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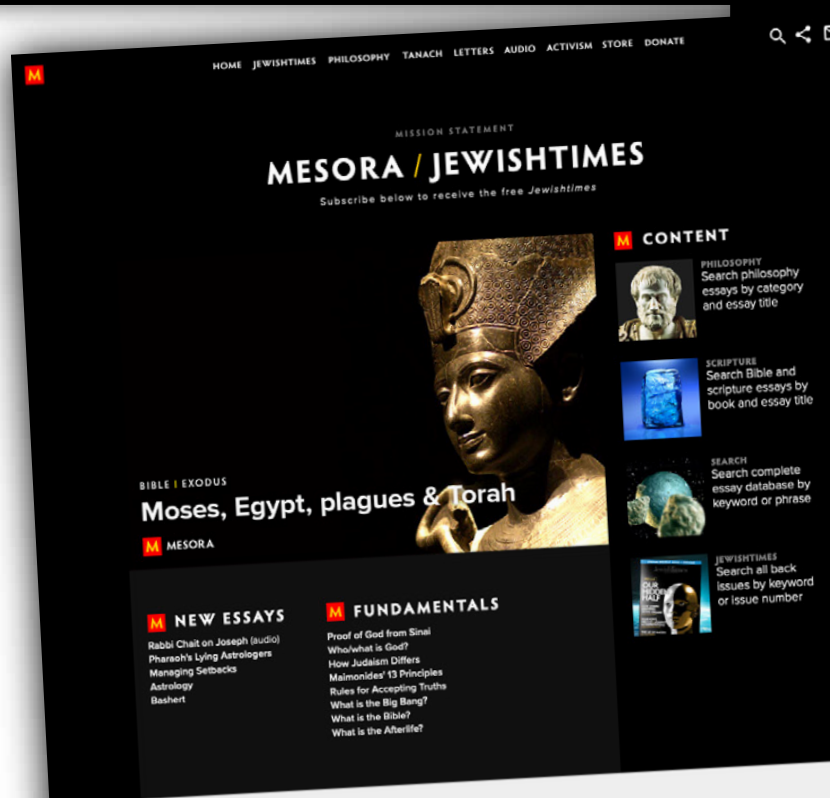
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OUR PURPOSE: WISDOM & MORALITY



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 amazement.

Pleasing Others: Don't seek approval over truth. Torah says, "What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:5). "Don't fear man" (Deut. 1:7). "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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An apparent redundancy in Maimonides' words leads to a greater appreciation for his precision.



"People will forget you very quickly when you die.
Don't live just to please them."

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What's Our Significance?

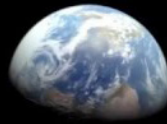
READER: After viewing a documentary about the Universe, I realized Earth is so microscopic on the scale of the solar system. Compared to the galaxies, it is actually insignificant, as we ascend higher and higher into the ever-increasing bigness of the Universe. This now brings me to how myopic Judaism and most earthly religion on Earth is: the focus of Judaism is on Israel, a particular land, and a small insignificant people in collective human history. Why is Judaism so earthly conscious? What about heaven, the infinite realm of the infinite Creator, what about the afterlife? If Earth is so tiny looking down from interstellar galaxies, what about our eternal destiny with the Creator? Where are we going to be a billion years from now?

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RABBI: King David shared the same sentiment:

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place, what is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him? You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty. You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his feet, sheep and oxen, all of them, and wild beasts, too; the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, whatever travels the paths of the seas. (Psalms 8:4-9)

But King David did not stop there, he concludes with this:

O God, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout Earth! (Psalms 8:10).

Despite his realistic, lowly assessment of man, King David valued God's will in creating man. Why? Because God gave man the intellect to dominate Earth and all therein. He understood God's will that however small man is, he is truly elevated due to God's gift of intellect where man can recognize his Creator, as King David says, "How majestic is Your name throughout Earth!" That very last phrase demonstrates man's capacity to recognize God's greatness, and herein lies the worth of earthly existence: that a creature can marvel at God's wisdom.

