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Houston	7:48	Phoenix	7:02
Jerusalem	7:09	Pittsburgh	8:09
Johannesburg	5:12	Seattle	8:19
Los Angeles	7:27	Sydney	4:48
London	8:24	Tokyo	6:19
Miami	7:40	Toronto	8:15
Montreal	7:57	Washington DC	7:54

Weekly Parsha

Bemidbar

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Strange Correspondence between the BeMidbar Census and the Population Reported in Shemot

And their entire number was six hundred three thousand five hundred fifty. (BeMidbar 1:46)

(continued on next page)

Perfection



the Rise of Orthopraxy

RABBI STEVEN PRUZANSKY

A few months ago, football's New York Jets willingly accommodated Jewish fans by moving their home opener from the evening to the early afternoon of the same day. That evening – Yom Kippur – would have presumably found thousands of the Jets faithful in synagogue and not at the Meadowlands or glued to their television sets.

This altruistic act – moving the game out of prime time – speaks volumes about the Jets' sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities (perhaps it even propelled them to a successful season), to the influence of politicians and civic leaders to cause a commotion over trivialities, and to our sense of acceptance in general society.

From their perspective, it was a most decent and generous act. From our perspective, though, it is less salutary, and represented a triumph of Orthopraxy over Orthodoxy.

(continued on page 6)

Fundamentals

BNAI NOAH: THE RELIGION; THE DANGER

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT



We have seen how God gave us a unique religion through Torah. Its unique character derives from the instrument of Halakhah which is not to be found in any other religion. Halakhah removes all religious practices from the realm of symbolic performance and places upon these practices a distinct set of standards and requirements. While every commandment has a philosophical reason for it this reason does not determine the religious practice in specific. It is related to the commandment only in a general way. What does determine the practice in specific, are the propositions and formulae of the Halakhah. These propositions and formulae are of an abstract nature and require great knowledge in order to comprehend them. It is for this reason that the Torah has always been entrusted to the Talmudic scholars of Israel and they alone have determined authentic, religious practice through-

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(Bemidbar cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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Sefer BeMidbar opens with Hashem commanding Moshe to conduct a census of the male population of Bnai Yisrael. The census included all males of age twenty or older. It covered all of the Shevetim – the tribes – with the exception of Shevet Leyve. Moshe performed Hashem's command. Our pasuk relates Moshe's finding. The number of individuals in the census was 603,550. This is the second census of Bnai Yisrael explicitly discussed in the Torah. The first is found in Sefer Shemot. There, Hashem commanded Moshe to collect a coin from every male of age twenty and above.[1] These coins were subsequently melted down and used in the construction of the Mishcan – the Tabernacle. The Torah reports that the coins collected numbered 603,550.[2] This is the same number reported in our parasha. Rashi points out that it is impossible for these two accounts to refer to a single census. The account in Sefer Shemot refers to a census taken prior to the building of the Mishcan. In fact, the coins collected were used in the Mishcan's fabrication. The account in our parasha takes place after the assembly of the Mishcan. This prompts an obvious question. How could these two censuses result in the same number? Both indicated a population of 603,550.

Rashi offers a somewhat complicated answer. In order to be counted in the census, one was required to be of age twenty or older. According to Rashi, this did not mean that one had actually reached his twentieth birthday. Instead, it was required that the person would be age twenty or older that year. The first census was taken in Tishre. Tishre is the first month of the year. Many men did not reach age twenty until later in the year. Nonetheless, these men were included in this census. The second census was taken in Iyar of the same year. By this point, additional men had reached their twentieth birthday. However, these individuals did not affect the outcome of the census. They had been counted in the original census in Tishre.[3]

Nachmanides rejects Rashi's explanation. He raises two objections. First, he does not accept Rashi's basic premise. Rashi posits that the first of the two censuses included all individuals who would become age twenty or older in the twelve months beginning from Tishre. Nachmanides rejects this assumption. He insists that each census included only those who had actually reached their twentieth birthday. Second, it seems that according to Rashi no one died between Tishre and Iyar. If deaths had occurred, the second census would have resulted in a lower number. Nachmanides insists that it is unreasonable to assume that, in a

nation of over 600,000, no one died.

Nachmanides offers a completely different explanation for the identical outcomes of the two censuses. He explains that the outcomes were not at all identical! The two censuses did not count the same group. In the census in our parasha, Moshe was commanded to exclude Shevet Leyve.[4] Hashem's directions to Moshe in Sefer Shemot do not mention the exclusion of Shevet Leyve. Rashi assumes that, although their exclusion is not mentioned, Shevet Leyve did not participate in the contribution of coins described in Sefer Shemot. Nachmanides disagrees and asserts that Shevet Leyve was included in the first census. In other words, the first census resulted in a count of 603,550 including Shevet Leyve. The second census produced the same number. But it did not include Shevet Leyve.[5]

Gershonides raises an obvious objection against Nachmanides' answer. What has Nachmanides gained? His original objective was to explain the strange stability in population. It is only reasonable for some change to have occurred in the nation's population during the course of the year. Nachmanides explains that the nation did grow. However, this growth was not directly reflected in the censuses. This is because the first census was more inclusive. However, Nachmanides' answer creates a different problem. It results in a bizarre coincidence. The two censuses measured different groups. They were separated by an interval of seven months. Yet, they produced the same outcome!

Based on these considerations, Gershonides suggests an alternative explanation. First, he agrees with Rashi that Shevet Leyve was excluded from both censuses. Second, he accepts Nachmanides' assertion that only those who had actually reached their twentieth birthday were counted in either census. Once these premises are accepted, an entirely different approach is required to explain the agreement between the censuses. The Torah is telling us that the population of the nation remained completely stable between these two censuses. The Torah is revealing a miracle. Of course this raises a question. Every miracle has a purpose. What was the purpose of this miracle? Why did Hashem exercise His providence to maintain this remarkable stable population of Bnai Yisrael over a seven month period?

Gershonides answers this question. He observes that in each census the Torah indicates a minimum age of those included. Only those of age twenty or older were counted. He explains that there was also a maximum age for these censuses. Those

(continued on next page)

over sixty were not counted. Nachmanides also agrees with this assertion.[6] Gershonides then makes a simple observation. What would be the normal pattern of population growth for this age group?

In order to answer this question, we must conduct a simple, two-step, analysis. First, we would expect the number of younger members to be greater than the number of older members. The subset of those between twenty and thirty years of age should be far larger than the subset of those between fifty and sixty. This is because the more senior age group will have a higher mortality rate. Second, the relative mortality rates of these two subsets will affect the growth pattern of the entire group. The population of the nation should grow. This is because the number of people entering the group at age twenty should be far greater than the number leaving the group after age sixty.

