

JewishTimes

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WHAT IS THE
AFTERLIFE?

What is the
BIG BANG?

What is
GOD?

**HOW DOES JUDAISM DIFFER
FROM OTHER RELIGIONS?**



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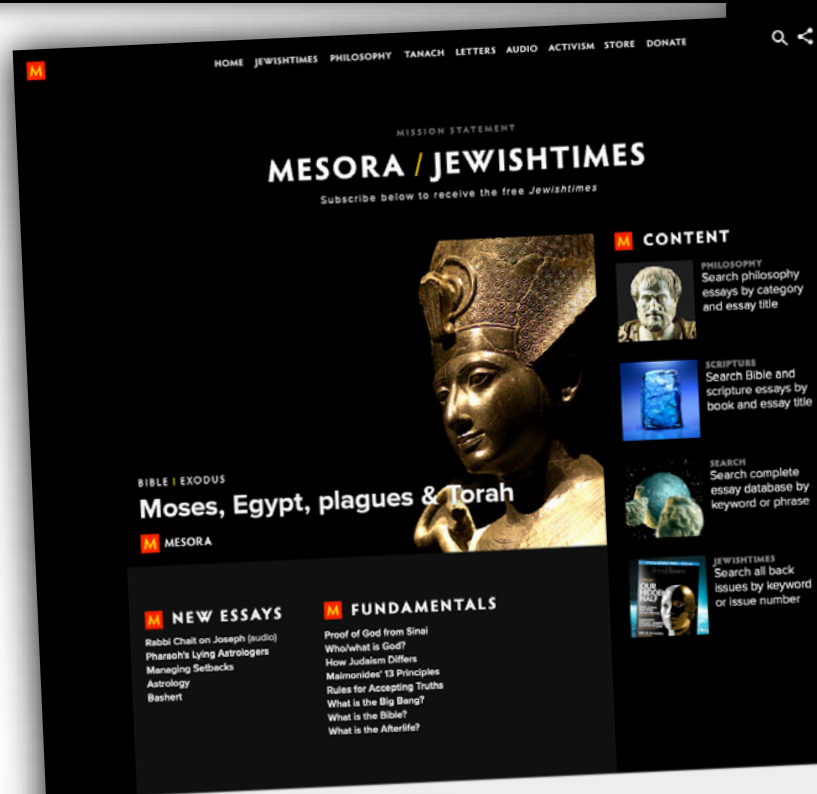
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OUR PURPOSE: WISDOM & MORALITY



God created man to live by truths concerning Him, creation, others and ourselves.

We must study God's instruction about what He is, what is idolatrous or fallacy, we must study nature, psychology, philosophy and morality. This draws us closer to God and He to us, and creates societal harmony which fosters greater Torah for all.

MORE BELOW

Kindness: As equals, all humans must treat others as we wish to be treated. Charity, kindness and justice demand we rise above personal and selfish emotions and recognize that God made others as He made ourselves. Doing so creates harmony, and earns His kindness.

Racism: A Lie: Man descends from Adam. **Black/white twins** unveil the lie of racism. Bible denounces it: Moses' wife was black, our kings married Egyptians and Messiah descends from Moabites. "Better is the day of death than the day of birth" (Ecc. 7:1). Birth doesn't define us; how we live does.

Insecurity: Man's insecurities can be false, but reality is greater, as it is truth. Man seeks security about his future, accepting fallacies like astrology, amulets, omens, horoscopes and others. God prohibited such practices precisely because they are false. God is more powerful than false notions. Rely on Him alone.

Happiness: Many think wealth and success secure happiness. But Torah teaches happiness stems from study. When pursuing wisdom, one is most happy as Torah offers childlike amazement at every turn. Study offers the daily novelty necessary to retain interest and the depth that offers amusement.

Pleasing Others: Don't seek approval over truth. Torah says, "What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:5). "Don't fear man" (Deut. 1:17). "Desist from man whose soul is in his nostrils, for what is he considered?" (Isaiah 2:22). Mortal attention is irrelevant. Following God earns all goodness.

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JewishTimes

THE JOURNAL ON ORTHODOX JEWISH THOUGHT

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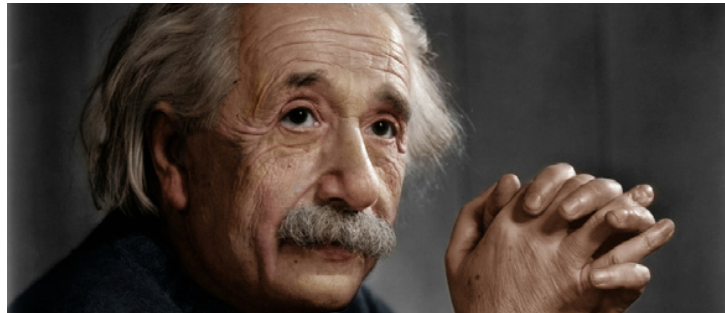
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"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

ALBERT EINSTEIN

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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Stoicism & Judaism?

READER: My query is your take on the ancient Greek/Roman philosophy of Stoicism. It is basically divided on three legs: Physics, Logic and Ethics. I am predominately asking about Ethics. I am more than cognizant of the ethics of the Torah but I also see the relevance of what Stoicism teaches. Our Rambam was able to create a synthesis between Aristotle's philosophy and Torah. Can the same thing be accomplished again with Stoicism?

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RABBI: The Stoic God is not a transcendent omniscient being standing “outside” nature, but rather it is immanent—the divine element is immersed in nature itself. Thus, there are 2 grave errors in Stoicism: 1) their concept of God is wrong, 2) and as they don’t study God’s words concerning His definitions and permutations of truth, justice, kindness and charity, Stoics operate based on feeble human notions.

God alone caused the universe, including physical reality, man and morality. God alone determines truth and morality, and without knowing God’s definitions, man must err. And although Rambam praised Aristotle, he could not fully know Torah’s definitions of morality, justice, kindness and charity on his own. Maimonides too says Aristotle believed in the eternity of the universe, while the rabbis says He created it from nothingness. Even Abraham who was perfected in thought and character, was not God, so he too could not know all matters. Rashi on Genesis 5:5 says that God told Abraham, “Give up your astrological speculations that you have seen by the planets that you will not raise a son; Abram indeed may have no son but Abraham will have a son.” Rashi teaches that Abraham had incomplete knowledge.