Judaism values man's earthly stay as this is where man finds the Creator. The magnitude of galaxies do not outshine man's worth; they are inanimate and cannot recognize God. What is outstanding? It is the amazing reality that God bestowed the intellect and Torah upon a species so they can find astonishment in God's wisdom through creation and Torah. All else—regardless of their magnitude—are inanimate.

Judaism values Torah study over all else, making the Jew mankind's teacher and prized nation. Thus, the Jew, his save haven of Israel and his time on Earth play a central role in God's will for mankind. And mankind is God's will in creating Earth.

If the Jew is wise, he will fulfill God's will to share Torah with the world. And if man is wise, he will preserve his afterlife and destiny with God for all eternity by using his time on Earth as God willed him to do, by studying the universe and Torah.

READER: What a beautiful answer. Thanks so much for your reply. It is humbling realizing the greatness of the Universe and also realizing how amazing and great the Being behind it is all going to be. God bless. ■

Submit your letters and questions to Comments@Mesora.org

PARSHA

Man's Failure

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Parshas Bechukosai warns man of divine punishments for his failure. But what precisely is man's true failure? Rashi comments on Lev. 26:14:

"BUT IF YOU WILL NOT HEarken UNTO ME": This refers to laborious Torah study in order to fathom the textual interpretation of the Sages. [You will be punished] if you will not hearken unto Me to study the Torah industriously as I command you. And in this verse, what is the meaning of the word "Me"? It implies that your disobedience is directed against Me. The word "Me" is used only in the case of such a one who knows his Master and rebels against Him. Similarly in reference to Nimrod: (Gen. 10:9) "A mighty hunter before the Lord" which means that he knew God and yet purposely rebelled against Him. Similarly in reference to the men of Sodom: (Gen. 13:13) "And the men of Sodom were evil and sinful against the Lord exceedingly." They knew their Master and yet, intentionally rebelled against him.

Rashi suggests the entire chapter containing these threats of punishment is addressed only to

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people like Nimrod and the men of Sodom, not to one who sins against God unwittingly.

Yet, this condemnation of one who fails to “toil in Torah” requires attention. Although failure to toil alone without rebellion doesn’t meet with this degree of severe curses, one who does not toil in Torah study but studies casually, is committing an error.

God designed man with the capacity to thoroughly enjoy his existence and attain full satisfaction. Satisfaction refers to a person who expends all his or her energies. When an artist is engrossed in painting a scene, he thinks of nothing else, as all his energies are fully expended. He is happy. The same is true when a hiker arrives at the summit of a beautiful mountain range. He views the 360° panorama with complete enjoyment. The novelty is refreshing. However, both the painter and hiker eventually find frustration; the novelty in the artistic expression and in the view respectively offers only momentary satisfaction, as the nature of all physical pleasures is temporal, and novelty fades. The human psyche requires regular stimulation, and change provides this. But paintings and scenic views are static; they eventually lose all pleasure, and this happens quite quickly. As Rabbi Israel Chait taught, the pursuit of wisdom is the one phenomenon which offers constant novelty, providing regular satisfaction. In wisdom,

endless new ideas emerge as long as one is studying. This is non-stop novelty and is refreshing at every turn. This is Torah’s design. This is the daily pleasure of one who toils in Torah.

Why must one “toil”? Strata of rock must be unearthed to finally descend to the depth of treasures. Torah too shares this design of layers. The deeper one studies, analyzes and thinks, the more creative thoughts and ideas he discovers. I experienced this once again last shabbos. A friend and I studied a few halachos (laws) in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah. We pondered an apparent redundancy, which is unheard of in Maimonides’ writings: each of his new laws adds a new point; he does not repeat himself. We eventually identified a textual inconsistency, which lead to the answer (see “Maimonides’ Precision” in this Jewishtimes issue). King Solomon too taught, “If you seek it as silver and search for it as treasures, then you will understand the fear of God and you will find knowledge of God” (Prov. 2:4,5).

