the sake of removing their immediate pain from the serpents - not a true realization of their error. Because of this, God instructed

Moses to create a replica of the serpent so that they could stare at it in order to contemplate their problem properly, thereby removing from themselves their incorrect notions. Placing it upon the pole facilitated the direction of their thoughts towards God, Who is figuratively "upon high".

In summary, the following steps should be taken when approaching an area of Torah Sheb'csav: 1) Know where the area begins and ends

2) Understand the area thoroughly

3) Distinguish between main points and side points

4) Ask yourself how this area differs from all other areas. This will help to point you towards the main topics

5) Formulate questions clearly using as much information as you have to work with

6) If the area deals with God's relationship to man, detect either man's fault and see how the punishment fits the crime, or look into God's actions towards man to understand what He was improving upon

7) If the area deals with mitzvos (commandments), if they are positive commands, look into man's nature to see what they affect; and if they are negative commands, then they are coming to control a natural disposition of man which must be tempered.

## False Notions: Magical Powers

RABBI REUVEN MANN

The idea that objects possess supernatural powers is absolutely contrary to Torah. The Torah makes it clear that nature operates according to fixed laws. Thus, objects only possess the natural powers they are endowed with. Whenever something occurs outside the frame of natural law the only cause is the Divine Will, i.e., what we call Providence. In the war against Amalek when Moshe lifted his hands the Jews would prevail and when he lowered them they would falter. Yet Rashi asks, "can the hands of Moshe wage war?" So too in the case of the copper snake those bitten would gaze upon the snake and be healed. Would

you say that the copper snake had a special power to heal? Here too Rashi asks, "Can a snake heal?" and continues to explain that when the Jews subordinated their hearts to G-d then He would cure them. The same is true regarding the hands of Moshe. From the question of Rashi we can clearly deduce that he rejected the notion of ascribing non-natural powers to physical objects. It is important to remember the Chizkiyahu destroyed the copper snake when the people began to attribute powers to it. The jar of manna and many other objects were hidden for the same reason.

G-d did not give us any objects to cure us or help us with our problems. He told us that our fate would be determined purely by the quality of our faith, obedience to His will and level of perfection. If the stones of the ephod had the power to cause pregnancy why did Channa pray so bitterly and offer the child to G-d's service? Why were there any barren women? It is not mentioned that Channa or the woman who hosted Elisha swallowed any dust in order to become pregnant. This attitude of course represents a complete distortion of mitzvohs as the Rambam explains in regard to using mezzuah for medicinal purposes. On this point all intelligent people should agree.

Finally it is not our burden to disprove an idea which is contrary to Torah and common sense understanding of Torah. It is the burden of the person asserting a notion which runs contrary to the basic principals of Torah to demonstrate through authoritative and unimpeachable sources that his strange interpretation is authentic.

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