We are now ready for Gershonides' answer. The Torah states that the population of Bnai Yisrael between the ages of twenty and sixty was stable. Based on the analysis above, we know that this should not occur. Normally, this population should grow. How could stability occur? Stability could only occur if the number of men leaving the group after age sixty was equal to the number entering at age twenty. This would require a remarkably low mortality rate for all men under sixty! The persistently low mortality note would inflate the number of people graduating out of the census group between the first and second census. This is the miracle the Torah is revealing. Hashem protected Bnai Yisrael. He granted them long-life. This blessing is reflected in the two censuses.[7]

The Encampment in the Wilderness as a Representation of the Sinai Revelation

And you should appoint the Leveyim over the Mishcan of Testimony and over its utensils and all associated with it. They will carry the Mishcan and its utensils and will minister to its needs. And around the Mishcan they will camp. (BeMidbar 1:50)

The Mishcan was located in the center of the camp of Bnai Yisrael. The Mishcan was surrounded by the camp of the Leveyim. The other tribes were assigned positions around the perimeter of the Leveyim's camp.

Nachmanides explains that this pattern reflected the encampment around Mount Sinai. The majority of the nation was not permitted to approach the mountain. The elders could ascend with Moshe to the lower levels of the mountain. Only Moshe could climb to the top of the mountain. The Mishcan represented Sinai. The people could not approach the mountain. Neither could the nation camp directly around the Mishcan. This area was reserved for the Leveyim.

The Leveyim were charged with the duty of dedicating themselves to the study and teaching of the Torah. Through committing themselves to this mission, they earned the right to serve in the Mishcan. They attained the status of the elders at Sinai. They could not enter the inner sanctuary of the Mishcan, but they were permitted to camp directly around the structure.[8]

This pattern represents the Torah's outlook upon our relationship with Hashem. Moshe ascended to the top of the mountain. This was because of Moshe's wisdom and righteousness. These qualities enabled Moshe to come as close to Hashem as humanly possible. The elders did not achieve Moshe's level of human perfection. However, they possessed sufficient wisdom to climb the lower slopes of the mountain and draw closer to the presence of Hashem. Those lacking the wisdom and righteousness of Moshe and the elders were required to distance themselves from the mountain.

Maimonides explains that love of and closeness to the Creator are not derived from religious fervor or asceticism. They develop through a profound understanding of the Torah and Hashem's infinite wisdom. It is only through the Torah and the revelations of His wisdom that we can know Hashem. True love of Hashem corresponds with our knowledge and understanding of Hashem and His

Torah.[9]

The encampment symbolized this concept. The various groups were placed around the Mishcan in a specific pattern. Each was assigned a position appropriate to the Torah knowledge associated with the group. This served as a constant reminder of the method by which each of us can draw closer to Hashem. ■

[1] Sefer Shemot 30:12-13.

[2] Sefer Shemot 38:26.

[3] Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) Commentary on Sefer Shemot 30:16.

[4] Sefer BeMidbar 1:49.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 30:12.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 26:64.

[7] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag/Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1998), p 1.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar Introduction.

[9] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 10:6.

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(B'nai Noah continued from page 1)

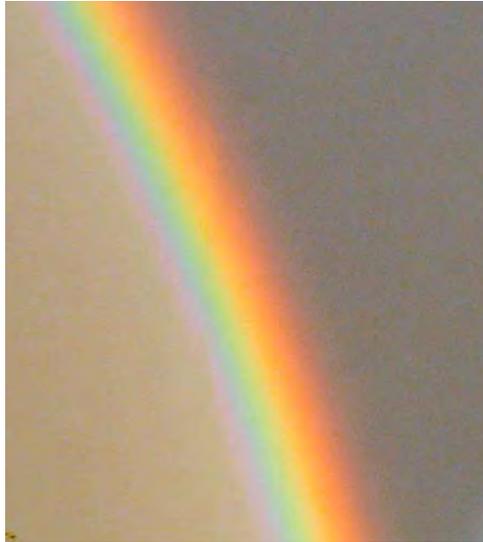
out the generations, from the time of our great teacher Moses to the present generation.

Most of the world has never attained any level of insight into the nature of Halakhah and as a natural result have never really cared much about the Torah's commandments. Religious people of the world could only understand religious rites, ceremonies and practices as symbolic actions. Hence when the world became aware of the Bible and tried to incorporate some of the practices of Torah into their lives they were attracted only to those things that could fit into their symbolic framework. Thus baptism, whose origin was "mikveh", became very popular. The difference between the two is that "mikveh" is an halakhic concept, as is known to anyone who has studied the Tractate of "Mikvaot", and baptism is a symbolic concept, a primitive act. The two are qualitatively differentiated. The symbolic act appeals to one's inner religious feelings while Halakhah must be apprehended by the intellect.

The Torah has shunned symbolic religious rite and not permitted it to be used as a vehicle to serve the Creator, the source of all knowledge and wisdom. Only a performance which engages the mind, man's unique element, his divine image, is fitting to be used as a means of approaching God. Contrary to Christian dogma, the greater the scholar – the closer one is to God. Hence, the most important commandment of the Torah is the study of Torah itself.

This great system which incorporates in itself the most profound ideas of philosophy, psychology, metaphysics, civil law, criminal law, and religious statutes, which has a science all its own, Halakhah, whose depth of knowledge is infinite; this all encompassing system of systems, Torah, has lurking at its side an insidious enemy. This enemy, strangely enough, comes from the quarters of the religious instinct. The archenemy of Torah is idolatry: the unbridled religious instinct, which in a misguided attempt to attain religious security, associates some physical form with the Creator. There is, however, another enemy. The Torah identifies it.

Twice in Deuteronomy (13:1 and 4:2) Moses warns the people against adding to or subtracting from God's commandments. But this commandment has been stressed by the Torah in more than these places. In Leviticus 10:1 we read, "and the sons of Ahron, Nadav and



Avihu, took each one his censer, and they put therein fire and placed incense upon it and they offered before God a strange fire which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." The Torah does not tell us what this "strange fire" was. It is not important; it is important for us to know only that it was something that God "had not commanded them." The sons of Ahron were fine upright righteous people, else they would not have been chosen to bring an offering to God. In their religious zeal they added something of their own which God "had not commanded" and for this addition they were deserving of death. It is a basic tenet of Torah that only God can authorize the religious act. No human being no matter how great has the right to do so.

In Exodus 25:10 - 28:43, the Torah gives instructions for the precise measurements and forms of the holy Tabernacle and its vessels. The Torah then repeats these same instructions when the people carried them out, (Exodus 36:1 - 40:38). We must wonder why the necessity to repeat all these details. When we look carefully we find that there is one verse which is repeated twelve times in the second account. That verse states that they did exactly as God had commanded Moses. The Torah thought it important enough to repeat the entire account in order to demonstrate that not one detail was changed, in that most holy of structures, from the way God commanded Moses.

The Rabbis of the Talmud, who always have the inside track when it comes to Torah, comment on the verse in Numbers 8:3 "and

Ahron did so." They tell us that the Torah is praising Ahron for not changing, not adding anything to the instructions God gave concerning the candelabra. He did not try to be creative, to leave his own mark by adding to God's words. He simply followed precisely the instructions given to him through Moses from God.

