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IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: KI TETZE	1-3
100% PROOF	1,4-6
PARSHA: SEEDS OF REBELLION	1,7
LETTERS: ISAIAH, SEGULAS	8

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Weekly Parsha

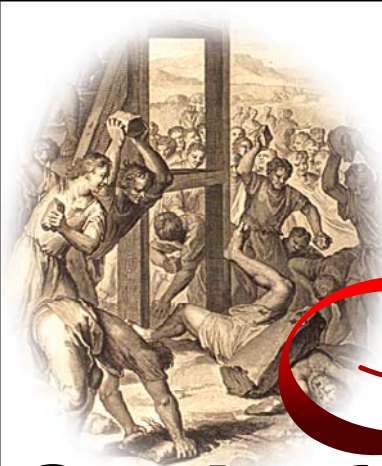
Ki Tetze

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"You must first send away the mother and then you may take the young. This is order that you have it good and will live long." (Devarim 22:7)

This passage commands us to send away the mother bird before removing the eggs or chicks from the nest. In other words, we are not permitted to capture the mother bird with her chicks or eggs. First, we must send away the mother and then, we can

(continued on next page)



Seeds of Rebellion

RABBI DR. MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

Modern people would probably be shocked by the fate of the rebellious son, the ben sorer umorer (21:18-21). "If a man will have a wayward and rebellious son who does not listen to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother . . . [The parents] shall say to the elders of the city, 'This son of ours is wayward and rebellious . . . All the men of his city shall pelt him with stones, and he shall die.'"

They needn't worry. The conditions that had to be met before the death penalty could be administered were so stringent as to make it virtually impossible for it ever to occur. And our Sages indeed assure us that it never did. The Torah's purpose in introducing this law is didactic rather than practical.

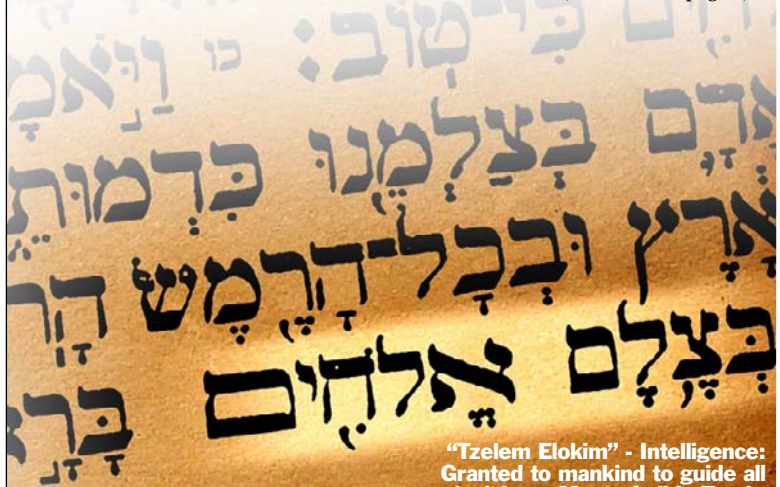
(continued on page 7)

100% Proof & God's Perfection

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This letter picks up on a previous dialogue, discussing whether external corroboration of Torah histories are required to prove Torah. In my first entry, I am responding to a friend who suggested that with new artifact findings from alien cultures that corroborate Torah histories, we could feel more assured that Torah is true...

(continued on page 4)



"Tzelem Elokim" - Intelligence: Granted to mankind to guide all our decisions. Most of all in Torah.

(Ki Tetze cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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take the eggs or chicks from the nest.

The Torah does not provide any explanation or rational for this commandment. However, the commentaries discuss the extensively the reason for this mitzvah and offer a number of suggestions. Maimonides suggests that the mitzvah is designed to reinforce our sense of compassion. He explains that the anguish that the mother bird experiences at seeing her nest raided is similar to the feeling a human mother experiences over the loss of a child. We are commanded to send away the mother and spare her this anguish. We are required to act with sensitivity and compassion even in our treatment of animals. If we follow this practice, this sensitivity and compassion will – hopefully – find expression in our relationships with other human beings. The converse is also true. If we treat animals with cruelty, this callousness will be expressed in insensitivity in our treatment of human beings.[1]

Nachmanides offers an alternative explanation for the requirement to send away the mother bird. He suggests that the commandment is designed to assure the maintenance of the species. We are permitted to take the eggs or the chicks for our use. But we must spare the mother. We must allow some members of this “family” to survive. We cannot wipe-out the entire unit. Our authority to harvest the birds and animals of the world for our own use is moderated by this commandment. This helps assure the survival of some members of the species that can continue to procreate.[2]

Why is the survival of each species important? Sefer HaChinuch expands on Nachmanides' explanation. He explains that Hashem created our world with its variety of species. It is His will that His creations – the species – survive. Sefer HaChinuch asserts that Hashem's divine providence does not just extend to human beings. It also extends to each species. Of course, there providence that human beings experience is far more extensive and detailed than the providence experienced by animals. But Hashem does extend His providence over animals to the extent

of assuring that each species survives.