Synthesizing an incomplete or corrupt system with Torah must corrupt Torah. But when God recorded Abraham’s righteousness in Genesis, He incorporated selected values that reflected truths and Torah ideals. ■



What is GOD?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Moses asked this of God. God told him “Man cannot know Me while alive” (Exod. 33:20). But Moses knew that God existed. So did Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Leah, Rachel and all wise people. What can we know about God?

As our prayers state, we refer to God as the creator of the universe. He is not an “energy” in the universe, for energy is physical. Energy and physical existence are creations; that’s 2 proofs that God isn’t energy. God is also not “in” the universe, since before the universe was created, God existed. Thus, He exists separate from the physical universe, and therefore He does not occupy space or location, which are physical.

God is not physical. He has no place. We cannot know what He is. But we know He is the cause of all that exists, and that means there is no other power; He is the “only” cause for everything that exists. All Egypt’s gods were inanimate and silent, blow after blow during the 10 Plagues. All peoples’ gods were, and are silent; no people ever claimed their stone, metal or ivory idols communicated with them.

All existences require God’s will to continue existing. It is not that once God created something, that it now has independent existence. Not so. After God created you, you continue to exist only if He wills you to continue.

From God’s Torah, we learn that God is perfectly just, that He knows all, including every person’s actions and thoughts. We learn that God punishes man for his sins, and rewards those that are close to Him; He saved the Jews from Pharaoh. God is merciful, as He canceled His planned destruction of Ninveh (Book of Jonah) when those Assyrians repented wholeheartedly.

We know that God favors charity and righteousness, as these were Abraham’s traits which God praised (Gen. 18:19). God also records Rebecca running to serve Eliezer.

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What is God? He is the cause of the universe, Who is not physical, Who is not “in” the world, and Who designed the earth for man’s benefit. He is the cause of everything Who wishes man to have the most enjoyable existence through engaging in wisdom and proper morality. We don’t know why God created what He did, but we can know what He created, and what His will is for mankind. We can appreciate the great potential we each have due to God’s kindness and His will that we possess a soul, and intellect, that can find the greatest enjoyment in the pursuit of His wisdom, as seen in Torah and in the universe. God is the only Cause of the universe Whom we must praise and thank.. ■

What is the Big Bang? How the world began.

Edwin Hubble’s (1889-1953) observations showed that distant galaxies were speeding away from us at huge speed—which led to the discovery that the universe is expanding. And Belgian priest/astrophysicist Georges Lemaitre (1894-1966) was able to trace those expanding galaxies back to a single point of origin for the universe, an idea that became known as the “Big Bang Theory.” The Big Bang refers to the start of the universe—a tremendous explosion—which occurred nearly 14 billion years ago. Since that bang when all matter began, all galaxies are today still zooming away from the center of that bang. Tracing the galaxies’ paths backwards, Lemaitre calculated where that bang took place.

But as science is based on observable matter and laws, which did not exist prior to the Big Bang, science cannot know what caused the Big Bang. Judaism teaches that God caused the creation of the universe from nothingness. This is truly astonishing. People who doubt this have doubts due to their inability to think in a manner

different from their experience. They think that as all they see now is caused by something prior, like animals coming from their parent, they also believe the start of the universe must have had some prior physical source. But as natural laws of cause and effect did not exist before the universe, nothing demands the universe’s creation followed natural laws as we know them today. Therefore it is possible that God made the universe from literally nothing.

Furthermore, if one suggests the universe was made from something physical called X, we must ask from what X was made. We might say X was made from W, which was made from V, which was made from U. This would go back infinitely, and that is impossible to have an endless chain of causes. Because an endless chain of causes has no first cause, and without a first cause, nothing started the chain to exist, and the chain cannot exist. But as the chain does exist, an infinite chain is impossible. ■

What is the afterlife?

Death is a physical occurrence which does not effect our metaphysical element, our soul. A soul is not physical, and is not effected by the end of bodily functions. If one leads a life in search of truth, meaning the ideals of the Torah and truths about the universe, the soul will achieve a state of continued involvement in the world of ideas, which is eternal: the afterlife. Conversely, one who leads a purely physical hedonistic existence will not—according to Maimonides—have any existence once deceased. Maimonides wrote:

The World to Come there is neither body nor physicality, only the souls of the righteous divested of body as are the ministering angels. Inasmuch as it harbors no concrete forms there is no need there for eating, drinking, or other of the

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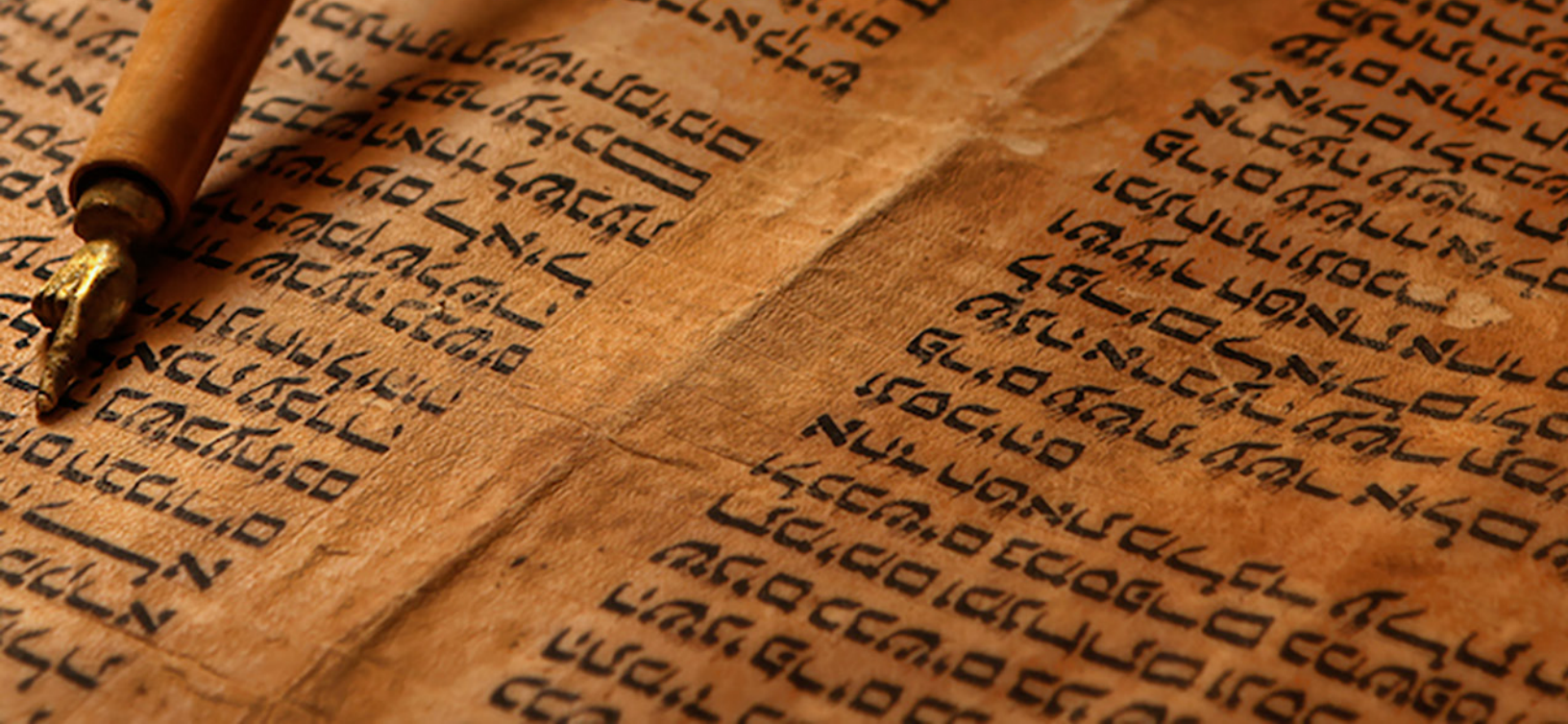