The Torah is the most ingenious work that man has at identifying evil, both overt and covert. Painful as it may be, the Torah demands of us that we recognize our own innermost desires for evil, for this is the only way man can advance. In praising Ahron, the Torah teaches that even a great person may have the desire to create or to add to the religious act. This desire stems from man's underlying egomania. He wishes to be great, to be glorious, to leave his own distinctive mark on the world and no where can he accomplish this more than in the sphere of the holiest of all human activities, the religious sphere. The Torah condemns this. It demands of man that he humble himself, that he recognize that only God can create the religious act. True, man has the right to interpret the laws God gave him, provided he adheres to the rules and the methods the Torah prescribes, but to be creative on his own in the religious sphere is strictly prohibited. Even when it comes to interpretation only a qualified Torah scholar has the right to interpret. Torah, like any other area of knowledge is not a free for all. Just as in medical science the opinion of the ignorant person is not trustworthy, so too in Torah. And just as in the above example an ignorant person must subordinate himself to the physician, so too in Torah the ignorant person must subordinate himself to the Torah scholar.

The Torah teaches us in Deuteronomy 17:18-20, that the king must have a Torah which is with him constantly in order that "he learn to fear the Lord his God to keep all the words of His Torah and these statutes in order that he do them." Why is the king different from anyone else? The Torah with its in-depth knowledge of the human soul knows that the more recognition a human being has from his fellow man, the greater is the danger of his falling prey to his own egomania. Accordingly, the Torah states, "so that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren." The king must have at his side a constant reminder of the Creator, of his own fallibility, of his need for God's Torah to constantly direct him. The Rabbis tell us that the king's Torah must be

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written under the direct supervision of the Sanhedrin, the scholars of the Torah. The king must realize that he must subordinate himself to the authority of the Sanhedrin when it comes to matters of interpreting Torah.

The true religion is difficult and demanding. In giving the Torah God has given man a great challenge, but He has also given man a great opportunity. Man can perfect himself and experience great beauty through the truths of God's system. The Torah has already made it difficult by not permitting the religious act to be of a symbolic character, as it is in other religions. God's institution of Halakhah does not permit the mere satisfaction of the emotions but demands the engagement of the mind, the divine element. The Torah has made it even more difficult by not permitting man to be active in creating the religious performance. The reward, however, for adherence to the Torah system, is the true recognition of God as the only authority. This directs man towards true personal humility, the greatest of human traits, as the Torah says of our teacher Moses, "and the man Moses was more humble than any other man on the face of the earth, (Numbers 12:13)."

What does this mean for B'nai Noah practically and theoretically? We should note that while very few of the 613 commandments have made their way into the B'nai Noah system as mandatory, the above one did. The Ben Noah is not permitted to add or to create any religious ceremonies or rituals. While this is not part of the seven societal mandates, it is incumbent on every Ben Noah. It is considered such a serious violation that it is punishable by death, not by a human court, but by God Himself.

On a practical level this means a Ben Noah must avoid introducing any kind of ceremony or symbolic act, be it of a personal nature or related to institutions such as marriage, divorce, birth of a child, etc. Does this mean the Ben Noah can do nothing of a religious nature? Most certainly not! The Ben Noah can and should be actively involved in the study of Torah pertaining to him which is infinitely vast and deep. He may, and in certain instances must, pray in accordance with the manner which the Torah prescribes. He may voluntarily perform almost any mitzvah, commandment, provided he receives instruction first from the proper Rabbinic authorities. He is prohibited to take upon himself some performance of his own liking even if, according to his own understanding, it is supported by the Bible. He must consult with the scholars of Torah and follow

their ruling. "According to the Torah which they teach you and the judgment which they tell you, shall you do. You shall not turn from the word which they tell you to the right or to the left (Deuteronomy 17:11,12)."

The idea of Israel being a "light unto the nations" is clearly in reference to Torah and the proper performance of its commandments. Anyone who devises his own religious practices is either denying this principle or is maintaining that God's Torah system is not alive and thriving today. But even worse, by catering to his own egoistic fantasies this person brings destruction to the B'nai Noah movement, for then others too will feel justified in inventing their own religious practices. Then the B'nai Noah movement would become reduced to a man-made religion. It would become a religion which satisfies man's desire to say how he should worship God which is the very core of idolatry. It is for this reason the above verse in Deuteronomy is so imperative. The Rabbis tell us that even if one is convinced he is right and the scholars are wrong he must follow the ruling of the scholars, as it is stated, "you shall not turn from the word which they tell you to the right or to the left." If a person is himself a scholar he has the right to maintain he is correct on a theoretical plane, but in practice he must conform to the ruling of the authoritative body of scholars.

How wise are the ways of Torah and how beautifully did the Torah, with this one injunction, protect itself against its greatest adversary, the man-made religion, while at the same time it did not limit the intellectual freedom of the individual. This injunction applies equally to the Ben Noah and the Ben Israel. The Ben Noah, however, has a more difficult task. Since he is not commanded to do all the mitzvot he must be very careful when he goes about selecting a religious performance. His religious instinct must come under the supremacy of his Torah knowledge. This is difficult and very humbling, but his reward will be the inner joy he experiences when he realizes that in this way he is proclaiming God as the only One to be worshiped and the only One who can authorize worship. He submits not to his own personal whims, nor to the will of any human being, but to the divine will of the Creator who stated in His Torah that one's religious practice must be based on the authority of Torah scholarship. If we can follow this lofty principle, overcome our own egoistic drives, and humble ourselves before God's Torah, we can then be successful at the greatest of all human achievements, the sanctification of God's holy Name. ■



Letters

from our

READERS



Tehillim IV

Rabbi: This week I must commence by making a retraction. Last week I misunderstood a reader's email where he cited a midrash, and also suggested his own idea. I erred thinking that his entire email (his idea included) was sourced in Midrash. He clarified my error.

In the end, we agree that there is no source for the notion that "Acts of the living affect the spiritual level of the dead." Rashi makes this clear on Isaiah 64:3 where he quotes the Sages who teach that "No eye has seen it [Olam Haba] except for God." That being so, man cannot suggest what occurs in the afterlife, i.e., that the living can affect the dead. We simply don't know. ■

Ego & Irresponsibility

Writer: Kabbalistically speaking, there is always a reason – and a very good one – why we are in a certain relationship. As long as it's still unclear to us why we are in the relationship, the job is not finished. Every relationship, including friendships, is here to teach us something very deep...one of the greatest opportunities.

Rabbi: Free will enables poor choices, including choosing friends. We would do better without certain relationships that hurt us. Assuming there "meaning" in all relationships – and in all events – is irresponsible and egotistical: "There's a divine plan in all my life's events" one thinks. "I need not worry about my decisions." That is foolish, and Torah teaches the opposite: Abbaye said, "Woe to the wicked...woe to his neighbor". (Succot 56b) Abbaye intends to veer is from relationships that can damage us. He does not seek to justify such encounters. Nor must you. ■

While Orthodoxy literally means “correct belief” but in actuality encompasses an entire range of thought and behavior that is regulated by Torah, Orthopraxy (“correct action”) is much more limited in scope, requiring only the adherence to certain behavioral norms without any semblance of philosophical commitment to the system from which such behavioral norms emerged.

