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Rav Aharon Zt"l

The Passing
of a Giant

Defending Israel

Yom Ha'atzmaut

Spinoza's God

Reader's Question

the Purpose of Mitzvahs

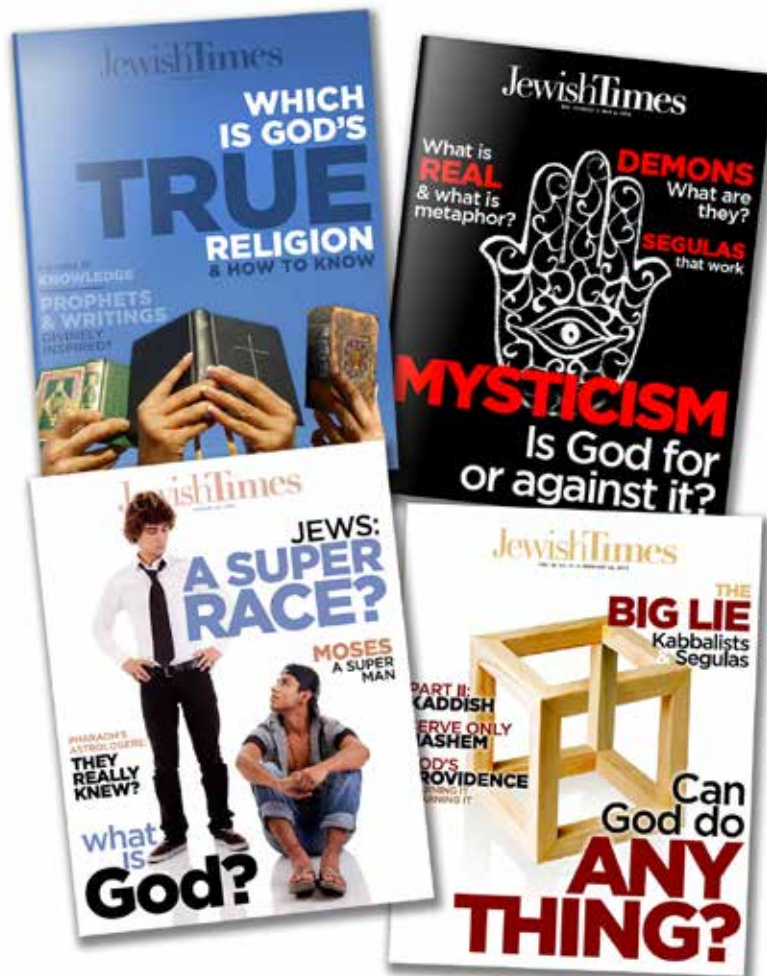
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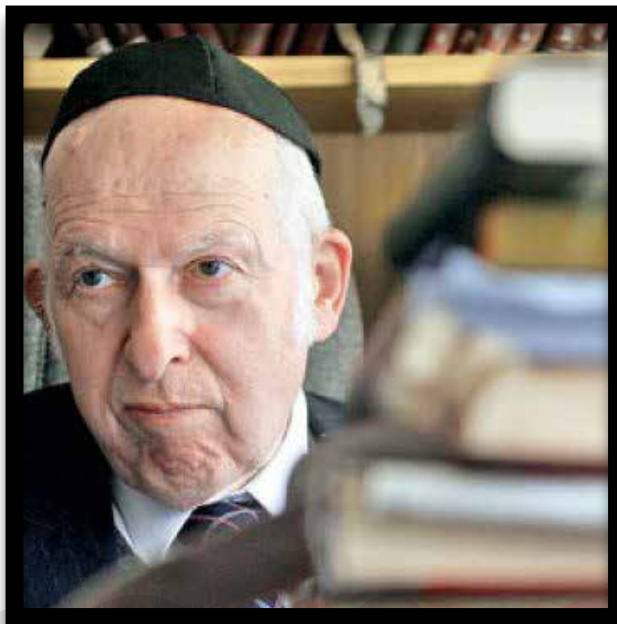
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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Spinoza's God

Reader: Can God place part of Himself into the universe, so as Spinoza says, God "is" nature?