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bodily necessities of the sons of man in this world; neither will any of the many things which happen to bodies in this world come to pass there, as, for instance, sitting down, standing up, sleep, death, sadness, mirth or the like. Thus did the ancient sages say, "In the World to Come there is no eating, no drinking, and no family life, except that the righteous are sitting, graced with crowns upon their heads, and indulge in feasting upon the luminousness of the Shekinah (God's presence)." (Laws of Repentance 8:2)

This is a metaphor: the righteous will be merited by their learning (crowns) which brought them to the point of having such appreciation for knowledge, that they will continue in this enjoyment (enjoying God's wisdom) in the afterlife, but on a greater level. This is the ultimate reward, the continued state of the perception of ideas.

Knowledge is the most enjoyable pursuit. If one delves into study, he will eventually see this is so, and he will enjoy the pursuit of wisdom for its own sake, and not with the ulterior motive of securing the afterlife.

Seeking the afterlife as a separate goal from seeking wisdom is an error. For the afterlife is only attained by one who values knowledge and thirsts for it for its own sake; he does not anticipate some ultimate imagined reward. Once

one sees that ideas are enjoyable for their own sake with no other motive, he will not seek the afterlife as something different from wisdom, but as a higher level of engagement in wisdom. Thus, only one who values wisdom has the proper concept of the afterlife, as far as man can conceive.

The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is man's purpose. But if pursuing knowledge doesn't lead to valuing it for itself, it is worthless. Knowledge benefits man beyond all else, as it benefits man's central component: his soul. As one partakes of what is true, he learns God's wisdom and delights in refreshing discoveries daily. The afterlife is a continuation of this enjoyable pursuit. But if one imagines the afterlife as some mysterious reward for learning and Torah observance, he elevates a blank imagination as greater than learning. His learning isn't for the learning itself, and therefore his learning is of little worth, and even of questionable worth altogether. Had the person realized the good which pursuing knowledge offers, he would be content to study for its beauty alone, without an ulterior motive. This involvement in learning for its own sake would offer this person an eternity of happiness.

And as he became more interested in the world of ideas through learning, he would cleave more and more to it, abandoning all other pursuits. Since the afterlife is metaphysical (purely wisdom), this person will naturally be in

a state of bliss after death. If on the other hand, one only learns as he assumes an imagined reward to follow, he will be sorely disappointed at the end of days. As he imagined the afterlife to be that which it is not.

For one to enjoy the next world, he must enjoy this world in the pursuit of God's wisdom. But learning as a means will not yield an appreciation of wisdom. Only a life lived out of a pure desire for truth will improve one's soul to the level where he can enjoy the afterlife. If one does not enjoy the pursuit of wisdom, but only does so in order to achieve an imagined afterlife, he will not achieve it. The afterlife, by definition, is an involvement in wisdom to a much higher degree, as our bodies won't exist as a vale between us and God, and His wisdom. One who seeks the afterlife and believes it to be something other than an existence of perceiving wisdom, has an incorrect view of the afterlife. He is seeking that which does not exist. He belittles the life of Torah, as he views Torah as only a means for some other imagined reward. If his learning was not for learning itself—Torah Lishma—he cannot achieve that high degree of the afterlife, which is an experience of wisdom in proportion to our level.

What is the afterlife? It is a state of being without our bodies where we enjoy the beauty of God's wisdom based on the level of attachment to wisdom we achieved on earth.. ■

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How Judaism Differs from Other Religions

A religion of reason and proof, not blind faith.

“Religion” refers to a lifestyle of submission to a superior entity, designed and given by that entity. All other religions claim to be God’s only true religion, but they all lack validation. Judaism is the only religion with proof of Divine origin. This proof is demonstrated through God’s revelation of His existence and His communication to millions of people on Mount Sinai exactly 3333 years ago. The Jews witnessed an intelligent voice speaking from within the fiery mountain. Biological or earthbound life cannot exist in fire, precisely why God used fire in this event. No other religion makes such a claim to possess proof because Divine revelation never happened to others, and as the Torah says, “it will never happen again” (Deut. 4:32-34). Judaism is also unique in its intellectual and brilliant design, in its basis in reason and proof, and its in full compliance with human nature, offering real happiness.

Judaism is the only religion whose claim is supported by world acceptance of Torah, the Bible. This acceptance is a 100% proof of God's revelation to the Jewish people. Had Revelation at Sinai never occurred, it would not have been believed by that generation, and certainly not the rest of the world and all future generations. The only way Revelation at Sinai became accepted is because it was witnessed, and then all witnesses passed the story down to the following generations through today. God wished that this event remain a 100% proof throughout all generations. Had a false prophet attempted to convince any group that they witnessed what they had not, they would never accept him, nor would they replace their known history with the false prophet's lies. A unanimous identical transmission of a witnessed event occurs only when that event occurred. Unanimous transmission—a single Biblical account—is proof of the truth of Revelation at Sinai. God revealed Himself to masses only once: to the Jews on Mt. Sinai, where He gave the Jews His Bible.