Thus, if man does not toil in Torah study, but casual engages it, he has not engaged his mind to its full capacity, which is the required level of study to discover the greatest knowledge. God wants the greatest good for man. He designed us to make the greatest discoveries, but only through the greatest effort. Anything less is a failure. ■



MERON

When Tragedy Strikes

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This past week on Lag B'Omer a terrible tragedy struck in Meron in the midst of what ought to have been joyous celebrations. The phenomenon of simcha turning into sorrow is, unfortunately, not so rare as it should be in Israel.

That is because for all of Israel's advances in science, especially in the area of medical innovations that save lives, the goal of peace with the Arabs who surround her remains elusive. All of the various strategies that have been employed have not succeeded in removing hatred and enmity and the specter of terrorism striking in the most unlikely places still remains.

But none of this prepared us for the tragedy at Meron. The deaths there were not the result of terrorism. No one placed a bomb or opened fire on defenseless civilians. Rather a stampede broke out as massive amounts of people sought to enter an area not spacious enough to contain them. Many of the deceased were young men in the prime of life and many left widows and orphaned children.

The entire nation of Israel and the Jewish People around the world were shocked by this unanticipated event which darkened the Chag of Lag B'Omer. Prime Minister Netanyahu declared a National Day of Mourning and as I walked by President Reuven Rivlin's residence on Shabbat morning I noticed a set table with a black tablecloth and counted 45 yahrzeit candles upon it. We must mourn but also strive to derive some meaning from this tragedy.

One of this week's Parshas, Bechukotai, describes the various punishments that will come upon us for violation of the Mitzvot. The question arises, should this be regarded as divine punishment for religious shortcomings? I wholeheartedly agree with the principle that when calamities, especially national ones, occur we are

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obligated to look within and search out our sins.

But I don't think we are obligated to believe that the terrible event was a supernatural happening designed specifically to dispense punishment for various transgressions. That is because according to numerous officials this calamity was eminently avoidable. In fact many who were familiar with the physical characteristics of the facility in which the gathering was held had expressed the fear that a calamity such as the one that occurred was in the offing. When the causes of a mishap are easily explainable in terms of the natural order one need not resort to metaphysical explanations in order to understand them.

It seems to me that the fact that we have an obligation to introspect does not necessarily imply that what transpired was a miracle. This was not a case where the earth opened up and swallowed Korach and all his congregation. Rather everything that happened took place within the framework of the natural order and, with the proper precautions, might have been avoided.

This, of course, does not exonerate us from the obligation to repent. For when a tragedy occurs whether of a miraculous or natural character it obligates us to look within and expose flaws. In the course of our soul searching we may have to confront the fact that we did not act to remove the hazards that were responsible for the disaster that ensued.

This laziness and lackadaisical attitude itself constitutes a very serious religious violation. The Torah commands that when we build a new house we must "erect a barrier for our roofs" so that "the one who falls should not fall from it." Not only that but we must remove all sources of danger from our dwellings so that we do not "place blood" in our homes.

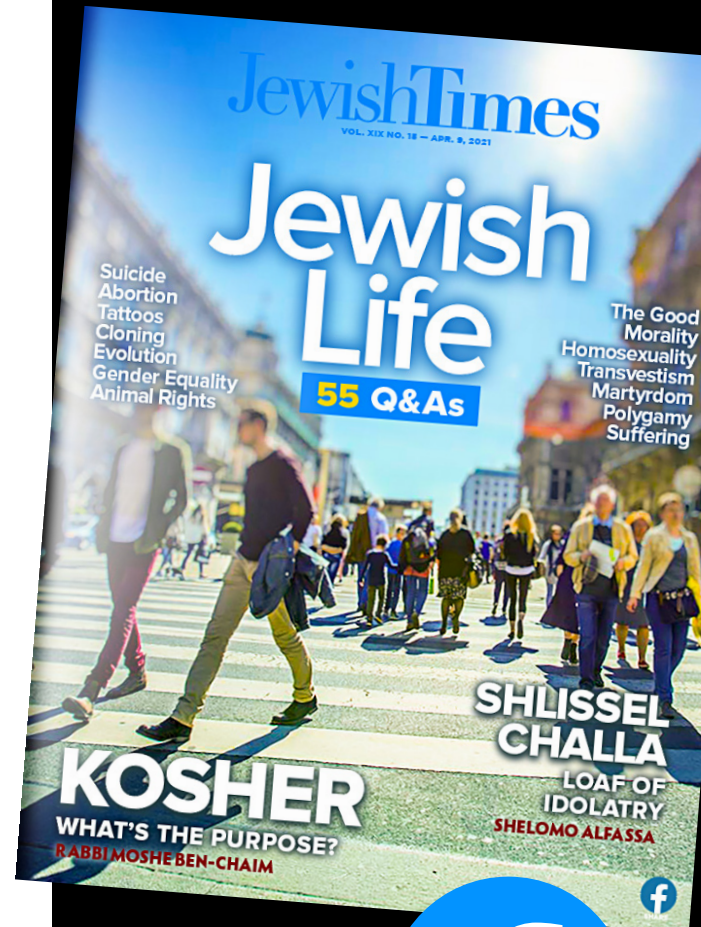
When a terrible catastrophe happens we need to look within and search for sin. This should not be limited only to ritual shortcomings like not praying properly. If the happening was a natural and avoidable one which came about because of laziness and stubbornness then those very attitudes constitute a serious sin which requires Teshuva.