We are required to serve Hashem. We serve Him by conforming to His will. Therefore, we must take care to not endanger the survival of any species. If we are not conscientious in these efforts or if we endanger a species' survival, we are demonstrating disregard for Hashem's will.[3]

Of course, it is tempting to treat Nachmanides' and Sefer HaChinuch's perspective as an endorsement of modern environmental and ecological efforts to save various species from extinction. However, this is not completely appropriate. It is important to recognize that modern science has developed an elaborate system for the classification of species. Even two

creatures that seem essentially identical may be identified as separate species. Our modern efforts to battle the extinction of species are designed to save as many species as possible regardless of the existence of similar species that are not threatened. No one would suggest that we should allow the bald eagle to slip into oblivion because there are so many other species of eagles that are not threatened. But it is not clear that Nachmanides and Sefer HaChinuch would accept our modern classifications of animals into a vast array of difference species. It is likely that

the Torah would define species more broadly. In other words, many of the similar animal groups that modern classification recognizes as separate species, the Torah might consider as included in a single species. It is not clear that the Torah would regard the bald eagle as a separate and distinct species. So, it may not be appropriate to recruit Nachmanides and Sefer HaChinuch to participate in our modern ecological and environmental campaigns.

All of these authorities are concerned with an interesting teaching in the Talmud. The Talmud teaches that a person should not pray to Hashem to be merciful towards us just as His mercy extends to the birds. The Talmud explains that this prayer implies that Hashem commands us to spare the mother bird as an expression of His compassion. Instead, we should regard his

(continued on next page)

(Ki Tetze continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

commandments as decrees and not attribute them to His mercy.[4]

This teaching seems to imply that we should treat the commandments as decrees from Hashem. A decree is an imperative that is followed without question or analysis. In comparing the Torah's commandments to decrees, the Talmud seems to imply that we should regard their reasons and rationals as inscrutable or irrelevant. We should refrain from attempting to explain the commandments. In fact, any attempt to explain the significance of a commandment is inappropriate and implies a lack of devotion.

It is interesting that Maimonides actually accepts this interpretation of this teaching from the Talmud. He explains that this teaching reflects the opinion of those Sages who regarded the commandments as expressions of the divine will. According to these Sages, it is not appropriate to seek explanations for the commandments or to attribute reasons to them. The commandments are decrees to be followed without any thought regarding their purposes or objectives. However, Maimonides explains that this is not the position that is prevalent among the Sages. Therefore, Maimonides concludes that it is appropriate to suggest explanations for the commandments.[5]

Nachmanides rejects Maimonides' understanding of this teaching. Nachmanides insists that this teaching is not intended to imply that the commandments do not have reasons or that it is inappropriate to seek these reasons. Instead, the teaching is dealing with a completely different issue. We are not permitted to attribute Hashem's mitzvah to send away the mother bird to His compassion for the bird. Hashem is not compassionate toward birds! He gave us the authority to use animals for our needs. We are permitted to slaughter animals. Any compassion that we are commanded to show towards animals is not required out of consideration for these animals. Instead, this commandment – like all others – is designed to benefit humanity. It is either designed to teach us compassion – as suggested by Maimonides or to preserve the species that Hashem created. Both of these possible lessons are important for human beings.

However, Nachmanides notes that the Sages do state that the commandments are designed to "purify" us. Nachmanides acknowledges that one might interpret this statements to mean that the commandments do not have specific reasons or rationals. Instead, we are commanded to observe the mitzvot as an expression of obedience to Hashem. The commandments "purify" us in the sense that they help us overcome our willfulness and self-centeredness. They train us to serve Hashem and to be faithful to His will.

Nachmanides rejects this interpretation of the Sages' comments. He suggests that the Sages were attempting to communicate a far more profound idea.