All other religions are founded on a single person's claim (or a fabricated story) that God appeared to him. Something of this nature cannot be proven, and is precisely why they formulated their religions with the demand for “blind faith.” Those religions did spread, but not due to witnessed events. Those religions spread as they appealed to human emotions. People will accept what is pleasing. Someone dying for my sins is very appealing. Praying to a tangible human figure is more pleasing than praying to an invisible abstract God. But not one other religion can provide evidence of Divine communication. Therefore, there is no basis to accept their religions. Furthermore, as God designed only one human being, multiple religions is nonsensical. Just as all people are treated identically for cancer, all people will find the happiest life with the same religious system.

Besides this miraculous proof of Revelation, Judaism is founded on principles which are rational and comply with man's nature as a philosophical and psychological being. Not one law in all of Judaism goes against man's nature. Unlike Catholicism which frowns upon divorce and praises celibacy, Judaism embraces the need at times for couples to divorce if they will be happier that way, and Judaism also embraces man's need for sexual happiness and children. These are just two examples of how Judaism approaches life honestly, without preconceived notions about how man should live. Catholicism makes man into a mystical and infallible saint, approaching their view of an angel, one who is above actual human drives and emotions. This opposes Judaism. Judaism accepts that man's happiness must stem from his being in line with his nature. And Judaism doesn't hide our leaders' sins. All men sin.

Judaism realizes that besides man satisfying his psychological needs, he has a much higher part which must be addressed: his soul. By man ignoring this essential part of his nature, he will never reach his ultimate, Divine mission of attaching himself to God. Man achieves this mission and ultimate happiness by his immersion in study of creation and Torah, actualizing his true goal and purpose in an appreciation of the Creator. Torah, Prophets and Writings, along with the Talmud, were written in a highly stylized format which takes years to master. Their style is such, that as one delves deeper and deeper, he finds more profound ideas. This analysis and search satisfies man in its very process, as well as through factual enlightenment. As God possesses infinite wisdom, man will always see new insights, provided he has toiled under the tutelage of those before him trained in the method of Talmudic and Biblical exegesis, teamed with the essential modes of interpretations only found in the Oral Law, which God also communicated to Moses on Sinai.

The system of Jewish law—halacha—is also a major component of Judaism. It guides man's every action from waking and prayers, to blessings over food, ethical and moral conduct, business practices, social relationships, and Holidays. All areas of life are always placed in check as man judges each of his actions for Torah compliance prior to commencement. This process engages man's mind throughout his days when he is not involved in study, which must comprise the majority of his waking hours.

In truth, there is no comparison between the Divinely designed system of Judaism and man made religions for the precise reason that there is no comparison between God and man: man made all other religions. God made Judaism, the Bible. ■



The 10 Plagues

Coded Principles

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



Ibn Ezra directs our attention to the performers of the Ten Plagues (Exod. 8:12):

Know, that by the hand of Aaron were the first three plagues and these signs were in the lower matter as I explained earlier, because two (of them) were in water, and the third was in the dust of the earth. And the plagues performed by Moses with the staff were in the higher elements, just as his (Moses) status was higher than Aaron's status. For example, the plague of hail and locusts were brought by the wind, and (so too) the darkness, it was in the air; also the plague of boils was through him (Moses). Only three (plagues) were without the staff; the wild animals, the disease of the animals, and the death of the firstborns. And one (plague) with no staff was through Moses, with a little connection with Aaron, and it was the plague of boils.

Ibn Ezra catches our attention by his first word, "Know", which urges the reader to think into this specific commentary. He intimates that there is more here than meets the eye. What is he driving at? He does not simply list each plague with its performer, or describe the involvement of the staff. We are not interested in dry statistics when

studying God's wisdom. Here, Ibn Ezra is teaching important principles. Beginning with the word "Know", Ibn Ezra is teaching an important lesson.

Each of the Ten Plagues was used as a tool to teach Egypt and the world the following: 1) Aaron and Moses were each assigned specific plagues in the lower and higher realms respectively, and they performed a similar number of plagues independently, 2) The staff was not used in 4 plagues, 3) Moses joined with Aaron in a single plague of boils.

In his Laws of Idolatry, 1:1, Maimonides teaches that early man already began projecting greatness onto the heavenly bodies. Man thought, since the planets, stars and spheres "minister before God," they too are worthy of man's honor. Eventually, man's corrupt thinking and sin increased as he replaced simple honor of stars with his worship of them as deities, until God was no longer recognized. Star worship reveals man's false estimation that the heavens deserve to be worshipped. Man feared not only the spheres, but also the heavens. Jeremiah 10:2-3 reads

So says God, 'To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of the heavens do not fear, because from them the nations fear. Because the statutes of the peoples are false, because a tree from the forest they cut,

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fashioned by an artisan with an adze.

Jeremiah teaches that man did in fact fear the heavens. But their fear stemmed from a false projection, not based in reality. Jeremiah's lesson is insightful: he equates the fear of heavens with the idolatrous practice of prostrating to wooden idols. He wished to teach that the heavens do not hold any greater powers than wooden sculptures. Man's idolatrous emotions project the same imagined authority onto both, heaven and idols. But the underlying message is that man does in fact ascribe greater veneration to the skies, as Maimonides taught above. It appears that based on man's first error that God occupies space and lives in the skies, man erred again, ascribing greatness to the spheres and stars that are assumed to be "in close proximity" to God.

The primitive view of the heavens determining man's fate was not alien to the Egyptians. God corrected this error with one aspect of His plagues. Commanding Aaron to perform the plagues limited to the earthly realm, and Moses to perform those of the "higher" heavenly realm, God discounted the dangerous esteem man held towards the heavens. God showed that the only difference between the heavens and Earth is the level of understanding required to comprehend their natures, as the wiser man—Moses—addressed the heavenly plagues, and Aaron addressed the earthly plagues. Laws control both realms, and both could be understood. Understanding a phenomenon removes one's false, mystical estimations. Realizing all corners of the natural world are "guided" means they are subordinate to something greater. These realms do not "control," but are "controlled," teaching the Egyptians that their views were false.