Rabbi: Reason cannot reconcile God simultaneously being non-physical and physical. It's like suggesting black is simultaneously white, or a circle is simultaneously a square, or that I was born yesterday and I was also born tomorrow. As nothing can create itself, everything was created, until we reach back in time to a first cause that "always" existed. For if we do not stop, and rather, suggest there are infinite causes, then the present cannot be reached. And as God created the universe, He and the universe are clearly two distinct entities, and therefore, there is no "part" of God in what He created. He is separate from His creation. For He always existed, and creation did not always exist. Thus, His existence is different than the existence of all else that was not eternal. So He and the universe are two separate entities. ■

A portrait of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a black kippah, a dark suit, a white shirt, and a blue patterned tie. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a solid blue color.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein: A Personal Reminiscence

Rabbi Menachem Genack

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, as I knew him, was not merely a giant of Torah, but also a giant of a man. He was a child prodigy—Rav Hillel Zaks, a grandson of the Chafetz Chaim and friend of Rav Aharon from Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, recounted that Rav Aharon stood uniquely above his peers even as a teenager. (In Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, his status as a child prodigy earned him the nickname “the babe,” a moniker which followed him to Yeshiva University.) Rav Aharon’s encyclopedic knowledge was matched by the incisiveness of his analysis, and he was a leading exponent of the Brisker method.

But aside from his genius, Rav Aharon was a man of great humility, kindness, yirat shamayim, and principle. When my father died I was still young, and Rav Aharon offered me great comfort and arranged many of the details of the funeral. He was a man of unsurpassed integrity, both in his intellectual pursuits and in his personal relationships and dealings. I remember in the summer of 1967, Rav Aharon, who was already a Rosh Kollel, playing a game of full-court basketball with other students of the Rav in Onset, Massachusetts. At one point in the game, Rav Aharon turned to me and said, “It is not ethical to play just offense and not defense.” Although his comment was tongue-in-cheek, it reflected his forethought and seriousness with which he undertook his every action.

When I came to know him, Rav Aharon was already the Rosh Kollel of RIETS, but he still attended the Rav’s shiur. His comments during the shiur were always to the point, and the Rav was always very attentive to them. Whenever the Rav was searching for a source, he turned to Rav Aharon, who invariably supplied it. As is well known, Rav Aharon was a proponent of studying literature, because as he once wrote, “the humanities deepen our understanding of man: his nature, functions and duties.” When I was studying *Paradise Lost* in college, Rav Aharon said to me, “I envy you, because you can read Milton now for the first time.” Once, the Rav explained that the Rambam and Rashi disagree about whether Shir Hashirim is a metaphor for the relationship between the individual soul and God, or a metaphor of the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. Rav Aharon interjected that both meanings can be sustained, just as Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* is an allegory with several different layers of meaning. For all his love of poetry, it was the Shir Hashirim within his own soul which animated Rav Aharon’s life, the poetic

song within his soul which melded the relationship of both the individual and the Jewish community with God.


A kaleidoscope of images helps capture his unique persona. Rav Aharon retained an eternal youthful quality, which I believe was a product of his unabated sense of discovery and openness to new learning. Upon his Aliyah to Israel, he developed a close relationship with Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, and on the death of Rav Shlomo Zalman, Rav Aharon tore his clothing as a son does for a parent, and as a devoted disciple does for a teacher. In his essay “The Source of Faith is Faith Itself,” we encounter Rav Aharon as one whose faith flowed from the example of his teachers in whom he saw the embodiment of the Jewish tradition—Rav Hutner, the Rav, and Rav Ahron Soloveichik—as well as from the divine encounter that Torah study itself provides. His eloquent words about Rav Ahron Soloveichik apply equally to himself: “I was simply enthralled by what he was—a remarkable fusion of mastery and simplicity, of vigor and humility and, above all, a pillar of radical integrity.” When a new translation of the Rambam’s philosophical magnum opus was published, Rav Aharon approved of the subtle change in title from *Guide for the Perplexed* to *Guide of the Perplexed*. The former, he believed, removed the Rambam himself from among the rank of the perplexed, whereas the latter more accurately captures the notion that perplexity is not a contradiction to faith and leadership. This was in keeping with the lesson Rav Aharon learned from his mentors, “that it was not so necessary to have all the answers as to learn to live with the questions.”

I remember that when Rav Aharon left America to join Rav Amital in heading Yeshivat Har Etzion, I did not understand how Rav Aharon was willing to sacrifice his undoubted future prominence as a leader of American Jewry. However, watching from afar, I saw how he and Rav Amital were able to have a significant impact on Israeli society as a whole. In addition to being responsible for introducing the

Brisker derech and the thought of the Rav to the yeshivot hesder, Rav Aharon became renowned throughout Israel as a religious leader and thinker of the first rank.