We are required to serve Hashem. It is reasonable that we will compare our relationship to Hashem to the relationship that exists between and servant and master. In the servant/ master relationship, the servant serves the master. But the master needs and benefits from the service of the servant. If we understand our relationship to Hashem to be akin to this relationship, we will serve Hashem but we will also conclude that Hashem needs or benefits from our service. The Sages were eager to teach us that the commandments were not given by Hashem because He needs our service. Hashem is perfect and complete in every way. He does not benefit from our service neither is he harmed by our disobedience. But he commanded us to observe His mitzvot in order that we should benefit.

This is completely consistent with Nachmanides understanding of the mitzvot. Each has a reason and rational. Each is designed to benefit us in some way. The specific purpose of a mitzvah may not be specified by the Torah or at all obvious. Nonetheless, we can be sure that the commandment is designed to "purify" us – to benefit us is some way.[6]

Sefer HaChinuch discusses these comments of Maimonides and Nachmanides. He explains that it is his practice to offer some explanation for each commandment. He recognizes that this practice can be criticized. It assumes that the commandments have reasons and rationals. But Sefer HaChinuch explains that he feels that it is appropriate for him to make this assumption. Maimonides and Nachmanides – two of our greatest scholars – both agree that each commandment has a purpose and reason.

He asserts that he certainly has the right to rely on the authority of these two giants.[7] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 3, chapter 48.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 22:6.

[3] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 545.

[4] Mesechet Berachot 33b.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 3, chapter 48.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 22:6.

[7] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 545.

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Thought

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Interesting artifact findings. But I wonder, is it not an internal contradiction to “support” historical credibility of Jewish texts, with another text? I mean, if a “single” historical document (Torah) or artifact is viewed as insufficient evidence, how can that same corrupt “singular” nature of another source add any credibility? That second source is equally deficient as the first...and so on, ad infinitum. Is it not truly the mass acceptance - even from a singular source - and universal transmission/acceptance of histories where masses were present, which truly convince the mind of a historical truth? If so, we need not look outside a nation’s documents, since mass transmission of witnessed events is 100% proof that no other history is true.

Friend: Intuitively, humans and things related to humanity don’t work like that. We aren’t 100% clear/honest/correct or 100% unclear/ dishonest/ correct, and this applies to almost anything related to humanity. Things are nuanced, complex, and they can’t be reduced to a binary system of “yes” or “no”. This applies just as equally to human writing and history as well.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Yet...you make this statement with 100% black and white certainty.

Friend: I will address a few issues...by topic. “Demanding Logical Proof.”

Based on your assumptions, if we look at any document and we find a single detail that is not true, then the whole document is discredited and is unreliable as historical evidence. There are countless examples in Tanakh of internal contradictions (never mind contradictions with extra-Biblical texts). These contradictions can be found within each section of Tanakh (i.e. within Chumash, within Neveim, within Ketuvim), as well as between the different sections. By your tacit logic, then, we should conclude that the Bible is an unreliable historical document.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: I don’t accept contradictions in the Torah as fact. The Rabbis would have already addressed this openly, as they have with all other honest inquiries. I would like to take each one of your suggested contradictions, one-by-one, to determine if it is not actually a Torah lesson, as seen throughout Ecclesiastes’ numerous “contradictions”, which were ultimately shown to be intentionally designed that way.

Friend: “Potential reconciliations of contradictions in Biblical texts.”

As I see it, a majority of these proposed solutions can only be taken seriously if we first take the



Revelation at Sinai

proposition that “there are no contradictions in the Bible - everything is 100% true” and then go looking for solutions. This would be obviously circular logic because this discussion is partially dealing with the question of the Bible’s credibility and truth-reliability. In other words, the solutions are ad hoc and would be best left as difficult questions than with the unsatisfying solutions that they receive.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Same as above...please present your cases in question.

Friend: On an even larger methodological plane, the greater question here is where to start. I would argue that the onus is not upon me to present arguments against yours. If you are trying to prove something, which you certainly are in this case, then it is your responsibility to prove its validity and the assumptions it relies on. So, why do you think that an all-or-nothing approach to historical documents is most correct/valid/appropriate? What motivates such a position, and what makes it convincing for you?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Reason tells you and me, there are things 100% verifiable. There-

fore, this is the true test of veracity. You just endorsed this position – contradicting yourself by saying, “why do you think that an all-or-nothing approach to historical documents is most correct”. You see, you too seek what is “most correct”. Your mind senses that “correct” can be in degrees, and the greater the degree, the more sure you are. Hence, that which is the greatest degree, i.e., 100% correct, you must admit is unsurpassed, and iron clad. You admit that we can attain 100% proof.

