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TORAH:

THE BRILLIANCE OF
PARSHA

LETTERS:

THE REJECTION OF
MIRACLES

KABBALA:

THE FLAWS OF

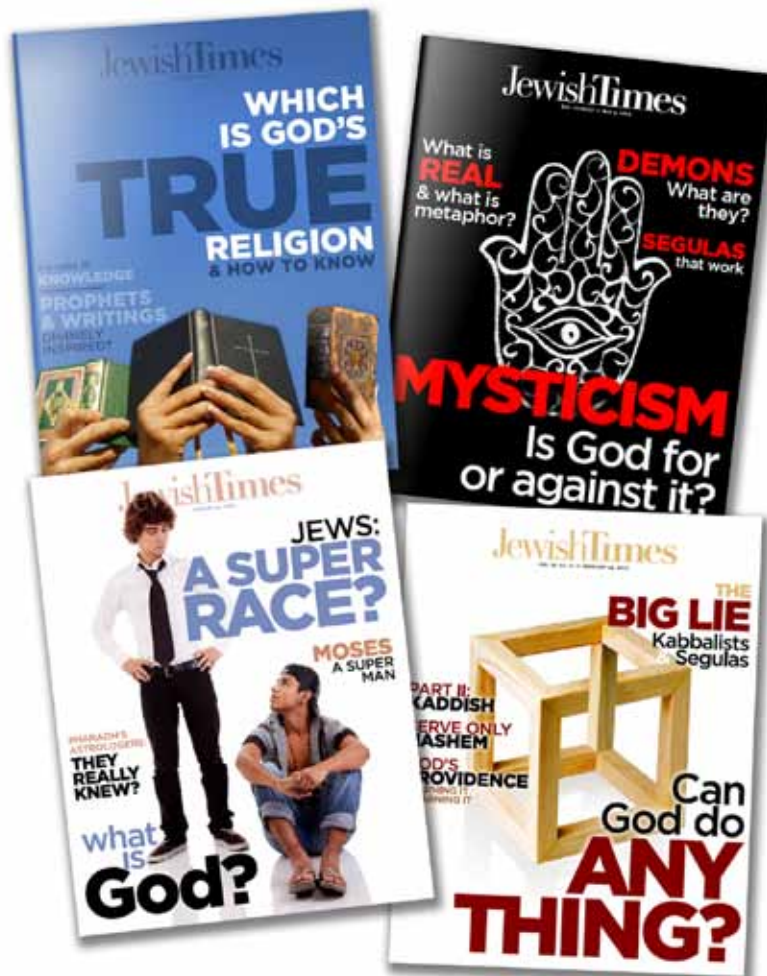
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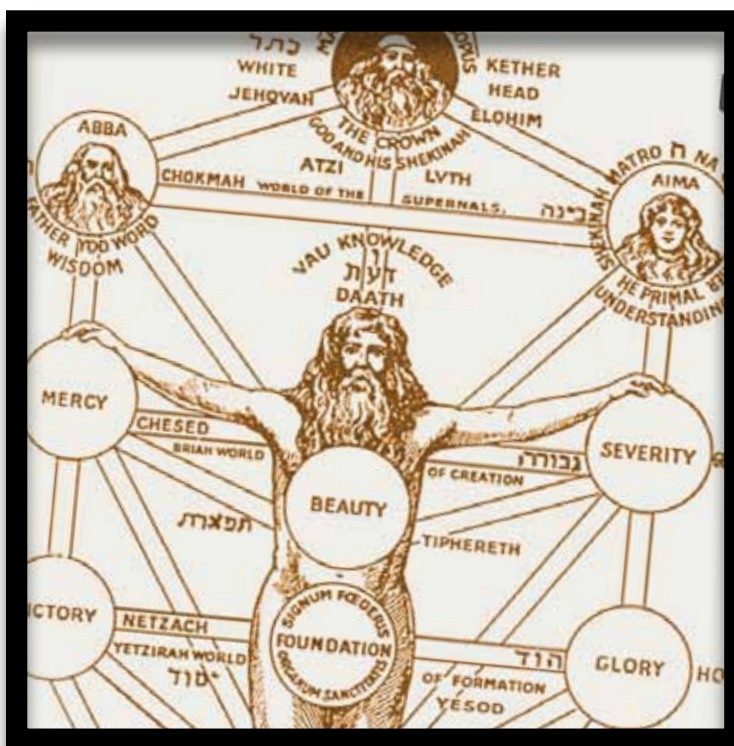
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Reader: Why are you biased against supernatural phenomena? It seems from most of your articles, miracles are only possible in the biblical ages, but miracles recorded in the talmudic and currently in Chassidic circles are scoffed at as superstitions by you. Thanks

Rabbi: God can make miracles anytime. But we are not to accept stories of miracles, unless there are mass witnesses. This is why God created Revelation at Sinai. He wants man to accept only what is proven. And proof of a historical event requires mass witnesses. If however, we

are to accept any story anyone says, we will be without proof, and also, we must equally accept Jesus, Mohammed, and others. The unique nature of Judaism, is that it alone possesses proof of God's only religion given to man via mass revelation, at Sinai – an event where 2.5 million people witnessed God's intervention. No other religion possesses such an event, which is why they are not validated. God orchestrated Sinai for this reason; that this become the sole criteria for accepting what is miraculous. We also reject claims that Rabbis or mystics performed miracles, since no masses corroborate it. The question is not on my position, but on others who accept stories without proof. ■

KABBALA: THE FLAWS OF ZOHAR

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

INTRODUCTION

"Listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One (Deut. 6:4)."