I had the merit to speak to Rav Aharon on the phone one last time just a few weeks ago, as I called to wish him and Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein a Chag Sameach before Pesach and to receive a bracha from him. I will always cherish my memories of him.

The Daf Yomi on the day of Rav Aharon’s passing, Ketubot 77, describes the death of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, the prime student of R. Yehuda Hanasi. Upon his entry into the Garden of Eden, he was heralded by Elijah proclaiming, “Make room for the son of Levi, make room for the son of Levi.” The Talmud explains that R. Yehoshua ben Levi merited his exalted position in the world to come because, in contrast to his peers, he did not disassociate himself from the sufferers of a highly contagious and debilitating disease. Instead, “R. Yehoshua ben Levi attached himself to these sufferers and studied the Torah; for he said, ‘Ayelet ahavim ve-ya’alat chen, a lovely hind and a graceful doe (Mishlei 5:19)—if the Torah bestows grace upon those who study it, would it not also protect them?’” These words of R. Yehoshua ben Levi are a fitting epitaph for Rav Aharon, who was the prime disciple of the R. Yehuda Hanasi of our times, the Rav. Rav Aharon, with his humility, drew close even those that others isolated, those distant from his coterie, and always through the Torah whose grace he radiated. And although this daf marks the end of the chapter Hamadir, the masechta goes on, just as Rav Aharon’s legacy will surely continue through the example of learning, humility and grace he instilled in his extraordinary family and legions of students and admirers. ■



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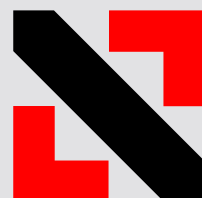
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Ibn Ezra: The Purpose of Mitzvahs NOT MERE ACTION

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim & H. Salamon

Please note as we commence that my added [bracketed] words in Ibn Ezra's quote below will help in your understanding. Please include them in your reading. Let us first read Ibn Ezra's words, and then discuss his precise formulation:

(Ibn Ezra – Exod. 31:18)

"Brainless people wonder what Moses was doing on Mount Sinai 40 days and 40 nights! And they don't know if he stood there with God this amount of time. [And even if you] greatly multiply this duration [that Moses stood on Sinai] he could not know [even] one part in a thousand of God's works and His ways and the fundamentals of all mitzvahs that God commanded Moses! [Brainless people wonder this] for they think that the "performance" [of mitzvah] is the essence. But this is not true; rather [the essence of mitzvah] is the "heart" [human intent]. [So be aware] that the actions, thoughts and speech [commanded by mitzvah] are merely to make one fluent [in following the laws]. And accordingly, it is written, "It is in your mouth and in your heart to perform it", and so have our early [Sages] said, "God desires one's heart."

And the root of all mitzvahs culminates in loving God with all one's soul and clinging to Him. But this cannot be complete if one does not recognize God's works in the higher creations and in the lower ones, and in knowing His ways. And accordingly the prophet said, "Only in this shall the praiser praise himself: become wise and know Me." Then it will be clarified to him, that God performs kindness, justice and charity in the land. But one cannot know God if he does not know his own inclination, his soul and his body. For anyone who does not know the nature of his soul, what wisdom does he have?

And behold, Moses who prophesied 40 years in the desert and grasped great principles that God revealed to him on Mount Sinai, and yet, he said before his death, "You have only begun to show your servant Your greatness." And behold now [even at that time] He [only] began to show him the greatness of God."

Ibn Ezra describes a phenomenon equally applicable to today's Jew. Jews get caught up in the "performance" of mitzvahs, and not with understanding their profound lessons and the human perfection God truly intends. Yes, God gives us commands, and we must act...but we act only in order that we become fluent in performance as Ibn Ezra says above. Our acts are targeting a greater good. God does not merely desire the physical activities of waving a Lulav, wearing Tefillin, reciting Kiddush or giving charity. "God desires one's heart." That is, God wants his human creations to perform mitzvahs because they understand the principles behind the mitzvahs, and value them as precious truths. Performance is merely the barometer of one's conviction. But it is the conviction in the mitzvah's idea that is the goal of the mitzvahs.