Friend: “Assuming the Binary Approach to History”

If we work with your tacit assumption that our investigation into history should be viewed as a binary choice, then our discussion will inevitably lead to the following question: how do we decide which historical documents receive a “yes-reliable” stamp of approval, and which ones receive a “no-unreliable” stamp of disapproval?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Sinai is the litmus test: factors are required; 1) mass witnesses, 2) easily apprehended historical accounts...this is based on Rabbi Chait’s essay, Torah from Sinai: <http://www.mesora.org/torahfromsinai.html>

Friend: “Mass Acceptance”

What makes you believe that the Bible was “accepted by the masses”? As far as I know, there have always been people that have rejected the Bible, and there always will be. The more we learn about the history that surrounds the Bible, the more we learn that there have always been conflicting perspectives regarding the Bible, and that few things have ever been agreed upon. Just consider all the modern research with the Dead Sea Scrolls - there are versions of Biblical books that share many qualities with text of our traditional books, but they are also very different in crucial ways. Certainly this should point to a lack of mass acceptance! Just because history hasn’t recorded the dissent to the Bible earlier in history, this doesn’t mean that it didn’t happen.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: You talk about many rejecting parties. Does this render a historical account less credulous? If there arose millions of people doubting the Holocaust, Rome, etc., they could not rewrite historical truths. It would merely place weak-minded persons in doubt. Would you doubt your own history, if masses disagreed with where you were raised?

You mentioned a lack of mass acceptance. But this rejection is not based on reasoning, so it is dismissed.

You mentioned lack of records of dissenters. But this too is meaningless, as their dissention is baseless.

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(100% continued from page 4)

Thought

Friend: Additionally, the more we learn about texts and writing in the ancient world, the more it seems that it was a small group of elites that had knowledge of writing and reading, and that it was these cultural elites who were responsible for the composition, editing, redacting, and transmission of these texts. To this you might claim that the writing of the Torah is different than other kinds of ancient writing and that it would be misleading to use a comparative model in viewing the Torah. This potential objection needs justification: why should we view the Torah as a fundamentally different kind of literature? Why isn't it susceptible to critical analysis just as other literature is?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Suggesting that the elite of the Jews wrote the Torah, is a denial of known history, of Moses and the Jews at Sinai. Further, our Torah leaders, whom at every turn support truth, to the point of teaching us that we would not follow a command if it was against reason, never suggested this your elitist scenario. The converse is true: they unanimously agreed to the Torah's Divine origin. Does it not startle you that your suggestion was never entertained by minds more advanced than ours...by Maimonides, Nachmanides, Rashi, Sforno, Ibn Ezra, et al?

Friend: This touches on another basic question: what do you mean by "the bible"? Do you believe that the bible that we have in our hands today is identical to the one that the Israelites received thousands of years ago? Modern research suggests that the Bible (Chumash) was composed over a very long period of time, say between the 9th and 6th centuries BCE.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Again, the Rabbis never disputed what the Torah is.

Friend: I think this assumption of "mass acceptance" needs much more proof. And to respond, "Well, the Bible itself recounts mass acceptance", is just to beg the question even further - we would then have to distinguish between a "narrative about mass acceptance" and "actual mass acceptance". Surely, because a narrative tells of its own acceptance by the masses doesn't prove anything. Anyone can write such a narrative, and this wouldn't prove anything. If, then, the proof is in the mass acceptance of the text, then we go back to that basic question: What makes you think that the Bible was ever accepted by the masses?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Mass "transmission" is also required to validate the Torah as truth...not simply the text. You are correct: simply recording an event in a book is no proof, since lie can be written in this way. But that the entire world should accept and transmit the Biblical miracles,

let alone Jewish history, is a testament to its truth. Had those accounts been false, no man or group could convince a people that they were at a mountain with miracles with 2.5 million others, in Egypt enduring 10 wondrous plagues, or any history. Generations could not rewrite Jewish history, so that others would accept it. But the fact that these stories have been transmitted for 1000s of years is the 100% proof of their truth.

Friend: One last point on mass-acceptance. Why does mass-acceptance help your case? If an individual were determined to interpret phenomenon in life subjectively, based on his/her experiences and education and context, then why would we expect anything different from a larger group of people?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: We are not discussing subjective experiences or feelings, but overtly performed actions, understood equally and accurately by all. All people distinguish between day and night, between rain and sunshine, between men and women. They easily identified a mountain, fire, intelligent voices, Egyptians,

plagues, and unnatural phenomena. This line of reasoning refutes nothing, and actually confirms Sinai.