God is perfectly clear: God is one. He is not many. There is a single, indivisible cause of the universe. Yet, despite this clarity, and as demonstrated by the Golden Calf worshippers, man has difficulty worshipping a metaphysical God. His insecurities catapult him towards idol creation, worship, and the invention of theories and practices that conflict with God's words. Trinitarianism, polytheism and all forms of idolatry are additional expressions of man's fantasies; not the Torah's words.

Even when God tells Moses to His attributes of mercy (Exod. 34:6,7) these attributes are not independent beings, God forbid. God refers to His "mercy, appeasement, long-suffering, abundant kindness and truth...etc." as attributes, not as "separate beings." God holds no discourse with these attributes, for in fact, He is One. These references to acts that man calls "mercy" and "kindness" are merely concessions to man's feeble nature. We need to know that God is not cruel, so He tells us He is "kind." We need to understand that God does not seek quick punishment, so He tells us He is long-suffering, offering man time to repent prior to punishment. And we must know that these are not positive traits, "for man cannot know God while alive (Exod. 33:20)." There is nothing positive we can understand about God. Maimonides and other great minds have discussed this.

In contrast, Zohar attempts to

describe God, despite God's words to Moses above that He is unknowable. Zohar pays no attention to God's warning, and corruptly invents "sephiroth" (godly emanations) and views them as independent beings: "The king (Abba) said to Imma: 'Did I not say to you that Adam is destined to sin?' At that time he (Abba) drove man away, and he drove away Imma with him (Zohar, Genesis 22)." Here, Zohar depicts God's emanations or sephiroth as both Abba and Imma, two distinct beings with their own opposing wills. But sephiroth are not found in God's words, or in the words of His Prophets. Therefore, sephiroth is an invention of human fantasy, with no reflection on Torah or on reality.

Kabbalists attempt to gain credibility for the Zohar by attributing it to Rav Shimon bar Yochai, as if anything any Rabbi says is a validation of reality. In fact, the Rabbis themselves argue throughout the Talmud, admitting the errors of their peers. Therefore, the tactic of attribution is of no value, as truths must be proven based on their own merit, and fallacy rejected by the same token. Furthermore, the attribution to Rav Shimon bar Yochai has already been rejected. Chassam Sofer, who was not an anti-kabbalist, said the following to the students of his Yeshiva:

"Of the vast Zohar, only a small portion that would make up a very small book of few pages, is attributable to R. Shimon ben Yohai." (Quoted by talmidim of the Chassam Sofer, as stated by Gaon haRav Eliezer Lippman Nizetz, "Mei Menachot", daf 43 amud 2)

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An even stronger statement is found by Rav Eliezer Pikkush, the outstanding talmid of the Nodeh BeYehudah, and subsequently the Rav of Prague:

"I swear by Hashem's Torah that in the Zohar there are many forgeries and destructive statements that have been added. One page of the Talmud Bavli [containing] the discussions of Abaye and Rava is more holy than the entire Zohar -- the [authenticating] seal of R. Shimon ben Yohai is not affixed to them (i.e., to the words of the Zohar). ... Anyone with half a mind must admit this, for a number of Tannaim and Amoraim are mentioned who lived many years after R. Shimon ben Yohai ... [This has been] explained by the Gaon Rabbi Yaakov Emden who declared that [unidentified] hands have been at work on it (i.e., the Zohar)."

The Rivash wrote:

"I have also informed you that my teacher Harav Rabbi Peretz Hakkohen never at all used to speak or think of those Sephiroth. I also heard from his mouth that Harav Rabbi Shimson of Chinon (the author of Sefer HaKerithuth), who was greater than all others of his generation used to say: I pray with the intent of this child, i.e., in rejection of the opinion of the kabbalists, who pray sometimes to one Sefirah and sometimes to another Sefirah, according to the subject of the prayer ... And all this is a very bizarre thing in the eyes of those who are not kabbalists as they are, and they (i.e., the non-kabbalists) consider this a belief in dualism (i.e., belief in two or more deities). I once heard one of the philosophical (i.e., non-kabbalistic) persons denigrate the kabbalists by saying: "The Christians believe in trinity, (i.e., the union of three), and the kabbalists believe in the union of ten [Sephiroth]."