(CONT. ON PAGE 9)

Is Torah mystical... or rational, just like God's natural laws?

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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.

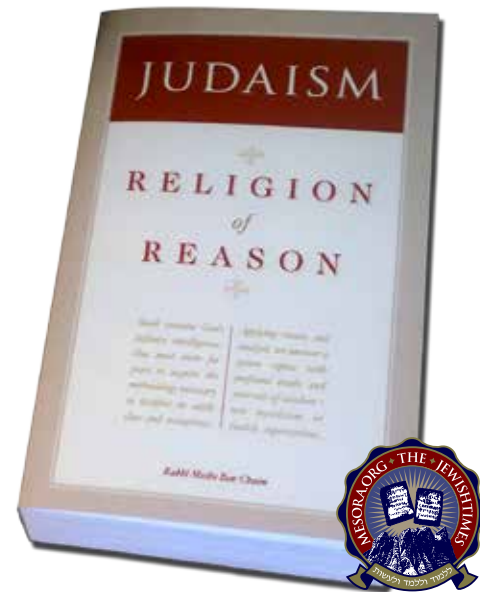


RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

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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The gift of intelligence is precisely in order to arrive at more and more truths about God and His ways. Had action alone been all God desired, the intellect's amazing capabilities would be of no use. Furthermore, the tapping of the intellect's potential cannot be accomplished through simple action. Mitzvah requires great thought, and that's why Moses stood on Sinai with God for over a month, day and night.

Brainless people wonder what took so long for Moses to descend Mount Sinai. "All he had to do was learn how to perform the mitzvahs, and then come back down the mountain," they think. They doubt Moses even needed 40 days! But as Ibn Ezra teaches, Moses could spend numerous years in communion with God and not even scratch the surface of God's knowledge.

Ibn Ezra's Formulation

He commences with a critique: people think action – and nothing more – is the goal of the mitzvahs. What causes a person to gravitate to the mitzvah's performance, and not go further? What prevents one from unraveling the clues in the mitzvah's design, and arrive at the fundamentals? Ibn Ezra immediately alerts us that "There's so many fundamentals and profound ideas, that even after 40 years, Moses barely scratched the surface." This was Moses' own admission. This dose of reality will hopefully impact people and drive them to seek the lessons of the mitzvahs.

The cause of preoccupation with performance is the sensual nature of a human being, which has a head start over our intellects. "For the inclination of man's heart is evil from youth (Gen. 8:21)." Our instincts are with us from birth, but our intellects develop slowly, over many years. Most people find great difficulty controlling – and certainly abandoning – a sensual lifestyle. And when confronted with Torah obligation, people attach themselves to the components that are sensual, meaning the physical act. Since they have followed a lifestyle rooted in the senses alone, and not intellect, they view Torah and mitzvahs from their senses, not their intellects. They don't live in their intellects, but in their instincts, so all is filtered through their instincts. Mitzvahs, then, are treated identically: whatever does not touch their instincts and senses, is ignored. Therefore, all they sense is the act of mitzvah, and they ignore the mitzvah's designs and halachas that point to immense insight.

This is the flaw Ibn Ezra wishes to correct with this commentary. He appropriately refers to such people as "brainless" (literally "empty-brained") as an indication that this core faculty of intelligence is not engaged, when it truly should be.

He then addresses the obvious question: If performance is not the goal, why are mitzvahs relegated to thought, speech and action, which are performances? He answers that this is to accustom us, for repeated behavior conditions a person in a desired path. He validates this with this verse, "It is in your mouth and in your heart to perform it (Deut. 30:14)", but then qualifies the true goal with the Rabbis' words, "God desires one's heart (Tal. Sanh. 106b)" based on God's words to Samuel, "Man sees with the eyes, but God sees the heart (I Samuel 16:7)." This verse also validates our idea that man is primarily sensual, "seeing with his eyes" and not looking into another person's heart and motives, like God does.

Next, Ibn Ezra explains why performance cannot be the end goal...

Loving God

This — Ibn Ezra teaches — is the goal of the mitzvahs. But what is the meaning of "loving God"? How is this mitzvah performed? How does one "love" God, when we don't know what He truly is?

Maimonides explains that one's love of God is in direct proportion to his or her knowledge of God (Hilchos Teshuva 10:10). Thus, love of God equates to "appreciating God's wisdom." The more one studies God's creations and Torah, the greater is his or her love of God. And although we cannot love God Himself, we are drawn to the Source of the wisdom and goodness we witness in creation and Torah. This is what we call love of God.