Friend: Methodologically, I would suggest a more nuanced approach to humanity and history. Binary-choice systems seem to work for certain things (math, for example), but not in discipline related to human creativity and production, especially those with ideological/ religious/ political significance. A nuanced system would ask many different questions about a historical document and the details it includes. Such as, "When was the document written? Was it composed at one time, or did it evolve through time? Why was it written? What possible psychological/political/philosophical motivations/beliefs might be underlying the document? Who wrote the document, and who was the intended audience(s) of the document? How did those people (author(s) and audience) understand life? How did they relate to the concepts that they refer to? How did they understand the words and concepts that they actually use? Who

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The screenshot shows the NYDesign.com website. At the top, there's a navigation menu with links like 'about nydesign', 'design services', 'boost sales', 'options', 'web strategies', 'testimonials', and 'links services'. Below the menu is a banner with the NYDesign.com logo and the tagline 'Where Good Design is Smart Business'. A central text block describes their 20-year history and offers a 'Free Quote Here' button. Below this, a list of 'Serviced Corporations Include' features logos for A&E, McDonald's, Pepsi, and others. At the bottom, there's a footer with contact information: 'New Project June 2006: Vilmar Website, Desktop/Widgits Application Development' and 'NYDesign.com'.

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Where Good Design is Smart Business

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Thought

transmitted the document through time? Has it changed through time, or has it remained the same?"

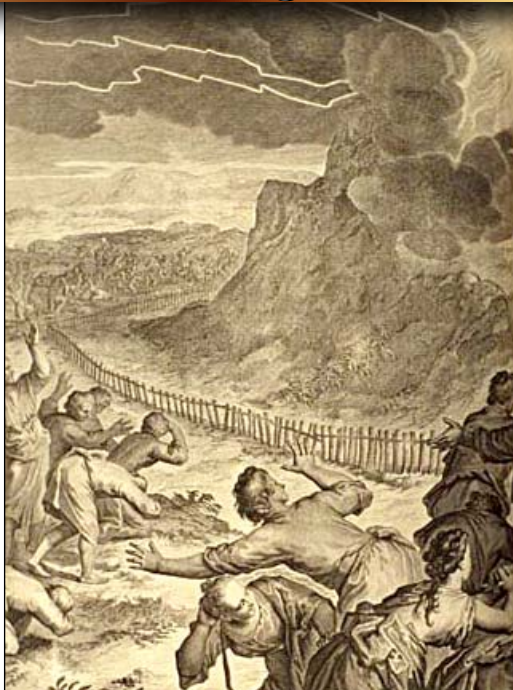
Just as an example. Parah Adumah, which is almost always translated as "red heifer" or "red cow", wasn't actually intended to be "red" by the biblical writer(s). By looking at ancient Semitic languages that are directly related to Hebrew (i.e. they share many linguistic properties) we can be sure that the root a-d-m didn't mean the "red" that we consider "red" today, but that it referred to a phase of the color spectrum that included red as well as reddish-brown as well. This would solve many of the problems that post-biblical generations incurred in understanding this phrase. And it is a good example how elements of texts need to be understood in the context (i.e. in this case linguistic context) in which they were created.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Exposing specific nuances in language, whether true or false, does not discount the clear facts of our discussion; locations, times, people, types of miracles, and so on. We don't claim Sinai is subject to refutation because some nuances in language can change the location, dates, people involved, or events. Your suggestion has never been made, precisely because it cannot affect the proof of Sinai which is built on irrefutably clear facts.

Friend: I would like it if things could be reduced to a definitive and certain "yes" or "no". I just don't have any reason to trust in that kind of assumption, and all that I've seen thus far has shown me that as much as we naturally feel like we need that kind of certitude in life, as much as we might feel like that kind of certainty must exist for our lives to be worth anything, we don't need it.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: But in many areas of your life, you DO live by 100% verification...like responding to ME...you are convinced I exist. You demonstrate with all these words of yours your agreement that reason DOES surpass guessing. You are 100% certain of many things.

Friend: "Conclusion: Humanity = Subjectivity"
In conclusion, I think my basic position is this: anything having to do with humanity and human perception resists objectivity. You need not look further than everyday life: obvious miscommunications between people; the way that different individuals from different backgrounds and mindsets interpret the exact same phenomenon in different ways; and the general inability of language to construct a world of concrete and objective meaning. Based on this idea, the only way that I think your argument can work as tightly



as you would like it to, is if we say that the Bible is purely and wholly from God without any human involvement. I don't think you are trying to claim that.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: I am.