The Egyptians erred by assuming that the heavens were a governing and mystical realm. God corrected this disproportionately high, heavenly grandeur. God did so in two ways: 1) by showing the heavens' subordination to a Higher will, God demoted heaven's status from the divine to the mundane, and, 2) by aligning the plagues with Moses' and Aaron's participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heaven's not divine, but they are in equal realms (created and subordinate entities), just as Moses and Aaron are equally human. Additionally, Moses and Aaron each performed three miracles independently to equate heaven and earth, dispelling a false supremacy of heaven and meteorological phenomena. Hopefully, the Egyptians would comprehend that both heaven and Earth are equally under God's control, as Jeremiah intimated, and that neither one is significantly greater. Egypt would then realize that Something higher was responsible for all creation. God wanted the good for the Egyptians. The good, means knowledge of what is true. As it says in the Torah (Exod. 9:16) with regards to these plagues, "...in order that they tell of My name in the whole world."

Interestingly, the three plagues designed in the heavens were hail, locusts and darkness. Why these three? Perhaps to address three errors of the

Egyptians. Egypt assumed meteorological phenomena to be divine, so God responded with a hail/fire plague to display His exclusive control in this area. Wind was also a heavenly phenomena, but now they experienced an unnatural wind blowing the entire day, the entire night, until the next morning when it delivered the terror of locusts destroying all vegetation remaining of the hail's previous destruction (Exod 10:13). Finally, with the plague of darkness, God displayed control over the primary focus in heaven: the sun. Weather, the atmosphere and outer space were all shown as false deities and under the exclusive control of Israel's God. Additionally, the plague of "darkness" had one other facet: it was palpable, perhaps to show that it was not a simple solar eclipse.

Ibn Ezra also made specific note of two plagues where no staff was used. These two also included the lesson of national distinction: Exod. 8:18, "And I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen that My people stand on it, to prevent from being there the wild beasts..." Exod. 9:4, "And God will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nothing will die of the Israelites." Why were these plagues designed to distinguish Egypt from Israel? Not just one plague, which could be viewed as a freak incident, but two plagues which differentiated "Egyptians" and "Jews," taught that God works differently than Egypt's view of the divine. The Egyptians thought that to please their gods was man's correct obligation, and precisely how gods operated: an expression of a child/parent relationship. How would such an infantile idea be corrected in order to teach God's true system? By Egypt witnessing punitive measures only on their "side of the river," they were awakened to a new idea: objective morality. They were held accountable. They also realized something even more essential: their relationship to their gods was one where their gods benefited from man's actions. Egypt felt that their gods need man to serve their needs, which were projections of man's own needs. But Judaism teaches that relating to God is not for God, but truly only for man. God does not need man. Man cannot affect God, as if God does not previously know our actions. Man must do that which is proper for himself, and if he does not, he will not only be punished, but he will lose the true good for himself. The Egyptian's exclusive receipt of these two plagues—a system of "reward and punishment"—awoke them to a realization that service of God means not catering to a god's needs, but rather, an alignment with proper ideals and morality. This is a drastic difference from Egypt's primitive notion of worship and pleasing their gods.

Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods: animals. Wild animals attacked them, and then their own animals died. It was a devastating blow to their esteemed deities. Their deification of animal gods was destroyed. Pharaoh's response (Exod. 8:21), "sacrifice to your God" confirms his lowered estimation of animals, to the point that he encourages Moses to slaughter

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them, and to do so to his God. In other cases, Pharaoh does gesture to free the Jews, but only here in connection with the animal plagues does Pharaoh say, “sacrifice to your God.” I believe the Torah includes these words of Pharaoh to inform us that the plague had the desired effect on Pharaoh. God understands what will affect man. The Egyptians were all the more confused when they saw that Israel was not affected, even though they did not serve animals. In Exod. 9:7, Pharaoh himself sends messengers to see if Israel was harmed. This plague of the animal’s death concerned him greatly.

Boils and firstborn deaths also punished Egypt alone; the staff was not used in these. The reason was to remove man from God’s acts of justice. God alone determines and administers justice. Moses, Aaron and the staff could not be used in these 4 punitive plagues. God must retain the spotlight in areas of justice.

God displayed His control of the complete universe: the first three plagues showed His control of the Earth, the last three over the heavens, and the middle three displayed His control over man, meaning an expression of justice: only Egypt’s population was attacked by animals, only their herds were killed, and their astrologers were exposed as charlatans when they could not remove boils from their own bodies.