Obviously, some of the obsession with sports is nothing less than silliness; who wins or loses – or even plays – does not matter at all in the real world, and sports and other forms of entertainment are just diversions from the more significant endeavors in which we are engaged.

What happens, then, when the diversions become the essence, or at least a critical component, of a person’s life – so much so that one’s thoughts on Yom Kippur might have otherwise been on the game and not on life, family, health, sustenance and the fate of the world?

That is a sad commentary on the spiritual state of some of our fellow Jews, and begs the question: Is it any less contemptible to spend three hours on erev Yom Kippur fascinated by grown men pounding each other in pursuit of moving an oval-shaped pigskin across a goal line than it would be to do the same on Yom Kippur night?

Not really.

The only difference is that there would be no technical violation of the rules of Judaism to so while away one’s time on erev Yom Kippur. Nonetheless, the broader and more crucial questions are: Where was the person’s head, and heart, at that most solemn time? Where were his thoughts? Were they on repentance and introspection – a matter of the soul? Or were they just on weathering the impending 25-hour fast – a matter of the body?

The answer is clear, as it was in Isaiah’s time when he decried the insincerity of fasting without repentance, of the tendency of some Jews to underscore some deeds and not others because none was internalized as the will of Hashem or as divine service:

“They pretend to seek Me every day, they pretend to desire knowledge of My ways . they inquire of Me about righteous laws, as if they desire the nearness of God” (Isaiah 58:2).

The Orthoprax are an informal, incognito group of unknown size and scope who, for the most part, practice halachic norms but do not really believe in God (or that He chose us as the nation that would carry His moral message to mankind) or understand what they are doing. They might not even believe in the divine

origin of the Torah, but identify themselves with the Orthodox community for social, ethnic, cultural or even aesthetic reasons. We usually do not know who they are – after all, it is a matter of the heart – but we do know how and where to find them.

They are the Jews who will come to shul – but barely daven. They will perfunctorily mouth a few words here and there while engaged in a persistent but likely not-very-stimulating conversation with their neighbors (people they would not talk to outside of shul for more than five minutes the rest of the week).

No wonder the Zohar (Parshat Terumah) labels people who talk in shul as atheists; they sit in the House of God but are oblivious to His presence. The words of the davening are either unfamiliar to them or do not resonate with them. Their only contribution to decorum is the occasional shushing of their children, a vulgar act of hypocrisy that, as Faranak Margolese noted in her book *Off the Derech*, is a major factor in turning off children to the life of Torah.

The Orthoprax attend shul because it is a social expectation, and their conduct in shul reflects it.

They are the Jews who are nominally shomerrei Shabbat – they would never drive to shul, for example – but they will look for ways to swim or play tennis or baseball on Shabbat or encourage their children to do so, or leave the television on (or have the ubiquitous housekeeper turn it on) or read business newspapers on Shabbat, or perhaps even sneak in a business phone call or two when no one is looking.

Their children will text each in stealth (texting being the preferred method of communication even between teenagers who are sitting next to each other). Their divine service is external; if no human being sees them sin, it is as if it hasn’t happened.

That state of affairs was well known to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai, who admonished his disciples that “their awe of Heaven should parallel their awe of men” (Berachot 28b), the latter being more pervasive and substantial. The Orthoprax will “observe” Shabbat – they will not mow their lawns or drive to the beach – but Shabbat as a day of communion with the Creator is almost non-existent.

They are the Jews who will dress the part – as if, indeed, there is such a thing as “Jewish dress” beyond tzitzit and kippah for men and modest clothes for all. But they will conduct

their business without integrity, stealing, conniving, cheating Jew and non-Jew alike, underreporting their taxes, hording with contractors after the work is completed, stiffing their employees of their due wages – and often professing that they are acting perversely for the glory of Torah or to benefit a favored charity.

The Orthoprax will do good works, but those are socially useful and divorced from any sense of divine worship.

Most recently, Orthopraxy underlies such phenomena as the female clergy, the Partnership Minyanim (in which women chant portions of the davening, and a quorum of both ten men and ten women are needed to begin services), and the integration of Christians into special worship services.

These innovations blur or cross the line that defines halachic practice, and all, on some level, conflate self-worship with divine worship. All seek to make halacha “user friendly” and to render the Torah into putty that can be molded as the user desires – the Torah as akin to the American Constitution, which, Thomas Jefferson warned, could be twisted and shaped by unscrupulous judges “as an artist shapes a ball of wax.”

Note how the proliferation of Orthopraxy transcends all the traditional (and artificial) divisions in Orthodox life. It compasses right wing and left wing, modern, centrist and yeshivish, haredi and non-haredi alike. And one might well contend that all the deviations listed above trample on the halacha and the sacred institutions of Jewish life, and therefore strip the “ortho” out of that “praxy” – they are not correct practices at all. But that contention is only partially true.

There are those of us who have become quite proficient – crafty is a better word – in manipulating the sources, in finding obscure opinions that, interpreted innovatively, tend to justify precisely what we want to do. Such people no longer desire to ascertain the will of God, but rather to satisfy their own inclinations while remaining in “technical” compliance with halacha, very broadly construed. It is as if they have transformed the Almighty into a divine caddy who carries for us a bagful of clubs known as “halacha,” and they reserve the right to remove any club when they so desire, and use them any way in which they desire. Most lacking is the concept of the Jew as the servant of God.

The Orthoprax wish to remain part of the community, relying on general notions of tolerance and Western concepts of religion as a

(continued on next page)

(Orthopraxy continued from page 6)

Perfection

“private matter.” And they do remain part of the community – often integral parts of the community – but a community no longer defined by commitment to the fundamental principles of Judaism, by subservience to God, or by eternal norms and values.

It is a social community, ethnically based and often geographically defined, but not a covenantal community. It is a community in which people perform actions that are roughly similar, but their hearts are not united. We certainly retain common enemies – Ahmadinejad is uninterested in these fine distinctions – but the nation of Israel should stand for something greater than that some evil people hate us.

Is there a value in Orthopraxy – in remaining part of a community of behavioral norms even if the philosophical commitment is lacking? Some point to a cryptic passage in the Yerushalmi, and in the Pesikta, citing, in Hashem’s name: “Would that they abandon Me and still observe My Torah!” As some explain, it is therefore better to observe the mitzvot even with a lack of faith than to observe only if fully committed. Undoubtedly, there is some merit to this – at least the individual practitioner remains tethered to the Jewish community, however tenuously. But that understanding is grievously flawed.

Better understood, the passage (a rhetorical question) seems to be admonishing us that it is impossible to abandon God and still observe the Torah for long; we can indulge ourselves for a time, but eventually even the practice of mitzvot will wither without an internal commitment.