Kabbala cites the order of the progressive emanation of the ten Sephiroth, generally presented by the kabbalists as follows: Kether, Binah, Hokhmah, Gevurah, Hesed, Tifereth, Hod, Netzah, Yesod, and Malkhuth, also called Shekhinah. According to Zohar III, 11b, 70a: "He is they, and they are He." This trinitarian/polytheistic approach does not explain sephiroth, but incoherently says a plurality equates to a singularity.

However, God said, "God is one." Unlike Zohar, we have these words as part of our Mesora. And unlike Zohar, God's words make sense.

PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY

The purpose of this essay is to determine what God said, to make it clear that God's words are limited, and that we must accept His words over man's words. To this end, I intend to offer arguments to bolster your intellectual conviction and courage in this truth, so it overpowers your emotional need to be accepted by your peers, who may deviate. Please be sensitive to your feelings as you read on. No doubt, you will read ideas that conflict with your present views, and the views of many of your peers and perhaps teachers and Rabbis. I urge you be open to accepting that you may harbor incorrect ideas. Torah study requires a commitment to honesty first, not to men, Rabbis, books, no matter how old or widely accepted they might be. Clearly, throughout time, Zohar and Kabbala have met with strong opposition. Both sides cannot be correct. The only method to arrive at truth, is first, to desire it and search for it until it is found, to be diligent in your search, and to follow reason and proof over emotional tendencies or following what is familiar or popular. If you can dedicate yourself to this search, to seeking a conclusion and not abandoning the search or tiring...please read on. But if you have already made up your mind, you need not waste your time.

WHATS IS TRUE AND WHAT IS NOT

We are not bound to accept as Torah truths, any matter, except those found in Moses' Five Books (Chumash), Prophets, Writings and the Oral Law. For these alone did God give to Moses at Sinai; these alone are absolute Torah truths. Therefore, notions located in the Zohar, Kabbala or other human works, do not impose obligatory acceptance. In all works other than the four mentioned above, we must agree only to what is

proven and true, regardless of its author. Everything false, or unproven, must be rejected, regardless of its author. Regarding this, Maimonides wrote:

"Know, my masters, that it is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is a clear proof deriving from man's reasoning—such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses—such as when he knows with certainty that this is red and this is black and the like through the sight of his eye; or as when he tastes that this is bitter and this is sweet; or as when he feels that this is hot and this is cold; or as when he hears that this sound is clear and this sound is indistinct; or as when he smells that this is a pleasing smell and this is a displeasing smell and the like. The third is a thing that a man receives 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)." ("Letter to the Community of Marseilles", "Letter on Astrology")

We accept as our "Mesora" only those authentically-proved transmissions, that are traceable to Sinai. However, what is not in our Mesora from Sinai, is not obligatory. Something without proven origin from Sinai is not part of the Mesora. Zohar and Kabbala are not traceable to Sinai, and is less than 1000 years old. This of course does not mean everything in Zohar or Kabbala is false. If an idea is true, it does not matter where it is found. The same applies if the notion is false. Thus, calling an idea "part of Zohar or Kabbala", does not validate it as true. Certainly, when an idea in Zohar or Kabbala, or any work, contradicts the four works above, we reject it.

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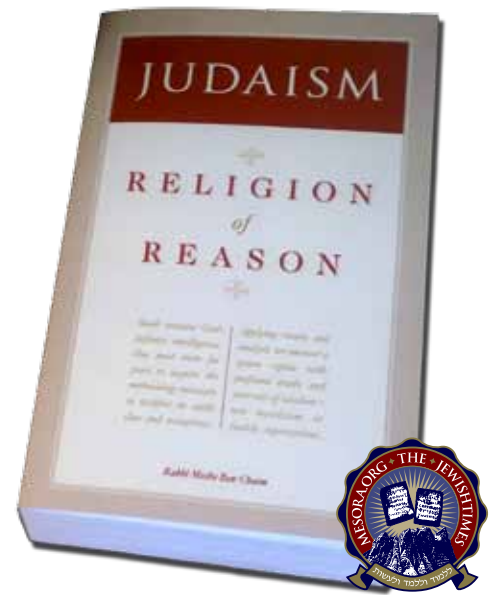
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REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN — Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively on Jewish philosophy for many years. His ideas are rooted in a rational approach. He follows the great philosophers like Rambam and Saadia Gaon. He is opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition and contrary to reason. This work covers a wide variety of topics, of interest to contemporary; insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the significance of many mitzvot. Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions as he is convinced that Torah is the Word of God and based on the highest form of wisdom. Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book.



RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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ALL COMMANDS ARE NOT EQUALLY VITAL

You must understand that Torah ideas are not all on the same level of importance. This explains the different levels of punishment for violations, and the varying levels of sacrifices. Truths about monetary damages are not as vital as our idea of what God is. This explains why the Ten Commandments commence with the command to know God, and why monetary laws are towards the end. Observing all the commands while possessing an incorrect notion of God, we might forfeit our souls.