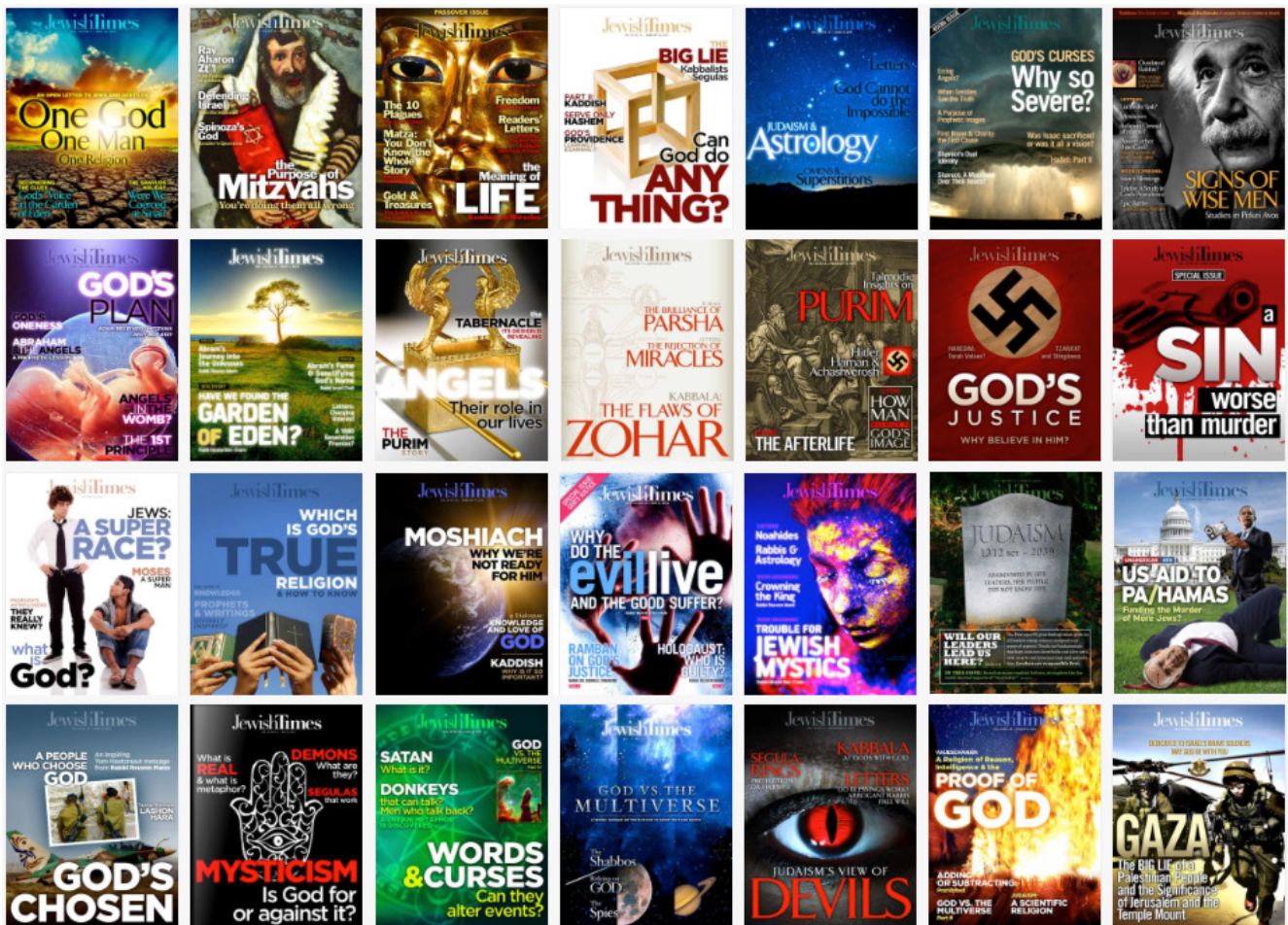
Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? My friend Jessie Fischbein made a sharp observation. She said that just as Moses and Aaron addressed the higher and lower forms of matter in their respective plagues, the plague of boils executed by both Moses and Aaron included the higher and lower matter: ashes from Earth, and they were commanded to be thrown towards the heavens (Exod. 9:8). Her parallel revealed another facet of the boils, as God’s plagues contain many strata of insights. I believe the boils’ combination of realms was to teach that heaven and Earth do not operate in two separate unrelated systems. The very act of throwing ashes towards the heavens teaches that both Earth and heaven work together. This was a necessary lesson in the reduction of the heaven’s exaggerated status. By showing this further idea that the heavens participate in earthly phenomena, the heavens’ false, divine status was stripped that much further. Just as his subjects will view a king who spends time with commoners in a less regal light, so too the heavens now lost their reputation by participating in Earthly matters. Moses could have collected the ashes himself, but by working with Aaron, together, they underlined this point.

One question remains: Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues? Perhaps, as these plagues specifically intended to distinguish Egypt from Israel, the evildoers from the victims, this theme of “justice” is placed smack in the middle of the set of 10 Plagues. Thereby, justice emerges as a highlighted message of all the plagues. A story or an awards dinner does not commence with the primary plot or the guest of honor...in both, they are placed at the midway point. Here too, perhaps God placed His plagues of justice in the midway point of all the plagues, to underline the theme that all the plagues were in fact an expression of justice, not viciousness. ■

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Making of a LEADER

RABBI REUVEN MANN

One of the most unexpected things we encounter in the Book of Shemot is the emergence of Moshe as a great leader. No one would have thought that could be possible. Indeed Moshe himself in the dialogue at the “burning bush”, disparaged his qualifications for high office. That itself is an amazing occurrence. How many other leaders throughout history would have pleaded to be recused from the greatest mission of all time?

But Moshe demurred out of a sober awareness of his shortcomings. The most significant impediment was his weak communication skills due to the fact that he was “difficult of speech and difficult of language.” Most formidable leaders possess impressive people skills. By contrast one who stutters and stammers invites revulsion and ridicule. So Moshe pleaded with Hashem to choose someone more appropriate to the task. He argued his case for seven days but finally, “the wrath of Hashem burned against Moshe” and he reluctantly accepted the assignment. However, we must ask, why did Hashem choose Moshe of all people to lead the Jews and represent them before Pharaoh? What can we learn from this that is pertinent to our lives?

In this week’s Parsha, Bo, we can see the result of Moshe’s stewardship. It would seem that he performed his duties masterfully. Pharaoh was brought to his knees and all of Egypt suffered as a result of his recalcitrance. You would have thought that the Egyptians would harbor great hatred for the Jews. Surprisingly, Moshe was very respected throughout the land. “Hashem granted the Jews favor in the eyes of Egypt; moreover, the man Moses was great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people.” Because of this newfound grace, the Egyptians generously outfitted the departing Jews with their finest clothing and jewelry. Still the question persists, what was it about Moshe that warranted his appointment?

There have been numerous leaders who have graced the pages of history. Many have been incompetent failures while others have been greedy thugs who abused their offices for personal gain and self aggrandizement. At the same time, there have been leaders with genuine

skills who have changed the course of history. It is interesting to note, however, that even successful leaders invariably experienced many failures which ultimately cancelled out their achievements. How are we to understand this phenomenon?

During their tenures most leaders will experience victories and setbacks. The achievement of great success poses a unique challenge to the ego of the ruler. In general, he possesses an exaggerated sense of his own greatness. Thus, when things work out well and everyone praises him, his narcissism skyrockets. It may even reach the point where he feels absolute faith in his own instincts and has no use for careful thought and dissenting opinions.

Total confidence in the veracity of one’s intuitive powers can lead to massive calamities. Pirkei Avot urges judges, even the most sagacious among them, to be “patient and deliberate in judgement.” This means that they are not intrinsically superior and “all knowing.” They must work through the facts and reason carefully in order to arrive at the truth. Even the greatest genius cannot rely on “snap” judgments. How much more so a powerful leader whose rash decisions can unleash great harm on masses of people. It is the uncontrollable ego of corrupt individuals in positions of power that have caused most of the catastrophes in history.

It is true that Moshe lacked the superficial charisma that comes from “smooth speech”. But we see from his example, that this is not necessarily a barrier to success. Moshe had the internal attributes of leadership. He had enormous courage as can be seen from his confrontation with the Egyptian who was beating a Jew and later with the shepherds who afflicted Yitro’s daughters.