Or Chazal are teaching us stages of development: people may begin the observance of mitzvot without a full ideological commitment, or must continue even if such commitment occasionally wanes – but eventually commitment and practice must coalesce, and the observance of mitzvot must mature from mere deeds to the development of the complete Torah personality. If not, then our divine service remains stunted, and not a little phony.

Worse, our youth are very sensitive to this double game, and some become disenchanted. They internalize the corrupt idea that in Judaism externals count for everything and sincerity for nothing. Like Esav asking his father halachic questions in a fatuous attempt to demonstrate his piety, our children can learn to play the adult game just as well as we can: emptily mouth the words of tefilla, read parsha sheets at the Shabbat table while clueless to what they are reading, or internalize the idea that the most harmful aspect of sin is not the sin

itself but getting caught. Once learned, that approach is not easily forgotten, until the child either finds better role models or discards his commitment entirely.

There is a bright side to all this, or at least elements of comfort. The rise of Orthopraxy is on some level just a reflection of the human condition. The criticism applies to everyone, bar none. We are all flawed and all sinners, and the revelation of the flaws of public figures – even religious figures – is usually just a matter of time.

“For there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he [always] does good and never sins” (Kohelet 7:20) – and yet we are still stunned and shaken when it happens.

We must distinguish, though, between personal frailties and systemic breaches. The “righteous” sinner (an oxymoron, but bear with me) stumbles because of human nature – an inability to control his instinctual drives – but

confesses his sins, admits his guilt and does not seek to rationalize his wrongdoing.

There is, however, a “wicked” sinner, as well, who protests his innocence, who claims he has been misunderstood, who defends his actions on grounds that others are doing it, or, worst of all, that what he did is not sinful at all because the halacha changed, or should change, or he found an arcane but lenient source allowing him to do what he wants to do. The former is the position in which most of us find ourselves, and which is addressed by the commandment of repentance; the latter is a systemic violation for which there is no simple rectification. It is an act of spiritual gerrymandering by the sinner who has carved out for himself exemptions from halacha.

How do we triumph over Orthopraxy and reconnect our divine service to God? We can – must – infuse our mitzvot with a recognition of their divine imperative by returning to fundamentals. We should study ourselves, and teach our children, not only “how” we do things but also “why.” We all must learn the details of the mitzvot – from Shabbat to Pesach, from kashrut to monetary integrity, from the laws of Chanukah to the laws of Tisha B’Av – but also the framework of those mitzvot, how they combine to create a faithful, moral, decent servant of Hashem.

We must refine our davening so that – as Chazal ruled – it is better to say less with kavanah (a concentrated focus) than more without kavanah, and lose the notion that our prayer obligation is satisfied through the daily recitation of a certain quota of words. We must restore a sense of reverence and sanctity to the shul, or stay outside until we are ready. And before performing any mitzvah, we must pronounce, figuratively if not literally, that we are “ready and prepared to fulfill the commandment of our Creator.”

Kabbalat HaTorah (the acceptance of the Torah) required naaseh v’nishma – the commitment “to do” preceded the commitment “to learn.” It preceded it, but did not vitiate it. Naaseh cannot endure unless there is an ongoing nishma – and Talmud Torah must encompass not only what we should do but also what we should think and how we should feel.

The greatest of all orthodoxies – those correct beliefs that govern our lives – is, then, humility – humility that will enable us to absorb the divine values of Torah and not those of modern man, and recreate a nation of thinking, rational, wise, intelligent, good and ethical servants of God, a light unto the nations. ■

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Holidays



A NIGHT OF JOY

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Judaism is very meticulous about the manner in which it celebrates Festivals. Thus, we eat Matzah on Pesach because it recalls the suddenness of the Exodus which happened so quickly there was no time for the dough to rise. On Sukkot, we leave our homes and establish residence in the Succah to remember, "In Sukkot did I house the children of Israel when I took them out of Egypt." Hashem protected us and provided for all our needs in the wilderness. Dwelling in a fragile hut for seven days facilitates our concentration on these significant ideas. A question can be raised with regard to Simchat Torah-the Holiday of rejoicing with the Torah. The purpose of the day is to give expression to the profound feelings of joy in the study and observance of Torah. However, the timing of this holiday seems strange. We observe it on Shmini Atzeret, which is the eighth day of Sukkot. It would seem that Simchat Torah ought to be connected to Shavuot for the theme of this Holiday is the giving of the Torah. The purpose of the Exodus was to fashion a unique nation, which would govern its private and public affairs according to the commandments and philosophy of the Torah. Our love of Torah is so great that we anticipate the day of Revelation by counting the forty-nine days from Pesach to Shavuot. Why then don't we sing and dance and rejoice with the Torah on Shavuot? This would, at first glance, seem like a more appropriate time than Shmini Atzeret.

Judaism insists on honesty and truthfulness and frowns upon displays of shallow emotionalism. Profound sentiments of joy do not come easily. How often do we feel so happy that we just want to burst out in song and dance? We need something personal and compelling like a major family simcha to arouse powerful feelings of joy. Is it reasonable to expect us to get so excited over a

Book containing commandments, prohibitions and exhortations to act with justice and compassion that we want to sing and dance with it for hours and hours? Indeed it is-but these emotions must be cultivated over a long period of time. The goal of Torah observance is not mere obedience, but joyful exuberance with the lifestyle of Kedusha (Holiness). Joy in the service of Hashem is the highest ideal. The Rambam says (Laws of Lulav 8:18) "The rejoicing one experiences in the performance of Mitzvot and love of G-d who commanded them is a great service. Whoever holds himself back from this simcha is fit to be punished as the Torah says, 'Because they failed to serve Hashem with joy and a good heart'."

The joy of which the Rambam speaks does not come quickly or easily. It requires effort, devotion and the ability to withdraw from superficial pleasures. You must put your heart and soul into the study of Torah and then you will appreciate its great beauty and fall in love with it.

Shavuot marks the beginning of our relationship with Torah. This is the time when our ancestors demonstrated their faithfulness by saying, "we will do and we will listen." The Creator had made us an offer we could not refuse. We knew that Torah is the greatest treasure. However, the Torah does not magically transform us. It takes a great deal of dedicated effort to achieve the emotional joy and satisfaction that the Torah promises. On Shavuot we renew that commitment. Many observe the beautiful custom of learning through the night to demonstrate their willingness to part with the pleasure of sleep in order to gain more Torah knowledge. It is worthwhile to pause and consider the deeper significance of this practice. The Mitzvah of Talmud Torah is not bound by time or

place. We read in the Shema, "And you shall teach them to your children and discuss them when you sit in your house and when you travel on the road, when you lie down and when you arise." Although there is never a time when one is exempt from study, the night assumes a special significance in the performance of this Mitzvah. The Rambam says (Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:13) "Even though it is a Mitzvah to learn by day and by night a person only learns the bulk of his wisdom by night. Therefore, one who seeks to merit the Crown of Torah should guard all his night and not waste any one of them with sleep, eating and drinking, talking and the like, but only with the study of Torah and matters of wisdom."