It is not as we think, that all God asks is that we attend shul, daven three times daily, give tzedaka, celebrate holidays, send kids to yeshiva and attend simchas. Without the diligent search to understand God's Torah, to learn what we can and cannot know about God, we miss the core of Judaism, and no other act can compensate for this loss. I understand this is rarely discussed, and why you must be thinking, "Does this really matter?" since it is unpopular. However, Torah says this is both central and vital. This explains why our greatest minds like Maimonides and Rabbi Bachya (Duties of the Heart) wrote extensively on our notions of God: what He is, and what He is not. And they derived their ideas of God from God's words, not man's words. They adhered to the four works stated above, Chumash, Prophets, Writings and the Oral Law.

Today, unfortunately, Judaism has been steered off the focus of God's four only works, towards the popularity of a man-made work called Zohar and Kabbala, 2500 years after God's complete Torah was given at Sinai and accepted as His undisputed, entire transmission to mankind. Until the invention of Zohar, no Prophet, Rabbi or Sage would heretically suggested God's Torah was incomplete. Until Zohar, no mention of "sephiroth" was ever heard, the notion that God has ten "emanations." But like all movements, with enough followers, the remaining members of that culture feel obligated to accept the movement, lest they be ostracized and lose popularity, as if personal fame outweighs following God.

Many Rabbis, from Zohar's rise, and throughout time, vocalized opposition to its writings, and for good reason. Here are Zoharic quotes, and I will follow by quoting God's words to illustrate the deviant nature of these portions of Zohar:

Zohar: Genesis 22

"When coming to the world of separation which is the world of separated things, the builder said to the master of the edifice: Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. The master of the edifice said: 'Indeed it would be good to make him, but he is destined to sin before you, for he is a foolish son,' as it is written (Proverbs 10:1): A wise son maketh glad a father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother. Whereupon she (Imma) said: 'Since his sin relates to Imma, and not to Abba, I want to create him in my image,' as it is written: And God created man in His image; but Abba did not want to participate in man's creation. At the time that man sinned what is written: and for your transgression was your mother sent away (Isaiah 50:1). The king (Abba) said to Imma: 'Did I not say to you that he is destined to sin?' At that time he (Abba) drove him (man) away, and he drove away Imma with him."

The portion of Zohar quoted above "Let us make" surely was said of two beings, and goes on to explain that Imma said to Abba "Let us make man", and she did as she wished and created man without the agreement of Abba. This is the heretical view that there are multiple divinities, and each does as he/she wishes. Zohar includes additional corruptions stemming from it's author's inability to extricate himself from a physical understanding of God, the source of all idolatry. Zohar's author rejects Maimonides clear explanation in his 13 Principles, that God is not comparable to His creations. His creations are subject to division and parts, while He is not: "To what shall you equate Me, so that I shall be similar (Isaiah 40:25)". Yet, Zohar suggest God has ten parts, which sinfully equates God to His creations.

PHILOSOPHY IS WILLFULLY ACCEPTED, NOT COERCED OR MANDATED

A wise Rabbi once commented, "psak" (ruling) is inapplicable to philosophy." "Majority rule" (the halachik mechanism of following the majority of Rabbinic opinion; "rove") cannot serve to render some philosophy part of the Mesora. Majority rule does not apply to historical verification, since majority rule is a principle applicable only to the sphere of halacha - Jewish law - not historical fact or philosophical ideas. Based on a vote, the Torah never says something is historically true, or imposes acceptance of philosophical principles.

Jews and Rabbis have erred when applying rules of Halacha – how to act – to one's beliefs, or "philosophy." In Halacha, we follow the majority opinion. But this cannot be applied to one's beliefs. And belief in the notion of sephiroth are "beliefs". Beliefs can only be accepted on our own, and not through a majority rule. A majority rule cannot coerce one to "believe" he is standing in Ashkelon, when in fact he stands in Jerusalem. Majority rule cannot make a person believe in sephiroth, if his mind tells him otherwise, or if he fails to comprehend how God being One, can simultaneously be 10 sephiroth. Therefore majority rule or "rove", cannot be applied to philosophical matters. It is therefore incorrect to say, "Since many Rabbis yesteryear or today accept Zohar or Kabbala, Zohar becomes Torah or Judaism." Majority rule does not apply.

Some wish to claim that Meilli, Rivash, Ran, R. Alkafih who rejected Zoharic Kabbala as heresy, have been "overruled by a majority." This claim is equally inapplicable, as we said, majority rule plays no role in belief. Majority cannot render ideas, to suddenly become false. Ideas of truths and falsehoods are not subject to how many people accept or deny them. Truths and falsehoods are determined, as Maimonides accurately said above: 1) you realize a truth with your mind; 2) you witnessed some phenomenon; 3) the Mesora includes the idea. But a philosophical truth cannot be mandated, certainly not by a rule of

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Halacha, i.e., majority rule.