In addition, he was absolutely committed to the welfare of the Jewish People as can be seen from his intercession with Hashem to save them from destruction after the sins of the Golden Calf and the Spies. His dedication went so far that he put his life on the line to preserve them. In pleading for forgiveness of the sin of the Golden Calf he said; “And now if You would but forgive their sin! but if not, erase me now from Your book that You

have written.” Rashi explains the meaning of this unique statement. “Moshe, the loyal and loving leader of Israel “confronted” G-d, as it were: ‘If You forgive Israel, good! But if not, take my life and remove any mention of me from the Torah, for I cannot be a leader who failed to gain mercy for his people.’”

There is an additional matter to consider. In portraying the character of Moshe the Torah says; “Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth!” The Rambam maintains that this virtue is the most consequential to human perfection. It is also of great significance for successful leadership. The fatal defect of otherwise effective rulers is the inability to control their massive egotism.

To be truly great and yet remain genuinely humble is very rare and reflects actual perfection. It is easy to be modest when one is ineffective or mediocre but when one can point to enormous achievements the ego soars.

Moshe was a great leader but he harbored no desire to wield power. He served only because Hashem had chosen him and because of his love for the Jewish People. His successes were not motivated by the desire for glory and therefore did not “go to his head.”

His example has relevance for all of us. In whatever field we may serve, whether we are doctors, rabbis, teachers, etc. we should strive to emulate Moshe’s combination of competence and character. This will enable us to keep growing and not be sidetracked by empty vanity.

Hashem did not reject Moshe due to his lack of superficial finesse. He chose him because of his profound wisdom and exalted character traits. This is the model we should turn to in choosing leaders.

May we be worthy of, and may Hashem provide us with genuinely righteous leaders of Israel in the mold of Moshe Rabbenu.

Shabbat shalom. ■

Dear Friends,

In this time of social isolation, we should seek ways to avoid boredom by staying occupied with meaningful activity. The world of virtual reality allows us to stay in touch with friends and attend all kinds of classes available online. But that can only take you so far. Comes Shabbat and Yom Tov, and you need books, especially on the parsha. I personally recommend Eternally Yours on Genesis <http://bit.ly/EY-Genesis> and Exodus <http://bit.ly/EY-Exodus>, and my newest one on Numbers <http://bit.ly/EY-Numbers2>. They are easy to read, interesting, and thought-provoking conversation starters. I am especially interested in your feedback and hope you can write a brief review and post it on Amazon.



Why these Plagues?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

As is true regarding all God's acts, the 10 Plagues contained great wisdom and direction for man. As is true regarding all Torah sections, God provides hints to His underlying lessons and clues to His brilliance. In the Biblical verses recording the 10 Plagues, which convey God's words to Moses, Moses' words to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's reactions, we discover such messages.

Dam, Tzefardaya: Blood & Frogs

God wished the plagues to unveil Egypt's idolatrous beliefs as fallacies and recognize Him alone as the Creator. The first plague—Dam—intended to refute the Nile's divine status. How can a god be subjected to other forces converting it into blood?

Rabbi Reuven Mann wrote: "Pharaoh went to his house and did not give credence even to this" (Exod. 7:23). What do I care where he went after blood took place? Pharaoh took comfort and security in his house and this enabled him to deny reality. And that is why in the next plague, Tzefardaya, Torah makes the point that the frogs invaded his very living quarters to remove that basis of denial.

And I believe Exodus 8:8 proves Rabbi Mann's point, as this verse refers to frogs as a plague that God "gave to Pharaoh," and not more inclusively, that He "gave to Egypt."

Lessons: The Nile was no god; one cannot escape God's lessons.

Kinnim: Lice

When the astrologers could not reproduce the plague of lice, they hid their weakness behind the excuse "it is the finger of God" (Exod. 8:15). God records their feeble attempt at duplicating lice precisely to disarm their claims to astrological power and magic. However, until Shechin, the astrologers retained their positions, for they attributed only this plague of Kinnim to God, but not Dam and Tzefardaya. A purpose in exposing the astrologers was that although their duplication of the previous two miracles were mere sleight of hand, some ignorant onlookers might attribute powers to them. Saadia Gaon explains that the astrologers used dyes to mimic blood and used chemicals to cause the frogs to leap from the chemically polluted waters. Saadia Gaon remarks that Egypt's magic was sleight of hand, and nothing more (The Book of Beliefs & Opinions, pg. 153).

Lesson: Powers do not exist outside God.

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Arove: Mix of Wild Animals

“And I will distinguish on the day the land of Goshen that My people stand [dwell] upon, restricting Arove from [entering] there, that you may know the I am God in the midst of the land” (Exod. 8:18).

Egypt believed in general powers with their many gods: Ptah (god of creation), Ra (god of sun/wind), Matt (god of stars/seasons), Horus (god of the sky), Osiris and Anubis (gods of death), etc. God taught the profound lesson that His dominion extends to Earth: “in the midst of the land.” A distinction between lands exhibited God’s awareness of various peoples. This was a first step in educating Pharaoh on God’s “specific” providence: a view different from the Egyptian view of “general” powers. Secondly, animal attacks were alien to the idolatrous view (invented from human insecurity) that gods provide only good. An extension of this second idea was that animal attacks forced the Egyptians to question animal deification, as animals no longer “favored” them as they had believed. This is alluded to as the word “sacrifice” is repeated five times in this plague, indicating Egypt’s reduced veneration of animals, to

the extent that Pharaoh approved animal sacrifice.

Lesson: God’s reign extends to the Earth.

Dever: Animal Deaths

“Pharaoh sent [messengers] and behold, not one of Israel’s cattle died...” (Exod. 9:7).

Dever was a second step displaying God’s specific providence: reward and punishment of individuals expressed through only the sinners’ loss of property. With this verse, God isolates Pharaoh’s intrigue that a God will distinguish between individuals, punishing some and sparing others. From Pharaoh’s response of intrigue, it appears that Egypt did not view their gods as relating to individuals, but as relating to Egypt on the whole.

Lesson: God relates to individuals; He knows man’s thoughts; man is rewarded and is punished based on his relationship to the Creator.

Shechin: Boils

“And the astrologers could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the

boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt.” (Exod. 9:11)

How do boils—a malady of the skin, not bones or muscles—affect posture? Also, of what relevance are the boils on “all of Egypt?” Why mention that, “all Egyptians” had boils, if the message concerns only the astrologers’ inability to stand? Furthermore, of what significance is the astrologers’ inability to stand before Moses, as opposed to standing before Pharaoh or others? And if they truly could not stand, let them sit! But “standing before” someone has another meaning...

