

# JewishTimes

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## GIVING MILK TO STATUES

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot touch, feet, but cannot walk; they can make no sound in their throats. Those who fashion them, all who trust in them, are like their statues. (Psalms 115:4-8). (CONT. BELOW)

## LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

# Religions' False Claims

**READER:** Judaism's proof is 600,000 male witnesses at Mount Sinai...mass witnesses is 100% proof. [However] as 1 billion Hindus saw their god Ganesha drinking milk in 1995, isn't that more a valid proof than 600,000? Shouldn't you be a Hindu instead of being a Jew, if your desire is seeking God by objective means? How would you respond to this claim by Hindus?

**RABBI:** No report says 1 billion Hindus witnessed a miracle, or even a stone idol "drinking." The report is as follows:

*On September 21, 1995 one worshipper offered a spoonful of milk to a statue of Ganesha, and the milk apparently disappeared, as if the statue was drinking it. News spread across the nation (and then the world), with Hindus flocking to temples and feeding milk to statues. The event was widespread in temples around the world. But, oddly enough, seemed to end within a matter of hours—in most places the report stopped the same day that it started. Media*

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attention was intense, including coverage at the *New York Times* and the *BBC*.

Scientists then tested the "miracle" by giving milk containing food coloring to statues in a New Delhi temple. They hypothesized that the milk was being pulled from spoons via capillary action, and in fact was running down the front of the statue rather than disappearing. Video of the "miracle" seems to support this hypothesis, with many clear examples of milk running down the front of statues, and pools of milk around statues. Prabir Ghosh was one of the people to demonstrate how the Hindus were coaxed into believing the miracle. Sitaram Kesri, labor minister in the Narasimha Rao government, quoted internal reports to say that a temple in Jhandewalan Park near the RSS headquarters in Delhi was the epi-centre of the miracle. He said it was a ploy by the Hindu nationalist BJP to gain votes in the ensuing Lok Sabha elections by spreading false rumors. The phenomenon reportedly spread by an organized barrage of late-night telephone calls to Hindu temples all over India and the world, telling them to feed their statues milk. The story was picked up, mostly as a novelty piece, by news services around the world, including *CNN*, the *BBC*, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*.

The facts: 1 Hindu claims milk vanished. While on May 2, 1312 BCE, 2.5 million Jewish eyewitnesses transmit that they were at Mt. Sinai hearing an intelligent voice emanating from the fiery mountain. It is the only history of the Jews from that era. Had it been a lie, it would never become the only history; the "true" alternative history should also have been transmitted. Furthermore, Torah states family names, tribes, census, locations traveled and dates.

Facts vs. facts clearly unveil this Hindu careless discrepancy:

- 1 Hindu's imagination vs. 2.5 million Jewish eyewitnesses
- Absorbing liquid vs. a supernatural voice emanating from inside fire and earthquakes
- An immediately rejected mystical Hindu claim vs. universally accepted world history for 3334 years

These comparisons clearly expose the Hindu fallacy. But what prompts Hindus to even attempt offering a drink to stone elephant idols? The Hindu story was mass hysteria by mystics who already believe in statues as deities. "1 worshipper" interpreted milk absorption as a miracle and thousands elsewhere followed suit. That person was feeding a lifeless statue, that he created with his own hands. Why do gods need humans to create them? But, as he deceived himself the statue was alive, he can deceive himself that it drank the milk:

*Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot touch, feet, but cannot walk; they can make no sound in their throats. Those who fashion them, all who trust in them, are like their statues. (Psalms 115:4-8).*

Instead of using observation and rational thought as the scientists did to explain the phenomenon, mystics don't use critical thinking...but accept sheer nonsense. That's why Hindus everywhere tried to feed their idols milk...but the claims ended the same day. The scientists exposed the phenomenon as nothing more than absorption. The "widespread" belief of the claim does not equate with "mass witnesses" found only in connection with the Jews at Mount Sinai. The Hindu story itself claims "in most places it stopped the same day that it started." The story itself reveals it was false. ■

## JESUS: Unwitnessed Resurrection

**READER:** Didn't Matthew witness Jesus being resurrected?

**RABBI:** No Gospel personality—or any person—claims to have eye-witnessed Jesus being resurrected. No Gospel writer claims to be who they are ascribed as. Meaning, Matthew never claimed to have written the book of Matthew. From even the Christian vantage point, this claim fails.