Friend: Even in your narrative, humans hear the Bible from God, humans help in some way to put the text together (Moses is still human), humans transmit the text, humans write it down and copy it, etc. Still, Human subjectivity doesn't mean that nothing is believable.

Even though I think that anything having to do with humanity is inherently subjective to some degree, just because we can't know anything with absolute certainty doesn't mean that we can't know anything. It just means that we can't know it with the certitude that we might like.

I'll take an often cited example about American History. There are narratives about George Washington. I believe that George Washington lived and that he was the first president of the United States of America. I believe this even though no one will ever be able to offer me completely logical proof. I believe it because when I weigh all the different questions that I have (sources, possible motives, etc), it seems reasonable that he did live and that he was, in fact, the first president of our celebrated republic.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: If you study human nature, you will arrive at very true rules. One rule is that motive differs in everyone, and based on this, one motivation to lie about history cannot apply to 2.5 million people, let alone the world at large. Thus, mass transmission of the

Torah teaches that since no common motive exists to fabricate the stories in the Torah, then, they are all true...just as George Washington's existence and status is a truth.

Friend: "Random Ruminations"

"What Gives God Moral Authority Over People and the World?"

Unless we assume it, which doesn't seem to me to be very convincing, why do we think God is right about all of the things that He supposedly says? Sure, we can tell ourselves that God is omnipotent and morally perfect and omniscient, etc - but why would we believe that this indeed the case? Ok, so it's in our definition of God, but that just begs the question - why are we convinced about that definition of God? Maybe God writes books and doesn't really know what He's talking about. Maybe God is just the being that created the world, and the whole moral rampage He went on in the Bible was just His subjective ideas about what morality is all about. Why should we trust Him anymore than anyone else? Maybe there is no such thing as objective morality?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: My friend and I discussed this recently. He asked, "How do we know God is 'perfect' - perfect in His knowledge, abilities, etc.?"

Let's define our terms to start: how do we define "perfect"? We said it means that which lacks nothing...it is "independent" and has no needs. For example, a human is not perfect, since it depends on food for its very existence. Therefore, a human is not "perfect". More primarily, a human cannot create itself, so its very existence, its primary feature that it "exists" is dependent on something else creating it. This dependency applies for all things that exist, except for the First Cause... which did not require creation, but is exclusively responsible for all creation. We cannot say that matter goes back in time indefinitely. For if this were so, then we are actually saying "there is no first Creator". And if there is no creator, then nothing can exist. So we arrive at the conclusion that God is independent, with no needs, and therefore, He is perfect. His knowledge is also perfect, so He knows all, and cannot err. He created all laws, so nothing can overpower Him.

Now that we have proved God's existence, He alone is the cause for all things, including "morality". And since He alone created morally, He alone defines its truths. He also created knowledge, so He knows what He is talking about.

In conclusion, we realize that 100% proof does exist. And utilizing proof, we realize the Torah is true, and it could not have been fabricated. Third, the Torah came from God. Fourth, God is perfect.

Torah must then be perfect. ■

The Midrash Tanchuma observes that this commandment is the third in the parashah. The first is the commandment of yefas to'ar, which provides the laws for marrying a heathen woman captured in wartime. The second details the laws of inheritance that apply when a husband has children with two wives, one beloved and one hated. From this sequence, the Midrash infers that a man who marries a heathen captive will come to hate her, and that the union will eventually produce a ben sorer umorer, a rebellious son.

What is the psychology that drives this chain of events?

Perhaps we can find the answer in the story of Amnon and Tamar. Amnon, David's son, harbors a passion for his stepsister Tamar. Unable to restrain himself any longer, he violates her. Afterward, Amnon sends her away; her pleas for him not to do so fall on deaf ears (II Samuel 13:15). "Amnon despised her with a great hatred; his hatred was even greater than the love he had felt for her." Amnon hated her because her very presence reminded him of his surrender to his animalistic instincts. Rather than hate himself, he chose to hate the person who reminded him of his venal act.

In a similar fashion, the Jewish conqueror who succumbs to his lust and marries an unworthy heathen wife may regret his own weaknesses. The Torah predicts that instead of directing his recriminations at himself he will come to hate the wife taken in the moment of his weakness.

Finally, the Midrash suggests, this union may produce a rebellious son. This is not because the heathen wife will fill her son's head with wrong ideas. Wrong ideas do not necessarily lead to rebelliousness; plenty of parents teach their children foolishness and nonsense, and yet the children show no inclination to rebel. The principal causes of rebellion lie elsewhere.