The primary lesson is that we use the verse as the starting point, and let it teach us. We must not to start with our own unchecked thoughts and then look for some supporting verse. The posture of lying mystics adds no great wisdom to God’s Torah. The real lesson must address the basic theme of the 10 Plagues, as the plague of boils was delivered together with the other nine.

Standing also means to “present one’s self”...to appear before others. The astrologers attempted to reproduce the plagues, only to expose their inabilities. When they

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could not reproduce the plague of lice, they hid their weakness behind the lying claim, "...it is the finger of God (Exod. 8:15)." It is significant that God records their feeble attempts. So significant, that it appears from the very few words concerning the plague of boils, that the objective of this plague was precisely to disarm their claims of superiority through astrology and magic. Torah verses are selective in their messages, not merely recounting every single historical occurrence. Our verse means to teach that boils purposefully targeted the astrologers.

"And the astrologers could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt" refers not to posture, but to their ability to sustain their dignity...they could not "appear" before Moses who outperformed them. They were ashamed. But why were they any more ashamed during the plague of boils? The answer is the second part of the verse: "...for the boils were on the astrologers and all of Egypt." A comparison is made: both, the astrologers and the Egyptians possessed boils. What about this comparison prevented the astrologers from appearing before Moses? Why was their "equal" status to all other Egyptians an embarrassment to them? We see the answer quite readily. It was the astrologers' very equality to all other Egyptians that discounted their claims of possessing powers. They were no better. They could not defend themselves from boils. What type of powerful astrologer allows painful blisters to afflict him? It is the liar who allows this to happen, since in fact, he has no more defense from boils than any other Egyptian. Worse than Kinnim, Shechin embarrassed the astrologers personally, explaining why they could not "appear" before Moses.

From this plague and further we never hear from the astrologers again. God's plan worked. Additionally, not standing before Moses thereby raised Moses' status.

Lessons: Astrologers are liars; political positions do not validate people; Moses was God's true emissary.

Barad: Hail

"For this time I will send all My plagues upon your heart, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world" (Exod. 9:14).

Egypt feared the heavens (Rabbi Israel Chait) explaining their invention of Horus, the sky god. With Hail, God intended to show His dominion over another domain: the heavens. We see Egypt's fear of the heavens, for once the hail commences, Pharaoh said to Moses, "Plead with the Lord that there may be an end of God's voices and hail. I will let you go; you need stay no longer" (Exod. 9:28). Pharaoh's deification of the heavens is seen in his mention of God's "voices," Pharaoh personified thunder, as if some angry being is behind it, as stated earlier, "For this time I will send all My plagues upon your heart." More than Dever, Barad displayed a "will" that caused Pharaoh to feel victimized.

This lesson is extended to Moses' rebuke: "Now the flax and barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud [they were stiff and snapped under Hail's force], but the wheat and the emmer were not hurt, for they ripen late [they were soft and bent]" (Exod. 9:31:32). Moses was not teaching agriculture to Pharaoh. He was showing how this plague was designed around Pharaoh's personality, to teach that his obstinance would cause him to be broken like stiff plants, but that he could survive if he "bent" to God's will as did the soft, late-ripening crops. Here, Moses tells Pharaoh that God has singled him out, and knows him.

Lessons: The lofty heavens too are nothing more than another creation and not to be deified; God includes lessons in His acts.

Arbeh: Locusts

"They shall devour the surviving remnant that was left to you after the hail" (Exod. 10:5). "Then the Lord said to Moses, "Hold out your arm over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat up all the grasses in the land, whatever the hail has left" (Exod. 10:12).

Torah repeats the intent of Arbeh: to finish Barad's job. God teaches that He controls weather and animal life. Polytheism is false.

For how can weather and animal life target the same objective—destruction of crops—were there not a Being orchestrating an identical purpose from both realms?

Lesson: A single God controls all realms of the universe; polytheism is false.

Choshech: Darkness

"People could not see one another" (Exod. 10:23).

Solitary confinement is the worst punishment, as man's greatest need is to be social. When isolated from others, the social need is so powerful that man conjures images of people (shadim) to offer him company. [Rashi says that on the Ark there were shadim, as Noah too was isolated.] The gemara (Gittin 66a, Tosfos) does not say these shadim are dangerous, for they are phantoms of the mind, and not real. The gemara merely says not to greet them as this would raise their status from imaginary to real, and Torah rejects all lies.

There is a purpose in Choshech which emanates from isolation. The Egyptians' loss of social intercourse combined with darkness prevented shadim (even phantoms require a visual basis) thereby forcing their yearning for dialogue to be converted into confronting God, the source of this darkness. Understanding this plague was God's work, the Egyptians were offered the opportunity to face God: a force that controls the universe: "For it is not My desire that the wicked shall die—declares the Lord God, [rather] repent, therefore, and live!" (Ezek. 18:32).

Lesson: God knows the human mind and how to make it confront truth.

Bechoros: Firstborn Deaths

As Rabbi Chait taught, this plague intended to terminate the transmission of Egyptian culture, which was passed on by the first borns. In summary, God exposed Egypt's gods and leaders as phony. He exhibited His control over all corners of the universe. Polytheism is false. God taught Egypt His specific knowledge of individual man and that He rewards and punishes. ■

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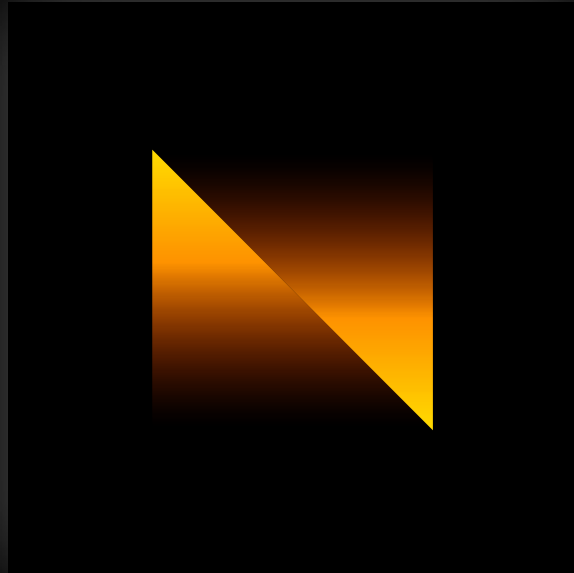
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