At first glance this is difficult to comprehend. If study is properly done what difference does it make in which part of the day it takes place? Would any scientist assert that a certain theory of his was formulated during the night in order to enhance its validity?

I would like to suggest an explanation for this tantalizing Rambam. The daytime hours are universally regarded as the time for "work". One naturally feels responsible to be engaged in some gainful employment during the day. Night, however, is the time that people associate with self gratification. You've put in a long day and now it's time to relax, unwind and have fun. It's easier to learn by day because then your work ethic is operative and you feel you must do something constructive with your time. Learning by day represents the service of obligation and responsibility. Learning at night represents the service of love. The psychic energy which is searching for fun and pleasure finds its greatest satisfaction through immersion in Torah. Nothing in the world is more enjoyable and deeply satisfying than a profound Torah insight. When we stay up and learn on the night of Shavuot we express our realization that Torah is not a burden but is, rather, the greatest joy.

We do understand why Simchat Torah could not be observed on Shavuot. The relationship has just begun and there is so much work to do. Singing and dancing will come later. We rejoice on Shmini Atzeret because that is when we complete the annual Torah reading cycle. We thereby affirm that one who is faithful and constant in his studies will uncover the beauty of Torah. Our relationship to Torah is framed by profound commitment to the hard work of studying the Torah and performing the commandments as well as a realization that the ultimate goal of our service to Hashem is a feeling of sublime joy. May we merit attaining it.

Chag Shavuot Sameach. ■



demonstrates that the rest of the Torah is untrue, and they would use this argument to sway the minds of the Jewish people into questioning the truth of Torah. What makes the aseres hadibros susceptible to this line of reasoning? Rashi explains that it

was the only part of Torah transmitted directly from God to Bnai Yisrael. How does one then derive the rest of the Torah to be untrue? What Rashi is telling us is that the singling out of the aseres hadibros, according to the minim, is being done to demonstrate its higher degree of authenticity. In other words, the only reason Chazal isolate the aseres hadibros is that it was the only portion that was communicated directly from Hashem to Moshe and it is, therefore, the only portion whose authenticity could be verified. According to the heretics, once Moshe became involved in communicating the rest of the Torah, the possibility of deviating from God's words is a very real one, leaving the authenticity of entire rest of the Torah, as it was transmitted, questionable. Chazal saw this issue as having the potential to influence the masses, so they chose to bar the inclusion of the aseres hadibros in our daily tefila.

It is important to clarify the intent of Chazal when introducing one pasuk over another in different halachic activities (such as tefila). There is no concept of superiority. Rather, Chazal recognize that certain ideas need to be conveyed during specific activities, and they incorporate those pesukim that best express these ideas into said activities. Therefore, while the objective of including aseres hadibros in tefila would be to convey certain ideas, the potential distortion that would emerge prevented it from being included.

The Rambam (Responsa 46) was asked about a minhag that had developed where people stood during the reading of the aseres hadibros. He vociferously argued against permitting such a minhag, explaining that to stand for the aseres hadibros during the reading of the Torah would be giving too much prominence to this specific part of the Torah, an extension of tarmoes haminim. According to the Rambam, standing up for the aseres hadibros correlate with a "loss of faith," leading a person down the road to denying the Divine origin of Torah. How did he come to this conclusion? Looking at the Talmud's case, the Rambam theorized that any action that would differentiate the

(continued on next page)

RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG



STANDING

for the

Aseres
Hadibros

In the vast majority of Ashkenazi minyanim, the prevalent minhag is for the tzibur to stand during the reading of the aseres hadibros on Shavuot. This minhag, at first glance, has a certain majestic appeal to it--after all, what could more appropriate than rising as one while the event at Sinai unfolds and God speaks to Bnai Yisrael? And yet, there is a riveting halachic debate as to the merits of this action. The spectrum of rabbinical opinions itself might come as a shock to many of its most passionate adherents.

The Mishna (Tamid 5:1), in reviewing the daily tefila of the kohanim in the Bais Hamikdash, explains how the kohanim would (after barchu) read the aseres hadibros, the parshiyos of shema, and then move into "emes veyatziv." The Talmud (Berachos 12a) explains that Chazal attempted to incorporate the aseres hadibros into tefila outside the Bais Hamikdash as well. However, this was rejected due to the issue of "tarmoes haminim." Rashi (ibid "mipnei...") and the Rambam (Perush Mishnayos Tamid, ibid) both explain that "tarmoes haminim" refers to an attack heretics would direct towards the average Jew based on the seemingly "favored" inclusion of the aseres hadibros in tefila. From their perspective, the fact that this portion of Torah was chosen

(Standing continued from page 10)

Holidays

aseres hadibros was imbued with the character of taromes haminim. There is no specific halachic action per se that is forbidden. Instead, it is bringing about this result that is the halachic problem.

And yet, Jews stand up for the aseres hadibros.

It happens to be that numerous other Rishonim and early Acharonim noted the prevalence of Jews standing for the reading of aseres hadibros, seemingly disregarding the Rambam's teshuva. Modern day poskim, such as R' Ovadia Yosef (Yechave Daas 1:29, 6:8), explain that it was possible that many of these Torah luminaries did not see the teshuva of the Rambam—had they read it, surely they would have agreed. Other poskim, however, offer different solutions for justifying the minhag.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (Harirei Kedem Vol 2) takes up the contradiction between the near universal practice of standing for aseres hadibros and the position of the Rambam. He explains how there are two different taamim (cantillations) when reading the aseres hadiros—taam elyon (where they are divided based on the commandment itself) and taam tachton (where they follow the division of the pesukim in the Torah). According to some poskim, taam elyon would only be employed on Shavuos (today, most shuls are accustomed to having taam elyon used all three times aseres hadibros are read). Why just Shavuos? The public reading of the Torah is generally considered a kiyum in talmud Torah, a fulfillment of the publication of learning Torah to the tzibur. However, on Shavuos, the reading of the Torah portion takes on another dimension. On that day, the revelation at Sinai took place, so the reading of the Torah portion becomes a remembrance of the event at Sinai. Therefore, taam elyon is used, signifying this kriya as one of zecher. In other words, the Rav is saying that the kriyas haTorah on Shavuos is of a different halachic nature. Since the very reading itself contains the character of zecher, standing up for the reading, like Bnai Yisrael stood around Har Sinai, would be in line with the theme. It is not that the content of the aseres hadibros is more important—rather, the event at Sinai, which Shavuos commemorates, is being “recreated.” The Rav then explains that the Rambam most likely never used the taam elyon. Since there would be no difference in the kriya between Shavuos and the other times the aseres hadibros is recited, standing up for this portion would, by definition, have the character of heresy attached to it. Sitting all year around, and then standing up, without any change in the halachic character of the kriya, is the problematic result the Rambam sought to avoid. It would seem though that the

Rambam would agree with the Rav's approach that adding the element of remembrance to the kriya would remove the problem of taromes haminim.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe OC 4:22) offers a different justification for the common minhag today. He explains that the original concern about the influence of the minim on Jews with aseres hadibros was not a general concern about heretical influence. Most Jews would never come to the conclusion proposed by the minim. According to Rav Moshe, it is self evident that the ideas of the aseres hadibros are the reason for its inclusion in tefila, not any sense of greater authenticity. In fact, Rav Moshe surmises that the aseres hadibros had been included in tefila even outside the Bais Hamikdash for many years. However, at a certain point in time, philosophical attacks took hold and indeed swayed some Jews. As a result, it was no longer included. In other words, Rav Moshe maintained that the concern was situational, that only when minim would actually pose a threat would the problem emerge. He goes one step further, writing how the very halacha introduced in the Talmud was limited to reading the aseres hadibros in tefila. There is a specific categorical construct to the prohibition, and this being the case, there is no reason to assume it extends to a different activity, such as standing. Therefore, according to Rav Moshe,

one may stand for this kriya all year round.