Rebellious children are unhappy children, and the primary source of unhappiness for children is disharmony in the home. Children desperately need the safety and nurturance of a happy home. When they sense tension between parents, their upbringing and happiness are greatly compromised. When a wife is hated and there is acrimony in the home, rebellious children will follow. ■

The Promise of Longevity

Promises of longevity are rare in the Torah. In fact, they appear only twice with relation to specific commands. One of these occurs with shiluach hakan, the sending away of the mother bird before taking the young (22:6-7). "If a bird's nest . . . you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall surely send the mother away and take the young for yourself, so that it will be good for you and you will live a long time." The other is the commandment to

honor parents.

The Talmud relates (Chulin 141a) a story that raises serious questions about the promised rewards of these commandments. Elisha ben Avuiah once observed a father telling his son to climb a ladder to a bird's nest and send away the mother bird. The boy fell off the ladder and died. Elisha was stunned. The boy had been fulfilling the two commandments for which the Torah promises goodness and long life. How could he possibly fall to his death while doing these things? And thus Elisha became the famous apostate, "Acher". The Talmud wonders, why indeed did this happen? "Good" and "long life," the Talmud explains, refer to the next world, the eternal world of righteous souls, which is all good and endlessly long.

Our Sages state that no verse fully leaves its simple meaning. Perhaps then we may also suggest a more literal interpretation.

King David declares (Psalms 89:3) that the world is established through kindness (olam chessed yibaneh). God, being perfect and without needs, created the world solely to benefit His creations through His goodness. The ultimate good God allows for us, is to be elevated and exalted through a direct relationship with Him. One means of accomplishing this is by imitating His ways; thus, we strive to be kind and merciful just as He is kind and merciful, and thereby, we place our metaphysical souls in harmony with the underlying will of God's chessed, the cornerstone of Creation.

By commanding us to have compassion for a bird, a creature with which we have no natural identification, the Torah encourages us to extend our compassionate feelings to all creation and, in doing so, arrive at the level of kindness that is the most fundamental trait of our souls.

The chief beneficiary of this act will not be the bird but rather the person who sends it away. A person who pursues kindness is fully in line with this fundamental trait of his own soul. He will not be disturbed by inner demons of conflict that will drain his life force and age him prematurely. He will achieve the maximum length of days his body will allow; barring mishap, he will have a natural length of days. Moreover, the quality of that life will be far superior to the lives of coarse, selfish people who are in conflict with their souls, which are naturally predisposed to kindness. In this sense, his days will be "good" and "long."

There is a debate among the Sages as to whether the juxtaposition of disparate verses or sections of law in the first four Books of the Torah can be used to derive information or legal principles. All agree, however, that the Book of Deuteronomy may be so expounded. Had Elisha ben Avuiah made a connection between adjacent verses he might have avoided apostasy.

What immediately follows the commandment of sending away the mother bird? It is the commandment of maakah, which calls for the placement of a security fence around an accessible roof. This seems to indicate that even someone who had performed the commandment of shiluach hakan needs to take precautions against mishaps. Apparently, the promise of good and lengthy days is not a guarantee that no mishaps will occur. It is either a promise of reward in the next world, or an explanation of the profound benefits of such a kindly disposition in this world.

As mentioned above, there is one other commandment for whose fulfillment the Torah promises "good" and "long" days³/4honoring parents. Can we provide a natural explanation here too according to the simple meaning of the verse? How and why might this transpire?

Honoring parents, the fifth of the Ten Commandments, is the last of the first group, which are generally regarded as sins against God. The Maharal, in Tiferes Yisrael, explains that each of these five has a counterpart in the last five commandments, which speak of sins against man.

Violation of the first command by failure to acknowledge God's existence is the equivalent of murder, the sixth. Denying the oneness of God through idols corresponds to the destruction of the oneness of the husband-wife unit through adultery. Misusing God's Name by a false oath is equated with misusing a person in the most basic way⁴by kidnapping him, the seventh commandment. We give testimony to God's general providence by the observance of the Sabbath, as prescribed by the fourth commandment, so too are we enjoined from giving false testimony against our fellow man, the ninth commandment.

Finally, the commandment to honor parents expresses reverence for and appreciation of God's providence that leads to each individual's own existence. This matches the tenth commandment⁵not to covet. It would seem the core failure of covetousness stems from an overestimation of one's importance and a failure to appreciate the blessing of life and everything else God has bestowed. Proper observance leads to gratitude and the conviction that God provides what is appropriate and necessary for satisfaction and happiness in life without having recourse to something belonging to someone else.