In philosophy, anything any Rabbi says is not binding, as we see the Rabbis argued on each other. Now, if every Rabbinic statement was binding, how could one Rabbi oppose another? We never see any Rabbi throughout time, waiting for a "majority rule" (rova) to agree with him before he voiced his opinion! In the Chumash, for example, Ramban argues on Maimonides, who argued on others. Ibn Ezra constantly voices opposition to many Rabbis. The same applies to all thinkers. Had majority rule been obligatory in philosophy, no Rabbi would have been able to voice his "sole" opinion. But, they all do. Majority rule applies only to Halacha.

Agreement can only take place by an individual who actually agrees, and this cannot be coerced. Halacha can be coerced, since the courts and Bet Din can coerce men to act. But force is inapplicable to one's convictions. And while one thinking God is physical, can have Halachik ramifications, the "belief" of any notion is outside Halachik jurisdiction.

GOD DESIRES WE EACH THINK FOR OURSELVES

It is for this very reason, that God gave each human being an intellect. God clearly desires that each person engage his/her intellect, so as to arrive at truths independently. Rabbi Bachya, author of Duties of the Heart says the following:

"If, however, you possess intelligence and insight, and through these faculties you are capable of verifying the fundamentals of the religion and the foundations of the commandments which you have received from the sages in the name of the prophets, then it is your duty to use these faculties until you understand the subject, so that you are certain of it - both by tradition and by force of reason. If you disregard and neglect this duty, you fall short in the fulfillment of what you owe your Creator."

"Devarim 17:8-10 states: 'If a case should prove too difficult for you in judgment, between blood and blood,

between plea and plea, between (leprous) mark and mark, or other matters of dispute in your courts,you must act in accordance with what they tell you."

Regarding this passage, Rabbi Bachya states:

"the verse does not say,.....simply accept them on the authority of Torah sages,....and rely exclusively on their tradition. Rather, (Scripture) says that you should reflect on your own mind, and use your intellect in these matters. First learn them from tradition - which covers all the commandments in the Torah, their principles and details - and then examine them with your own mind, understanding, and judgment, until the truth become clear to you, and falsehood rejected, as it is written: 'Understand today and reflect on it in your heart, Hashem is the G-d in the heavens above, and on the Earth below, there is no other'. (Ibid, 4:39)"

Again, "...examine them with your own mind, understanding, and judgment, until the truth become clear to you, and falsehood rejected." Therefore, when confronted with that which the mind cannot explain, and which has not been proven to form part of the Mesora, we do not accept such a notion, but we reject it. Suggesting an imposed acceptance of Zohar, contradicts this self-evident reasoning that God desires each person to apply their mind and reject falsehood. Even when about to give His Torah, God first gave Moses a number of laws, of which the Jews accepted. God wished the Jews accept the Torah system, but only after reviewing it. This does not mean Torah was optional. It means God wished the Jews' minds be engaged in what they were to accept.

ZOHAR & KABBALA: NOTIONS ALIEN TO TORAH

It is clear; Zohar presented new notions not found in Tanach. For had Tanach contained references to sephiroth, our Rishonim would not view Zohar as "new." What did these objecting Rishonim find so distasteful in Zohar, that they did not find elsewhere?

It is the discussion of matters one cannot prove, and the heretical notions of divisibility of God into many sephiroth; praying to varying sephiroth; and the gross humanization of God (Zohar, Vayeyitze 106b).

ZOHAR VIOLATES TORAH'S RESTRICTIVE NATURE

The approach to determining truths about God's essence must be relegated to the Mesora, since God Himself falls outside, 1) what our mind can grasp, and 2) what we can perceive. Yes, we perceive "evidence" of the Creator in His world, but we never perceive "Him." To make statements about what God is, i.e., sephiroth, when not having found such statements in the Torah, is an incorrect approach, for it cannot be validated.

Furthermore, God told the wisest man, Moses, the following: "For man cannot know Me while alive (Exod. 33:20)." If Moses cannot know what God is, a discussion of "sephiroth" as "parts of God" falls outside human knowledge.

Torah shuns the very notion that man can know God at all. It is for this reason that the Rabbis who crafted our prayers, included these words to be repeated many times daily: "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, God of hosts, His honor fills the world (Isaiah 6:3)." On these words, the great intellect Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235) (Radak) states, "God is distinct, elevated and totally incomprehensible (ibid)." The word kadosh does not mean holy, but rather, "distinct," as in God is distinct from all else and unknowable. Thus, we cannot know what He is. The suggestion of sephiroth exceeds Torah's boundary, that God is unknowable. Note also that the Torah says God's "honor" fills the world, not that "He" fills the world. For God is not related to the universe in any way. He cannot occupy space, for even space was His creation, and He predates space. Thus, He existed, and exists, without space. Unrelated to physical creations, God has no parts. Sephiroth must be false.