Rav Moshe, Rav Ovadia Yosef, and most other poskim indicate that even if one is follows the opinion of the Rambam, he should still stand when everyone else in the minyan stands for kriyas aseres hadibros. Since it has become the established minhag, it would be inappropriate to publicly deviate from the custom of the tzibur. However, in a minyan where only a few people stand, it is acceptable to remain seated.

Overall, it is clear that standing for the kriya of aseres hadibros is a very controversial activity that is nonetheless accepted as the norm the world over. But like all other areas of halachic performance, a person's thinking is what validates the activity, and to distort the concept by this kriya could lead to an uprooting of basic tenets of Jewish faith. It is critical that when standing up during this kriya, one should reflect upon its significance as one of the greatest, most momentous events in our history. The reading of the aseres hadibros marks our acceptance of the Torah as the guideline by which we live our lives, the blueprint for every minute of every day. If one would stand, it cannot be in recognition of the content of the aseres hadibros, since that content is no more valid than any other kriya we perform throughout the year and is merely a small portion of a greater whole. It should be done to show our acceptance of kol HaTorah kulah. ■

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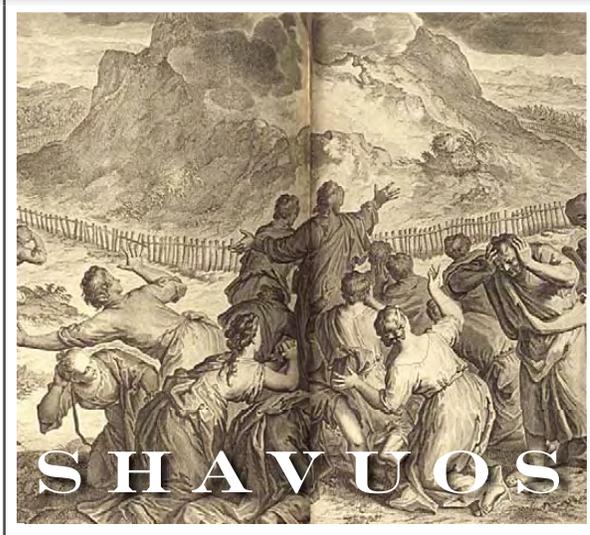
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Holidays



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

"...Behold I will cut a treaty, against all your people I will do wonders that have never been created in all the land and with all the nations, and all the people that you are among will see the acts of God that they are fearful, that I do with you." (Exod. 34:10)

"And God said to Moses, 'Behold I come to you in thick cloud, in order that the people hear when I speak with you, and also in you they shall believe forever..." (Exod. 19:9)

"And it was when Moses descended from Mount Sinai and the two tablets of testimony were in Moses hand when he descended from the mountain, and Moses did not know that his face beamed with light when He spoke with him. And Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, and behold his face beamed with light, and they feared to draw close to him." (Exod. 34:29,30)

In the book of Joshua (10:12) Radak says that the words "I will do wonders that have never been created in all the land and with all the nations" refer to the miracle of God causing the sun and moon to stand still in Joshua's days. Radak says, "acts of God that they are fearful" refer to the miracle of Moses' face shining with light. Through these two miracles, God demonstrates His sustained providence over the Jews: from Moses through Joshua. Thus, miracles with similar objectives are placed in a single verse. And miracles at times may serve to endorse leaders. For a miracle does not happen on account of someone who violates God, but

someone completely deserving of God's feats.

We learn, that upon Moses' descent from Mount Sinai, God deemed it essential that a miracle accompany Moses for the remainder of his life, in the form of his face beaming light. What was this necessity?

God also said, "Behold I come to you in thick cloud, in order that the people hear when I speak with you, and also in you they shall believe forever" referring to His revelation at Sinai. The purpose was so the people witness God, His selection of Moses as His prophet, and remain loyal to Moses forever. How can loyalty to Moses endure "forever", since Moses died? Of course, it means that Moses will be eternally accepted as God's prophet to mankind. However, even though the people attest to Moses' selection by God and communion with Him on Sinai, will they accept all of Moses' 'future' words as divine?

Revelation: Two Goals

These questions, and verses above point to the two purposes of Revelation at Sinai, what we are celebrating on this Shavuot holiday. That is exactly what God said, "in order that the people hear when I speak with you, and also in you they shall believe forever". God desired that Sinai act as, 1) a proof of His existence and communication with Moses (man); and 2) an eternal endorsement of Moses, upon whom all future Torah truths depend.

We cannot know what God is: for we can detect only that perceived by our five, biological senses, and God is not detectable by any of them. This concealment of God's true nature from our senses, and ultimately, our minds, is conveyed by the words "Behold I come to you

in thick cloud". Cloud is that which conceals other things. God wished to convey the impossibility of man to know God's essence. Even Moses could not know God's essence, "...for man cannot know Me while alive". (Exod. 33:20) Moses too tells the Jews many times "you saw no form [of God]" on Sinai.

The second part of the verse says "in order that the people hear when I speak with you" teaching that God's intent in revelation is to prove His existence. And the last part, "and also in you they shall believe forever" is to sustain the system, by endorsing its primary teacher. As a Rabbi once taught, Maimonides uses the term "yesode", or "fundamental" in connection with only two principles: 1) God's existence, and 2) prophecy. (Maimonides' Fundamentals of Torah; first word of both 1:1, 4:1) It is these two truths that are indispensable for Judaism: 1) the truth of a Creator, and 2) His communication with man. For without God, impossible as it is, nothing can be, and without communication, there can be no adherence to His word, His "religion". How precise is the Torah that this single verse above formulates what the true religion must contain. And this was the objective of Sinai: to commence Judaism by instilling in man the knowledge of an unknowable Creator, who communicates His will to mankind. (Joseph Albo agrees to these two fundamentals, adding Reward and Punishment as his third.)