Honoring parent shows appreciation for the vehicle God chose for drawing our divine souls into our bodies, the individual providence of our own existence. Appreciation, hakaras hatov, is like the kindness essential for a person's shleimus (wholeness or perfection). It allows a person to be satisfied or happy with his lot. Thus, like sending the mother bird away, it is "good for him" and "lengthens his days." ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Letters

Mesora invites your questions, letters in response to articles, your own thoughts, or your suggestions for the JewishTimes.

“The only poor question is the one not asked.”

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Follow the Leaders!

Reader: We have corresponded in the past, and I have not really kept up my end by asking you questions regularly. I am on the road from Christianity to Moses and slowly making my way. Exodus 19 saying that we should believe Moses forever is a pretty hard one for us ex-Christians...but nonetheless, truth is truth.

I meet with a group of guys to study the Torah Portion each week...All we have is Reform Judaism in this area, and no Orthodox Rabbis around that I can find, so we ex mainstream Christians get together to try to figure things out by arguing theology with the Torah as the center point. Having said that, I used to be a Trinitarian[1], but the Tanach has proven to me that this idea is nonsense. On to my question...

We came across Isaiah 49 in a HafTorah a couple weeks back, and one of the guys, (who is a Trinitarian) shows me in his Chumash that the verse says the “LORD MOSHIACH” in the Hebrew text, I know those two particular words by sight. My NAS and KJV says “savior” which would be “yasha” I think in Hebrew.... I can't find an English translation that says the LORD is Messiah and Redeemer, and I would think that Trinitarians would be all over this scripture to prove that Hashem is Moshiach.

Any ideas as to why the Chumash shows MOSHIACH and the Hebrew in the NAS and KJV show YASHA? Are there any Rabbinic thoughts or commentaries on what this would mean. Your comments are appreciated.

—Chad Hill, Fort Walton Beach Florida

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Chad, good to hear back. The word here in Isaiah 49:26 "moshiache" simply means, I am the Lord “who saves you”...a verb, and not a savior's title as the Trinitarians imagine. Thus, this word "moshiache" does not suggest God is also the Messiah (Trinitarian theology).

It must be appreciated that Torah and all religious truths can not be determined by anyone, other than the original recipients and teachers, i.e., the Sages. In Deuteronomy 17:11, God commands the Jews – the only recipients of the Torah on Sinai – that they alone act as Torah teachers. So I wonder why the Trinitarians reject this clearly stated verse from their studies, choosing to rely on a wrong and convoluted interpretation of Isaiah 49:26 instead.

An individual or group, who have no training in Torah, to suggest they better understand God's words than the Rabbis, is foolish. I always use the example of Henry Ford: just as I cannot tell that original inventor of the Ford that I know better what a Ford is, so too, all others cannot teach the Jews what Torah is, or what it means.

Reader: Thanks for the reply. That is where knowing the difference between verbs and nouns in Hebrew comes in handy. I found it strange that God would be referred to as "anointed one" since He is greatest of all, and who could anoint Him?! Thanks again, I will be back with more questions I'm Sure... ■

—Chad

Follow the Leader?

Letter to the moderator of a Jewish group email list:

“Dear Moderator: After reading numerous “pro” posts on segula challas, bereft of any Torah source, I kindly request your fair posting of an alternative post, an actual Torah source:

Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zara (11:4):

“One may not practice sorcery, as do the idolaters, as it says, “Do not divine”. What is sorcery? For example, those who say, “since the bread fell from my mouth, [or] since the staff fell from my hand, I shall not travel to such a place...for if I do travel, my wishes will not be fulfilled.”

Rambam is not discounting proven, medical cures, or logical actions that have rational, causal results. He describes prohibited actions, as they are not found in the Torah, since they have no natural relationship to their imagined promises. So too, keys in challas have no relationship to fertility. The Kessef Mishna – author of the Shulchan Aruch – states that Rambam merely describes the “principle”, which includes many other actions. Rambam could not list the innumerable permutations of sorcery, and therefore, described the Torah's prohibition with a few examples. In his conclusion, Rambam writes this:

“And these things [listed herein] are all fallacy and lies. They are what the original star worshippers misled the gentile nations to accustom themselves after them. And it is not fitting that Israel, who are very wise, be drawn after these futilities, and they shall [also] not assume they afford any help...But wise people, with complete knowledge know with clear proofs that all these matters prohibited by Torah, are not wise matters, but they are emptiness and futile...and because of this, the Torah prohibited them.” (Paraphrased, ibid, 11:16) ■

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