Ibn Ezra quotes Jeremiah 9:22,23, teaching that man's true praise is not based on his morality, strength, or wealth. Rather, a person is praiseworthy only if he becomes wise and knows God. Read that again...he must "become wise" and know God. This means that one must study. Why? Because the mere performance of mitzvah is not the goal. One must study and learn if he or she is to uncover the brilliance of true Torah values. It is not the performance alone that God desires, but man's heart, his "understanding" and "intent". One can go through the motions, but this does not reflect on one's inner recognition of the mitzvahs' true messages. A man or woman has not perfected themselves by performance alone. Perfection is achieved only when one recognizes a truth, and values it enough to act on it. The act, then, is a barometer of one's conviction. But it is the intellectual conviction that God wants... "God wants the heart".

And this is so sensible, since man's true essence is his intelligence; the faculty that distinguishes him over all other creations. It is then his intelligence that will mark his true worth. Animals can perform actions. But it is man alone who can recognize his Creator, and uncover His brilliance. Thus, actions are not our mark of distinction: it is our capacity

to become wise through understanding the perfection an design of the universe and the mitzvahs, thereby attesting to those truths.

"Man's true essence is his intelligence; the faculty that distinguishes him over all other creations. It is then his intelligence that will mark his true worth."

"Thus, actions are not our mark of distinction: it is our capacity to become wise through understanding..."

System of Knowing God

Ibn Ezra then teaches that man must first recognize God as the creator of what is above. This gives man the perspective that the universe and literally all that is, exists only due to a Creator. Once man recognizes God as "creator", meaning the exclusive

"cause" of everything, he must also know how God "governs" His creations. This is what is meant by knowing the "lower ones," meaning man. We must know that "God performs

kindness, justice and charity in the land.” And these are valued only if we understand the design of man, meaning, his instincts, his soul and his body, as Ibn Ezra states. By understanding man’s psychological, intellectual and bodily designs, only then do we learn what are man’s needs, and how God supplies these needs through acts that we call kind, just and charitable. Our appreciation for God’s provision of food, clothing, and shelter grants us one level of appreciation for God. But as we study man’s internal world, we learn of the multifaceted psyche, and how Torah laws guide us to a measured lifestyle that keep all drives in check, and enable us to grow intellectually and morally through the myriad of other laws and their designs. And with our study of the universe and of the Torah’s halachik and philosophical systems, our minds find the greatest pleasure unraveling marvels and deep insights that fill us with the greatest experiences. Through study, we recognize God as creator and governor. And as we grow in our learning of God’s creations and government of man, our appreciation (love) for God grows proportionately.

A Kind, Just and Charitable God

It is vital at this point to understand why God is all three: kind, just and charitable. On Jeremiah 9:23, Radak defines these three traits. Kindness is excessive goodness performed for another being, and has two expressions: 1) goodness performed for one who has no claim on you; 2) and goodness that is over and above what is due to another who has a claim on you. Charity is the act of giving another whatever it needs, as in food for the hungry and clothes for the naked. And justice is meting out reward or punishment depending on the person’s merits and sins.

Justice is applicable to humans alone. The former two also apply in some measure to animals. None apply to inanimate beings.

Why are all these qualities necessary? It is because the needs of living beings vary. And as God is perfectly good, His response to varying needs varies. At times, a being only requires nourishment; God’s providence for this is called righteousness. But at times, people require more than what meets their basic needs, due to emotional issues for example. Therefore, an added attentive measure called kindness is required to set such a soul on a path of happiness and equilibrium. For example, a depressed person will need additional attention and patience as compared to others who are functioning with normal optimism. And



when one is evil, justice is required to correct that person or society, or to deter others.

It is only through understanding a spectrum of God’s ways that we can accurately appreciate each mitzvah, through understanding its insights and ramifications. If one is devoid of knowledge of God, his charity misses the mark, for he does not view charity as a means to set a person on a good path, in order to love God. He simply views it economically, not in connection with God. And this is not the mitzvah of charity. And if a person lives in accord with strict justice alone, and does not bend with the needs of the needy, he is not acting as God acts. For he allows his emotional temperament to dictate his acts, when he really should determine his acts based on God’s values. And at times, this means we forgo what makes us comfortable, in order that another human being might find happiness.