And who recited these words, that God is unknowable? It was the angels; beings of far greater knowledge than us.

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And yet, they admit they know nothing about God! How then can humans who wrote the Zohar depict God, in anyway?

Why do both God and the Rabbis depict the angels in the Torah? We must understand this lesson: if higher-level beings cannot fathom God, certainly we cannot. God also tells us that angels, and Moses could never know what God is. But Zohar claims its does. You must appreciate Zohar's claim as directly rejecting God's Torah.

TORAH WAS COMPLETE AT SINAI

Ibn Ezra Exod. 13:9: "Kabbala's words are strong and don't need to be strengthened." Ibn Ezra says that our true Kabbala (literally, "received" Torah transmissions) predate Zoharic Kabbala. Nothing needs to be added (i.e., "strengthened") to what God gave Moses.

SEPHIROTH: BEREFT OF WISDOM

All of God's Torah reflects wisdom. In contrast, the polytheistic notion of sephiroth imparts no wisdom and subscribes to idolatrous influence, thereby opposing Torah at the core. Worse, sephiroth truly confuse the mind, forcing physical characteristics of partss onto our indivisible, metaphysical God. Again, to truly comprise Torah, an idea must be intelligent, not an empty statement, like sephiroth.

TODAY'S BLOGS AND EMAIL LISTS: NO SOUND IDEAS OR ARGUMENTS

Zohar proponents often need to personally attack those rejecting Zohar. A recent email list discussion found it acceptable to reprint the exact words of today's Zohar defenders, who stripped "Rabbi X" of his title, calling him "Mr. X" for arguing against Zohar. This can only be explained as a weakness in their arguments defending Zohar itself, thereby needing to resort to a personal



jab. Rabbi X could not have known his attackers, they being part of such a large an undisclosed email list. Thus, Rabbi X did not attack others, but wrote solely against Zohar. Personal attacks were therefore unprovoked, and unveiled an emotional bias for Zohar, not an intelligent basis for accepting it.

Other defenders of Zohar responded with a list of Rabbis praising Zohar or Kabbala, but without any explanation of sephiroth or any of Zohar's views. This makes one question their beliefs, as their defense of Zohar remains without explanation. Their defense boils down to, "The more people repeat something, the truer it becomes", which is not rational. Even if the many people are Rabbis.

One person voiced this sentiment: "It is an important part of our rich intellectual and spiritual heritage", but again, without explanation. And a final defense of Zohar was the familiar, "Some things in life are just beyond our understanding." This admission that Zohar is inexplicable should be well-heeded.

On the other hand, God's Torah is said to be that which the other nations will marvel at:

"And you shall guard the commands and perform them for they will be your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of other nations, for when they hear all these statutes they will say, 'What a wise and understanding people is this great nation'."

For what great nation has God close to them, as the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him. And what great nation possesses statutes and laws so righteous as this Torah that I place before you today (Deut. 4:6-8)?"

These verses make it clear that unintelligible (and heretical) notions of sephiroth cannot be part of Torah. True Torah ideas can be understood by all nations, as God says. And those ideas (i.e., what God is) that are beyond our capacity to grasp, is where Zohar fraudulently and irresponsibly has ventured to speak.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, it is more reasonable to reject the view that many Rabbis agreed with Zohar, as it contains unintelligent and heretical positions. So we need not even engage the inapplicable use of "majority rule". It's defenders have not voiced any explanations for sephiroth or other claims. And Rav Eliezer Pikkush and Rabbi Yaakov Emden's position that Zohar is a forgery, retains our ancient Rabbis in an intelligent light, which maintains Kavod Hatorah.

God gave each of us intelligence. Rabbi Bachya explained in Duties of the Heart so clearly, that this gift demonstrates God's desire that we each use our intelligence. Our opinions of what God is and is not, are at the core of our life's purpose. To leave this area unexamined, and merely follow the crowd, is against God's will. If you strive to follow God's Torah, you must start with a clear understanding of God Himself, as far as humanly possible. You must be clear about the guidelines for accepting and dismissing beliefs, and these rules are all within your grasp, if you engage your intellect.

Can God truly equate to His creation, by having parts? What did God say?

"To what shall you equate Me, so that I shall be similar (Isaiah 40:25)?"

What makes sense to you, is God one, or many? What did God say?

"Listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One (Deut. 6:4)." ■



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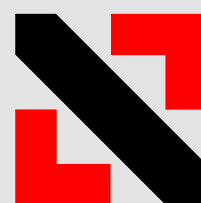
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Who is Like You?