But there is more to this verse. Let us read it again: "And God said to Moses, 'Behold I come to you in thick cloud, in order that the people hear when I speak with you, and also in you they shall believe forever..." This also teaches that God desires to work within man's frame of reason. He creates revelation in order that humans will arrive at truths based on reasoning. The words "in order that the people hear when I speak with you, and also in you they shall believe forever" that God orchestrates His plan on how man perceives it. God works only with man's intellect. And we then must work with this intellect to perceive God's plan for mankind.

Revelation teaches God's desire that man obtain "proof" for religion. This explains why He created an undeniable event, where intelligence emanated from fire: the only element in which known life perishes. Intelligence emanating from fire teaches that the Source of that intelligence must not be of Earthly origin, thereby establishing an undeniable proof of a supernatural, intelligent existence.

In essence, God is complying with the human design He had cast years ago in Adam and Eve, His perfect will being unchanging for us today.

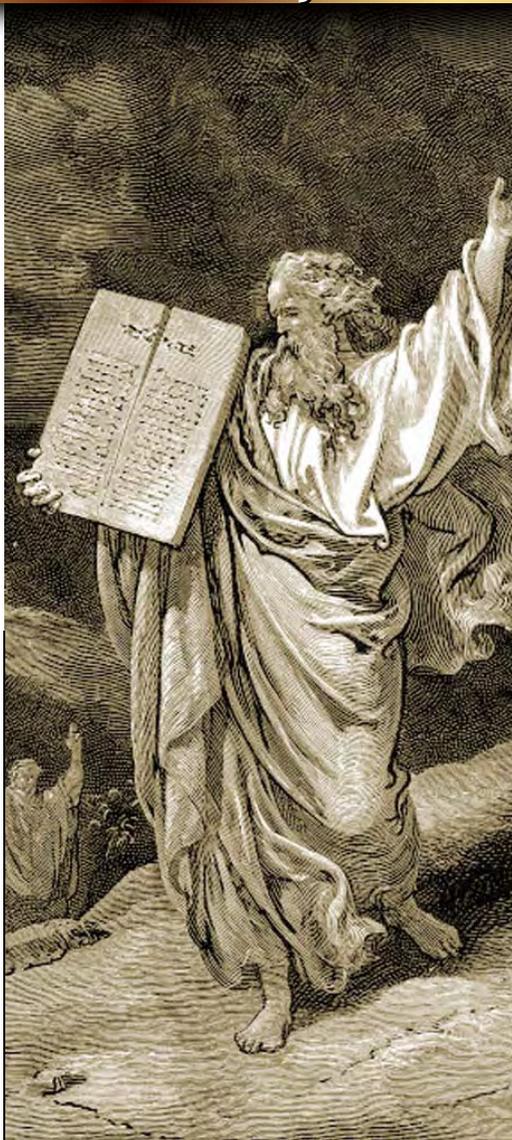
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He granted man intelligence, and demands that man use this faculty. And when God desires man to apprehend something, He desires this apprehension be based on what is provable to human senses, reason, or trust in the prophets. Sinai conforms. It is via these three vehicles alone that Maimonides states we view information as true:

“It is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things: 1) clear proof deriving from man’s reasoning; 2) what is perceived through one of the five senses; 3) what is received from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said “The simple believes everything”. (Prov. 14:15) (Maimonides Letter to the Community of Marseille)

Returning now to our initial questions: why God did create the beams of light on Moses’ face? Would the Jews accept all of Moses’ words subsequent to Revelation as truly divine, or as Moses’ invention?

To satisfy the third criterion above, God desired a continued demonstration that He endorsed all that Moses taught. All events subsequent to Sinai were not received at Sinai in that first, incomplete Torah. Otherwise, Moses could not have questioned God’s later actions, as he would already know the answers, had the entire Five Books been given to him. Additionally, there would be no free will for any person, as the entire nation would know their future sins, before they committed them. Therefore, as Moses would be instructing the Jews in God’s name, with commands not received at Sinai but only later, a method of divine substantiation was required, lest some Jews accuse Moses of writing his own Torah. The ‘continuous’ miracle of the beams of light did just that: it demonstrated beyond any doubt that Moses continually acted and taught on behalf of God, long after Sinai. Had Moses deviated from God’s words, God would have killed Moses, and would not have bestowed miracles upon his face. Miracles mean that the Creator of miracles endorses the recipient. This continued into Joshua’s era, when God halted the sun and moon.



Revelation at Sinai proves God’s existence and His prophesy to man, thereby proving Judaism to be the only divinely inspired religion, as all other imposter religions are based on the lies of one or a few men. Revelation was manifested precisely in a manner that satisfies the human mind beyond all doubt, since God’s desire is that man engages his intellect to “prove” what is real, and not simply follow blind faith, which proves nothing. “And God said to Moses, ‘Behold I come to you in thick cloud, in order that the people hear when I speak with you, and also in you they shall believe forever...’”

Application

This Shavuos holiday, let’s obtain and apply the true lesson of Revelation on Mount Sinai: God desires man to use reason in all areas of

his life, starting with his and her Judaism. We all must cease from our fear of the masses and peers, and their approval: for if we all live for others, no one lives for himself! And who determines if other Jews are correct: their numbers? Their reputations? If so, numbers exist in far greater quantity within Islam and Christianity. Do we then say those religions are correct, and Judaism is false? We also witness famous people who err. So, reputations and masses are no measure of truth. What we must use as our barometer are God’s words, and those of the Prophets and Writings.

From God’s intent of Revelation to prove His existence via human reason, to the successful outcome when the Jews admitted they witnessed God’s created voice (Deut. 5:21), Shavuos addresses the central lesson of our lives: to engage our reason. Minds far greater than anyone today, from Maimonides, Saadia Gaon, Rashi, Rabbi Bachya, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Sforno, all attest to this primary mandate from God. Therefore, when you hear notions in the name of Judaism that are inexplicable, mystical, demanding faith and no reason like pop-Kabbalistic notions, or notions that contradict Judaism’s fundamentals, be not impressed by their popularity, emotional appeal, or their author. You must be told a source, and you must see it...and not just any source, but any notion must be rooted in only Torah, Prophets or Writings. And the explanation you accept must fit the words without force, “Pshuto K’mashmaoh”. The Rabbis teach that Torah verses cannot teach outside the confines of the plain textual meaning, “Ain mikra yotzei miday pshuto” (Tal. Sabb. 63a).

Only with this allegiance will you know what is authentic, and save yourself from acting contrary to God and reason. Although our culture provides freedom of religion, that carries the danger – and proven success – of alien doctrines seeping into the Jewish mind-set.

Sinai and Torah were intended to separate us from those infantile and primitive religious beliefs, replacing our decision-making with reason, where we abandon all things inexplicable like Egyptian and Kabbalistic mysticism, reincarnation, superstition, omens, signs, blind faith, magic, and human deification. “Reasoning” is the only barometer for truth. If you forfeit it, reality will forfeit you, just as the Rabbi Shimone said, “Yom tazveni, yomayim eh’azvecha”, “If you abandon me (Torah) one day, I will abandon you for two.” (Rabbi Shimone, quoting from Megilas Chassidim, Jerusalem Tal. 68a) ■



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