As you can see, Ibn Ezra is correct...we can discuss God’s mitzvahs for 40 days or even 40 years and not scratch the surface! This explains why the Talmud and Shulchan Aruch are so lengthy.

The Fundamental

Ibn Ezra takes us through a sequence of considerations in order to fully explain the goal of mitzvahs; that being the love of God. He informs us that aside from understanding a given mitzvah, we must possess the additional knowledge of God as both the creator and governor. Meaning, these two truths form the crucial backdrop to understand all mitzvahs. For a mitzvah cannot exist in a vacuum. If one waves the Lulav in all directions, without knowing God alone created produce, he misses the entire point of Lulav, which is our thanks for produce to the God who governs the heavens and Earth, and all of man’s Earthly activities. If one wears Tefillin but does not know that we thereby attest to God’s exclusive reign over Egypt and all natural laws, we again miss the purpose of this mitzvah, commanded right after the 10 Plagues. And if one prays to God but thinks “God is physically inside us”, and He is not the metaphysical being He truly is, one is not praying to God, but to his fantasy. And fantasies cannot respond to your prayers.

These insights must renew in us all a fresh perspective on mitzvahs, that will grant us true appreciation for the laws, but mostly, a love for the Creator. ■

ACTIVISM

Defending Israel

YOM HA'ATZMUT

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This past week, Jews observed two related events back-to-back: Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Remembrance, followed by Yom Ha'atzma'ut, Israel Independence Day.

On Yom Hazikaron, a siren sounds in Israel, and everyone stops in their tracks. Even motorists pull over to the side of the road to observe a moment of silent remembrance for the soldiers of the IDF who gave their lives to preserve the State of Israel. The question arises, should Jews in the United States mark this day as well? In my opinion, we should.

Of course, we are loyal citizens of America and are grateful for all the freedom she affords us. In a very limited sense, we do not derive our physical security from the Israeli military. However, Israel is the ultimate homeland of all Jews. Her Law of Return guarantees automatic citizenship to any Jew who seeks it. The very word "return" indicates that choosing to live in Israel is basically going back to the place from which we came, but were unfortunately exiled from. In a very real sense, Israel is the center of Jewish existence, and her welfare is of paramount importance to Jews everywhere.

We must have great appreciation for the Israeli boys and girls who, at the age of 18, interrupt their lives to join the Army. They are a uniquely courageous and idealistic group, whose love of Israel and Jews and whose fighting spirit inspires all of us.

It is thus our duty to recognize and honor

their service and sacrifice. But how can we demonstrate our appreciation? The answer is that we must strive to become better Jews. Israel is under attack by vile antisemites around the world. We should show our support by fighting back against the haters, especially those who advocate boycotts, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel companies.

Anti-Israel behavior is not limited to Gentiles. Many Jews, particularly those on the far left, condemn Israel at every turn and seek to influence the US government to take a harsher stand against her. Some of these detestable people try to camouflage their

animosity by joining groups that claim to have Israel's best interests at heart. Organizations such as J Street allow Israel-haters to gain credibility by proclaiming their "concern" for Israel. They do incalculable harm by allowing the enemy to claim that even Jews themselves recognize the horrendous nature of Israel.

Not everyone who claims to be a Jew can be taken at his word. Even if he is born to a Jewish mother and is technically a Jew, that is of little consequence. There is more to being a Jew than an accident of biology. One's beliefs and behaviors are equally significant. A true Jew must recognize the Torah, seek to live by its ideals, and acknowledge the special mission of the Jewish people.

A Jew must love his people on both the individual and collective levels. He must be dedicated to helping them and promoting their welfare. This does not mean that he must agree with all of Israel's policies and actions. He may and should criticize her when it is warranted. However, this must be done constructively and helpfully, out of love. There is a thin line between legitimate criticism and vilification that plays into the hands of Israel's enemies.

The Rabbis say that a Jew can be identified by 3 character traits: being merciful, modest, and doing good deeds. Those who act brazenly and crudely cannot be regarded as genuine Jews.

As we celebrate Israel's 67th birthday on Yom Ha'atzma'ut, let us commit to becoming better Jews who have wisdom, compassion, and the courage to stand up against all who condemn Israel, including those who pose as Jews.

Shabbat shalom. ■





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