Lag B'Omer takes place during the mourning period known as "Sefira". During this time 24,000 students of the great sage Rabbi Akiva died from a mysterious plague. This clearly was not a "natural" event and the Sages sought out the reason for this divine punishment. They asserted that these great Talmudic scholars were punished because "they did not act respectfully one to another."


When we observe the mourning period of Sefira we must concentrate on the need to be respectful of all people and seek to honestly confront any tendencies we may have to be rude and dismissive of others. As we observe the aveilut for the victims of Meron all of us should engage in honest introspection. There may be many areas in our own lives where we fail to take necessary precautions and expose ourselves and others to serious danger.

Are there potential sources of calamity in our homes, do we keep stairwells well-lighted and are we safe or reckless drivers? If we emerge from this tragedy with a heightened sense of safety and concern for own lives and that of others that will impart some meaning to a tragic happening. May we merit to avoid such things in the future.

Shabbat Shalom ■



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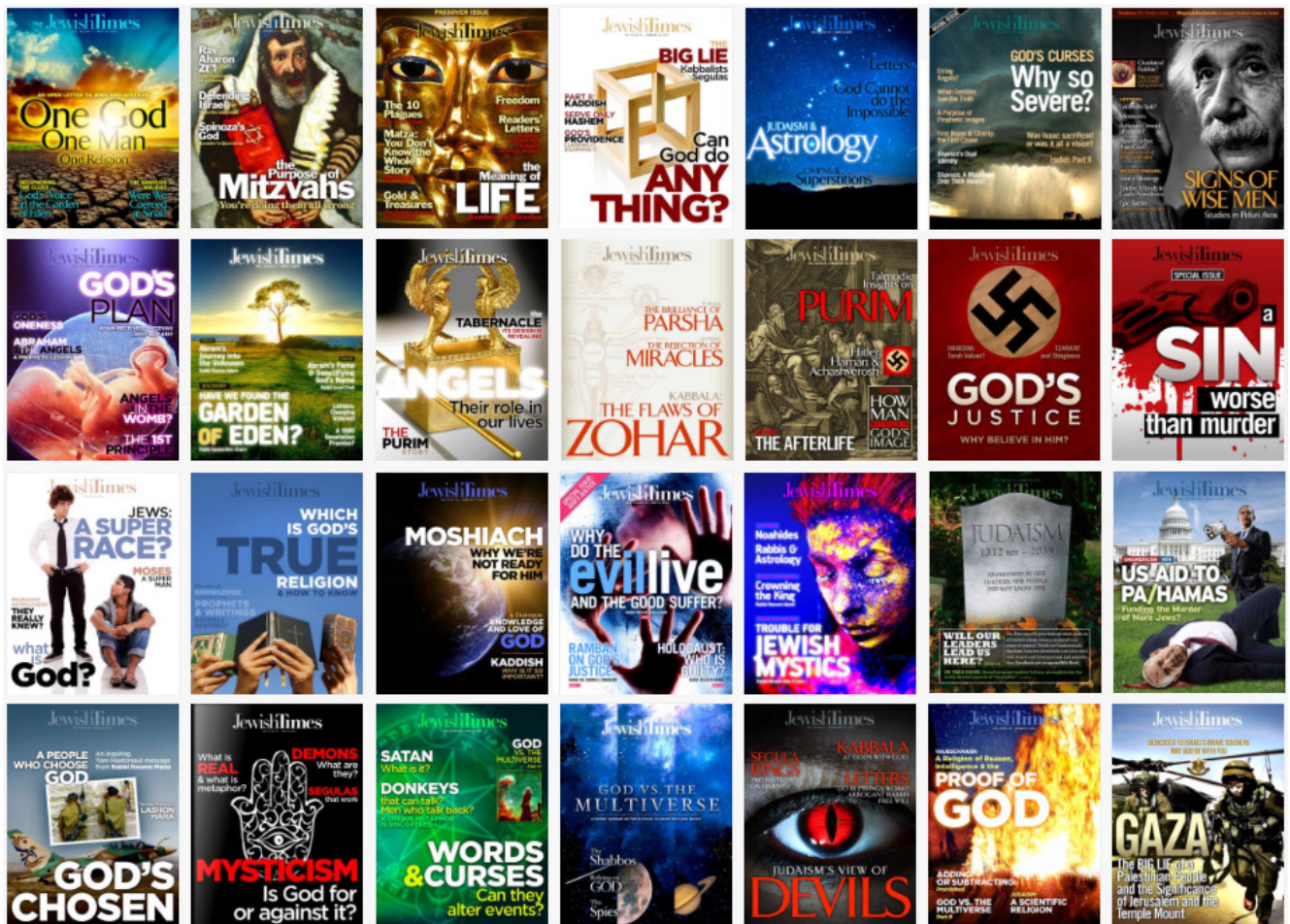