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

The splitting of the sea, and in many ways the exodus from Egypt, culminates in the shira (song) composed by Moshe and the Jewish people. Contained within this epic work are deep and important ideas about God and His relationship to mankind. We even see this part of the Torah included in our daily tefilah, both in its entirety, and in two verses strategically placed by Chazal in the tefilah of “Ezras Avoseinu”. In a sense, these two verses summarize many of the ideas set forth in the shira. In this article, we will take a look at one of these two famous pesukim.

The renowned verse goes as follows (Shemos):

“Who is like You among the powerful (baeilim), O Lord? Who is like You, powerful in the holy place? Too awesome (norah) for praises, performing wonders!”

In understanding the ideas contained within this verse, it is important to view the verse in two parts: the first being the “questions” and the second dealing with God being “too awesome for praises”. Rashi, in tackling the first part of the verse, explains that the question of God in comparison to the powerful is just that – recognition that God is stronger than anything. Therefore he understands the “comparison” as asking rhetorically who is more powerful than God. As he offers no insight into the second part of this first statement, we can assume Rashi takes the simple p’shat (explanation) that there is nothing as powerful as God in the “holy place”.

Ramban, though, takes issue with Rashi’s explanation. Rather than “powerful” referring to God’s strength, Ramban maintains that the allusion here is to the angels who are called

“eilim”. He proceeds to bring different textual proofs supporting his position.

One would think this type of debate to be benign; after all, they are just arguing over the interpretation of one word. However, when we look at the verse in the context of the entire shira, the difference between the two opinions is wider than first imagined, as we will soon see. The first step we can take involves the nature of the rhetorical differentiation being set forth in this verse. One of the major themes demonstrated in the verses prior to this one has to do with God’s dominion over the natural world. Through God’s splitting of the sea, the Egyptians were drowned and the Jews were saved. At first glance, it would seem that Rashi continues with this theme in the first part of the above verse. The question being raised is in fact a complete realization of how God’s dominion and control over the natural world demonstrates His qualitative differentiation from said world – “who is like You”. What about the second “question”? We first denote God’s differentiation from the physical world. This logically leads us to the next distinction. The “holy place” would seem to be referring to the world of the metaphysical, as the term “kadosh” generally means something distinct or separate. As such, after denoting God’s distinction from the natural world, one makes the declaration that God is separate from the metaphysical world as well. The overall theme of the first part of this verse then is quite clear. There is first the recognition of God’s distinction from the physical world, and then from the metaphysical world.

Ramban’s seemingly minor change gives us a completely different view of this part of the verse. It would seem according to Ramban that the entire first part of this verse is focusing on God’s differentiation from the world of the metaphysical. The focus on the angels demonstrates how God is distinct from those created within the metaphysical world. We then move to, as Rashi notes, God as being separate from the entire metaphysical realm. In other words, and similar to Rashi, there is a progression in abstract ideas here, moving from one notion of God’s distinctness to the most abstract. Thus,

(continued on page 14)

"I went to the Ravella for 3 years. It used to be the Ritz Carlton Lake Las Vegas. Very nice hotel! I've also have gone to Booky's program and he does a very nice job!"
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the debate at this point between Rashi and Ramban would seem to be whether the ideas being revealed here are a progression from God's differentiation from the physical world to the metaphysical, or from within the metaphysical world to beyond it.

This leads us to the second half of the verse, and the explanations offered by the above two commentators is quite surprising. Again, this part of the verse is divided into two parts - "too awesome for praises" and "performing wonders", and the focus of the commentators is on the first part. In essence, Rashi writes that the meaning of "too awesome" is that we are afraid to give praises to God as they definitively will be too few. Ramban, as he does quite often, offers a different explanation. He agrees that rather than translating the word "norah" as "awesome", it refers to fear.

In this case, thought, it means "fearful with praises". What does this denote? He continues: "for He does fearful things and He is praised for them, as when He wreaks vengeance on those who transgress His will and thereby helps those who serve Him. Thus He is feared and highly praised".

What point is being brought out by each of these different opinions? Rashi's explanation of "norah" being fear would seem to be zeroing in on the reaction one has to the ideas reached in the first half of the verse. When a person truly comprehends God's qualitative differentiation from everything, he is instilled with a realization of how insignificant he actually is. He comes to realize that there is no possible way he can verbalize sufficient praise of God. Any praise will, by definition, be deficient and lacking. This in fact is one of the most difficult struggles man faces in his pursuit of

yediyas Hashem, knowledge of God. As he begins understanding God, he is faced with the reality that any praise he gives will be incomplete.