No one witnessed Paul making such a claim. But even had Paul made such a claim, obviously damaging to this purported claim is that the very people Paul claims as witnesses, fail to transmit the claim of resurrection. This is akin to a person reading a story of "a wizard who performed in front of many," and claiming it is historical truth, based solely on the story. But you can't prove a story, from that very story! That's circular reasoning. And without those purported witnesses transmitting the story, the story goes unproven. Paul too was repeating a belief, not recording what he or others witnessed. Paul adopted a "faith." Resurrection is a belief; it's not a "witnessed event" of a dead body undergoing resurrection. In fact, nothing was witnessed. To suggest an empty tomb proves resurrection, is irrational. Therefore, it is possible that a [mere] belief in Jesus' resurrection emerged first, and that the empty tomb story was fabricated only when early critics of Christianity doubted the veracity of this claim. Thus, resurrection is conjecture.

Proof is based on events or reasoning. But an empty grave offers neither and therefore cannot prove resurrection. Christianity also fails to offer prophetic validation for any of its personalities, for no one performed miracles, and worse, they rejected God's command not to alter Torah. ■



*Seeing Joseph approaching from a distance, the brothers said, "Here comes the dreamer. Come now, let us kill Joseph and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall then see what comes of his dreams!" But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life." And Reuben went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves"—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. When Joseph approached to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his coat, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down and ate bread... (Gen. 37:20-25)*

**RABBI:** No Torah account should ever be glossed over, but should be taught to age-appropriate students.

You question morality: How are right and wrong determined? If you created a painting, you alone determine how it should look, what colors are to be used, and the objects pictured in the painting. As it is your creation, no one can tell you that you painted "incorrectly." As God created life, He too alone determines when it is to be created, sustained or terminated. His terms are the authoritative voice of "morality." If we disagree with God's terms, it is not He or His Torah that is at fault, but it is our corrupt thinking, for we cannot determine morality for lives we did not create. This explains why people argue if abortion is immoral, if we should kill murderers, and other moral questions. Morality is Divinely authoritative and objective, but people follow subjective baseless feelings instead. That's why they lock horns.

God commanded Moses to kill men, women and children of the 7 Nations when entering Israel. Those nations were so deviant, all remnants must be killed so as not to steer others to sin like them. God flooded Noah's generation including men, women, children and animal life, and He also annihilated Sodomites. God determined certain lives are beyond repair: "There are things so twisted that they are beyond remedy" (Koheles 1:15). God made life, so He alone determines when it is appropriate to kill a life. But He graciously records all this in Torah for our edification about morality.

**FRIEND:** By all measures, murder is an abhorrent, extreme act and fratricide is even more so. The Torah's depiction above is so callous and numb, to the point that the characters are dehumanized and lack any emotion (other than jealousy). And yet, these are our "righteous" forebears?! We name our children after the shevatim?! We callously gloss over the attempted murder when we teach this story in schools?! We, ourselves, lose some of our humanity if we are not bothered by this.

Sforno teaches the brothers viewed Joseph as a "rodaiif"—one who threatens others. That is why they were able to "sit and eat bread" after placing Joseph in the pit...Torah intentionally underscores their guiltless state of mind with these words. Their consciences were without guilt as they saw Joseph as dangerous:

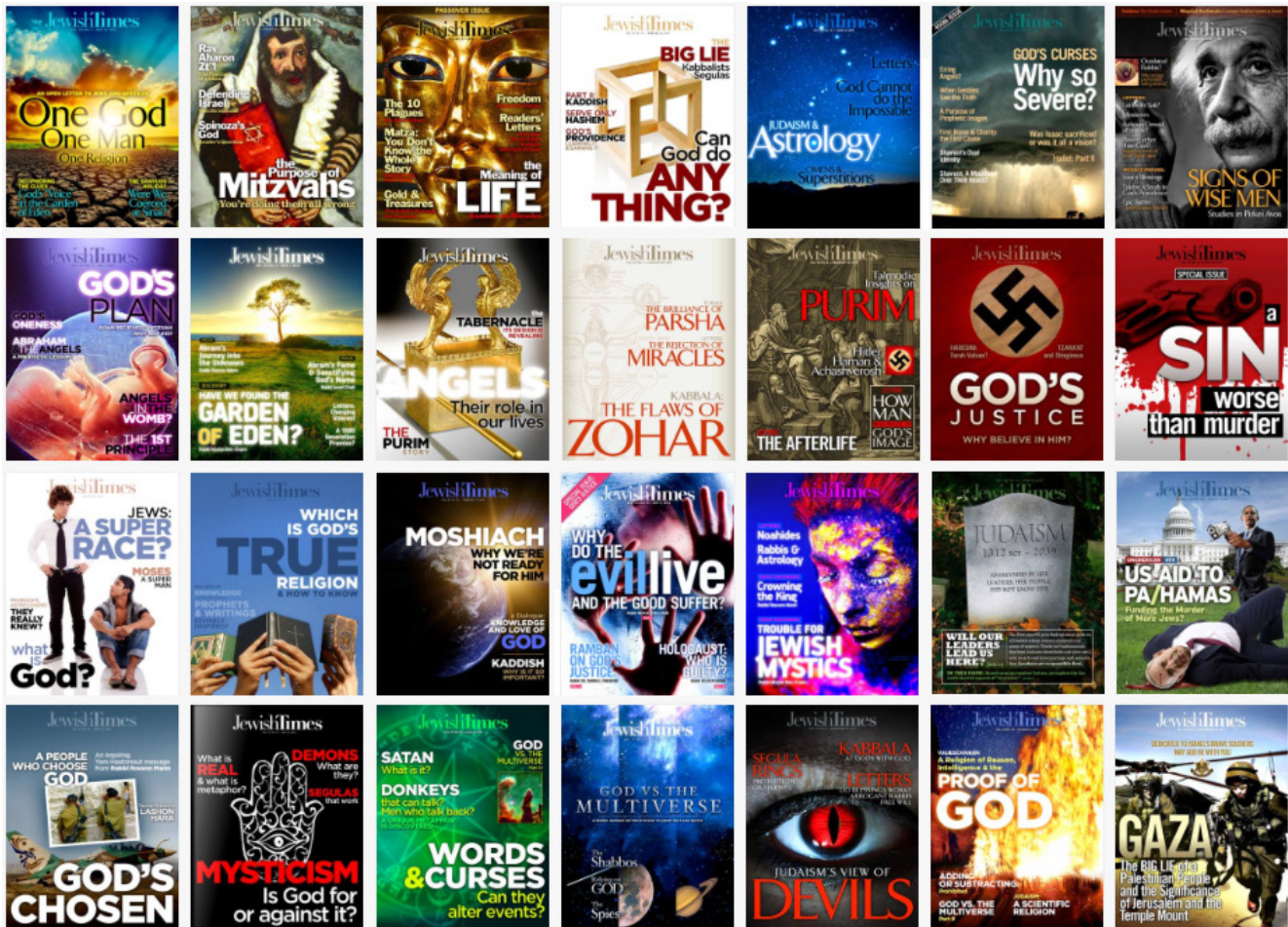
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# GOOD & EVIL Morality

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

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*They sat to eat bread: to demonstrate that what they had done was no crime in their eyes, or that the incident was not something that should interfere with their regular meal. When righteous people become aware of having inadvertently committed a sin, they not only do not celebrate it by eating, but they impose a fast day or more upon themselves.*

*If the brothers sat down to eat immediately after throwing Joseph into the pit, this is clear evidence that in their minds they had certainly not committed any wrong. We, who were not part of Yaakov's household, and who know that these brothers were unanimously elevated to become the founding fathers of the Jewish nation, must therefore accept the premise underlying their actions as being that they had truly felt themselves personally threatened by Joseph, someone who was considered so mature that his own father had appointed him as manager over his senior brothers. The brothers had made strenuous efforts to put physical distance between themselves and Joseph in order to avoid any altercation. When Joseph had sought them out in spite of their having signaled clearly that they wanted to avoid him, they felt understandably very threatened. (Sforno, Gen. 37:25)*

God displayed that life is contingent upon following Torah's code of ethics. God did not suggest that killing is to always be avoided, or abhorrent. Any father would certainly kill a person seeking to kill his children. Throughout Torah, the rabbis say, "One who comes to kill you, rise early and kill him first."