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In his Laws of Kings, Maimonides discusses Noahide laws. My friend Rabbi Leib Moshe Abarbanel noted an apparent redundancy. But as Maimonides is known for his precise formations, never repeating an idea, we seek a solution. Below are the two laws:

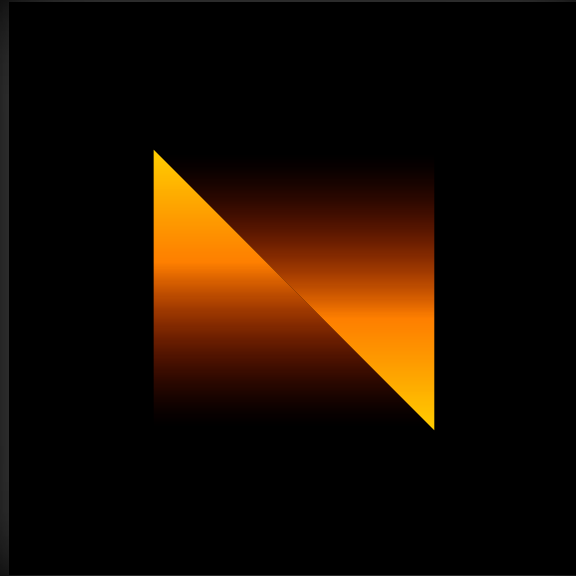
9:12 — A Jew who slaughters a domesticated animal, even cutting the [appropriate] two pipes, as long as the animal's body quivers, a limb or flesh taken from the body is prohibited for a Noahide due to the prohibition of Eiver Min Hachai—eating from a living animal.

9:13 — All that is prohibited for a Jew due to Eiver Min Hachai is also prohibited for a Noahide. And there are some matters for which a Noahide is punished, whereas a Jew is not. For a Noahide, whether the animal is domesticated or wild, pure or impure, the Noahide is punishable [on two sins]: Eiver Min Hachai and due to Flesh from a living animal. And a limb or flesh that is taken from a quivering animal body—even though a Jew slaughtered the [appropriate] two pipes—this limb and flesh are prohibited due to Eiver Min Hachai.

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Maimonides' Precision

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



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