Ramban, as we have seen, offers a more cryptic explanation. God's actions are defined by both fear and praise simultaneously. We must understand what makes this wondrous; after all, man is also capable of acting in a manner where vengeance against one leads to salvation of another. It could be that Ramban is alluding to an important fundamental idea in hashgachas Hashem, God's relationship to mankind. It is true that man can - in one action - produce vengeance and salvation. However, there is a limit to his control within and of these actions. There are always unintended consequences, a ripple effect from any event that affects the causal world in a way that is incomprehensible. Not so with God's hashgacha. When He acts, His actions have no unintended consequences. There is never a "random" effect of happening to be both negative and positive, nor is there any detail of the plan that is haphazard. This concept is the result of God's complete knowledge of the universe, every single causal event. Therefore, Ramban sees the progression in this verse in a different way than Rashi. It is not a reaction to the first half of the verse. Instead, Ramban sees it as being imperative to detail the greatness of God through His hashgacha after verbalizing the most abstract concept of God we have. Why is this imperative? It could be that after this initial praise, one is left (similar to Rashi) somewhat speechless, recognizing that we are so far removed from God. And with this realization comes as well a sense of futility - how is man to relate to God? The answer lies in the evidence of the hashgacha, when God chooses to reveal Himself to mankind. Those moments and events provide us the means of relating to God, opening up worlds of ideas for us to explore. Rather than leave man in a dumb-founded state, God creates a vehicle for man to enunciate his praises to God.

It is quite clear, then, how this one verse captures the themes laid out in the shira and takes them to the most abstract conclusion. ■

Why did Moshe take Joseph's bones? What was their significance?

Saw You at Sinai

RABBI REUVEN MANN



This week's Parsha, Beshalach, describes the hasty departure of the Jews from Egypt. The Rabbis say "the salvation of Hashem is like the blink of an eye." In other words it comes suddenly and quickly and not as a natural result of a lengthy process. Thus a defining feature of Geula (Redemption) is that it is instantaneous. One minute the Jews were abject slaves completely under the totalitarian domination of Pharaoh. With the advent of Makkat Bechorot (slaying of Egyptian first born) the situation changed immediately as the slave masters couldn't push the Jews out of the land quickly enough. Indeed, the Egyptians actually wanted the Jews to leave that very night. However, Moshe refused, as he was now in control and could set the terms by which his people would depart. According to the Rabbis, the spiritual redemption of the Jews took place by night when they brought the Passover sacrifice and witnessed the complete collapse of the Egyptian political apparatus. Moshe did not want the Jews to slink out of Egypt like, "thieves in the night." Rather, they would leave by day in an organized fashion, the triumphant "Hosts of Hashem," in the sight of all. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that the significance of Matzah is related to the haste of the

redemption. Anything which is part of the natural order requires time. The leavening process needs time and for that reason is prohibited on Passover as it symbolizes the natural order. Matzah, however, is baked immediately before the dough has had time to rise and thus represents Divine providence which overpowers the natural order when Hashem determines it. We eat matzah and avoid chametz to proclaim that the freedom we achieved with the Exodus was not due to any natural historical development but only to the miraculous intervention of the Creator of the Universe.

In describing the Exodus from Egypt the Torah mentions that "Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him for he had forsworn the children of Israel saying, 'Hashem will certainly remember you and you shall take my bones with you.'" The question arises, why does the Torah include this piece of information as a central part of the narrative of the Exodus? Of course it is important for the Torah to emphasize the significance of fulfilling one's oaths. Yosef's oath was very unique. He did not obligate any particular person. Rather, he foreswore the entire Jewish people. When the brothers, whom he enjoined, accepted the responsibility, they did so on behalf of the Jewish Nation includ-

ing future unborn generations. Between the time of Yosef's death and the Exodus, every generation of Jews confirmed and accepted the obligation of the oath. It, thus, assumed the status of a national responsibility and it was the obligation of the leader to fulfill it. On that hectic night, with so much to do, Moshe put everything aside and personally saw to the securing of Yosef's bones. Why is this action so central to the redemption from Egypt?

In my opinion it was not just a matter of fulfilling a national responsibility, however significant. G-d had told Moshe that when he took them out of Egypt, "they would serve Him on this Mountain." In other words, the reason why G-d was taking them out of Egypt was because the Jews would accept the Torah on Mt. Sinai. However, the Jews did not just accept the Torah for themselves but for all future generations. This is the meaning of the Rabbinic dictum that the souls of all Jews who would ever be born were present at Sinai. Every Jew is obligated to keep the Torah because he is foresworn from Sinai. The ability of this people to assume a national responsibility which is binding on all future generations, is at the heart of why Hashem chose them to be His people and perpetuate His Torah. That is why it was so important for Moshe to personally assume responsibility to take the bones of Yosef on the journey to Canaan. This reminded everyone that Yosef was the instrument of Divine Providence in bringing the Jews down to Egypt. Their enslavement and ultimate redemption was all part of Hashem's plan to create a special nation that would be "A light unto the nations" and the means by which mankind would eventually be redeemed. That could only happen if every generation of Jews would view themselves as bound by the oath taken at Sinai. Moshe set the example by assuming responsibility for the oath taken by Yosef's brothers and passed down by every generation until the Exodus. May we always regard ourselves as sworn to keep the Torah from Sinai.

Shabbat Shalom ■

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