The brothers viewed Joseph as a threat. Sforno on Gen. 37:18 writes:

*We must therefore endeavor to understand the collective feelings of the brothers as being that they actually felt themselves threatened by Joseph's aspirations and they were convinced that when one feels threatened, one is entitled or even obliged to take measures to neutralize the source of the danger. This is even a halachic principle clearly spelled out in Sanhedrin 72. If we needed any proof for the truth of the brothers' feelings, it is best provided by their conversation among themselves while in jail (42:21) when they felt that God had repaid them for their misdeeds. They did not regret selling Joseph, nor even having planned to kill him; the only thing they regretted and considered themselves guilty of was that they had not responded to Joseph's pleas for mercy. In other words, even over 20 years after the event they were still convinced that Joseph had posed the sort of threat to their existence which entitled them to take extreme defensive action against him.*

Thus, as Sforno teaches, the brothers felt they were operating with proper precaution. Sforno says, "the only thing they regretted and considered themselves guilty of was that they had not responded to Joseph's pleas for mercy."

Joseph saw their callous treatment of himself as wrong, and devised a scheme to force them to repent by undergoing the duplicate situation with Benjamin. The brothers admitted they were

callous, "We are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us" (Gen. 42:21). But they repented, and that's their greatness. Judah exemplified even greater perfection by offering to accept life imprisonment. Judah made a promise to his father that Benjamin would return. He also did not feel Benjamin stole the goblet. Judah sacrificed his life to spare his father losing Benjamin. The fact that Judah knew Benjamin was not guilty, and yet he offered life imprisonment, increases Judah's greatness. Who today would do such a thing? Judah was a great man. His brothers repented as well.

Torah teaches fact: God and many men killed. Torah reveals which cases were just and which were sinful. Our society distorts God's morality; we are wrongly influenced, and we must update our sense of morality to match God's terms. Just like the brothers sinned with their callousness, we too err by defending our subjective and wrong sense of morality adopted from our culture. We must replace our false values with those God depicts in his Torah. At times we find it difficult to abandon a long-held value. But we must select our values not based on how comfortable they are, but on whether they are God's values.

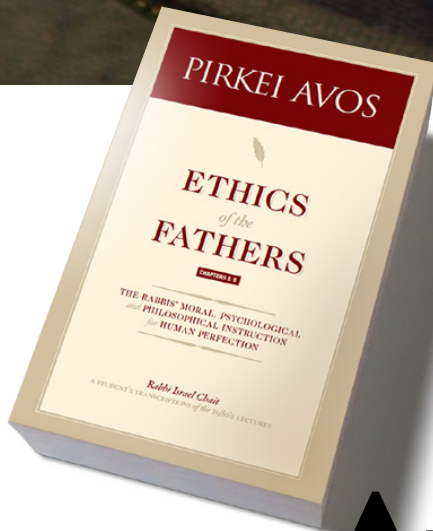
God depicts Moses, David and others as great individuals, despite their flaws. If God forgives even grievous sins, then we too cannot eternally condemn others. We also cannot render a summation of one's character based on isolated events, despite their severity in our eyes. "You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land" (Deut. 23:8). Rashi writes:

*THOU SHALT NOT ABHOR AN EGYPTIAN all-in-all (utterly), although they cast your male children into the river. And what is the reason that you should not abhor him utterly? Because they were your hosts in time of need (during Joseph's reign when the neighboring countries suffered from famine); therefore although they sinned against you, do not utterly abhor them."*

Torah teaches a unique type of morality: People like Egyptians can sin, yet still deserve recognition for their good actions. The brothers sinned, but they are not summarily disqualified due to that sin. In fact, it was not until all 12 brothers passed away that the Jews in Egypt succumbed to idolatry. Thus, the brothers provided great strength to Israel. Long after they died, God commanded their names be eternally inscribed on the High Priest's breastplate, and on his Ephod's onyx shoulder stones. This must make us question any attacks on their perfection.

God does not sentence a person based on a single sin. God weighs all man's actions before any sentence:

*Each and every one of the sons of man has virtues and vices. He whose virtues exceed his vices is a just man, and he whose vices exceed his virtues is an evildoer; if both are evenly balanced, he is mediocre. Even so is a state. If the virtues of all of its inhabitants exceeded their vices, it is, indeed, a just state; but if their vices exceeded, it is, indeed, a wicked state. Even such is a standard for the whole world. (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:1) ■*



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# Attaining Pleasure

**RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT** — *Transcribed by a student*

One should leave the pleasures because they are false. Desire attaches itself to a fantasy; it is a phantom of something else that one desires. [The pleasure is not the true object one seeks.] Man is different from an animal. An animal desires the very thing it seeks; there is no fantasy or phantom. But when man desires something, he does not want it for its own sake. The desired object is a substitute for something in his past, which is the true object of his desire. Man's past is his infantile state, where the child is like an animal as his desire is for the very object he seeks. People recognize that children are very happy [because they are fully satisfied when they obtain their desires].

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In human maturation, somehow man's infantile enjoyments cease to offer satisfaction. A person then chooses replacements that somehow reflect the original, but they are substitutes. That new substitute becomes glorified in man's eyes and he is convinced that the substitute will offer him the identical satisfaction as his original objects of desire offered [during infancy]. A mirage is a good example, as here, one's desire is so great that he fantasizes that this is the object of his desire. Neurosis is the same phenomenon where one believes something to be real when it is nonexistent.

Man's energies require an outlet. Therefore, he can select or imagine something that will offer him the satisfaction he craves. Man becomes convinced that the substitute is the object that he needs. Therefore, he attaches his desire and even his mind [to that object of his desire] and then applies all his energies to obtain that object. But, as this object is a substitute, he never achieves full satisfaction. His disappointment compels him to search for another replacement.

Why does man have such a nature? Because without it, he would never be capable of a life of wisdom. In the pursuit of wisdom, one must remove oneself from the attachment to the physical and entertain [focus on the world of] the abstract. Man would not be able to entertain the abstract and pursue knowledge had he the capacity to gain real [complete] satisfaction from physical pleasures. [Complete satisfaction in the physical world would deter man from seeking satisfaction elsewhere.] Therefore, God structured man in such a way that he undergoes a

process where certain energies are freed from their attachments to the physical. This energy can now be redirected toward wisdom. Man differs from animals in this ability to direct his energies toward wisdom so that he can enjoy pondering wisdom. This psychological phenomenon that might appear as a curse—as man does not obtain complete satisfaction from physical desires—turns out to be man's greatest blessing, for this enables man to enjoy the world of wisdom, which is the greatest pleasure. This is man's purpose and design: to engage in the tremendous pleasure of wisdom. This happiness is the result of man's ability to fully satisfy his energies seeking satisfaction. Those energies, now frustrated by dissatisfying physical pleasures, find 100 percent satisfaction in the pursuit of wisdom.

One finds happiness when he pleasurablely consumes [all] his energies seeking satisfaction. In the physical world, this is impossible since man's objects of satisfaction are only substitutes, and his search ends in dissatisfaction, a relentless [unhappy] search. But in the pursuit of wisdom, man finds complete satisfaction for his frustrated energies. This was God's purpose: to create a creature who can utilize those energies that were deflected from pursuing physical satisfaction, and direct them to the enjoyment of wisdom. This explains why we find people like Rav Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory who engage the world of wisdom and gain great satisfaction from it.

This also explains why abstinence is the highest level. It might sound like an austere matter, but it is

in fact a very happy situation. The person who attains that level is in a blissful state because he is capable of using so much energy in wisdom that he doesn't want to waste it on anything inferior. This is what Rabbeinu Yona means about one being in line with his nature.

One could ask why God didn't design man naturally attached to wisdom, instead of going through this process of redirecting his energies from the physical. But there are creatures like that—they are called angels. We have no right to ask why God created man that way. King Solomon expressed it as follows:

*For what is man who comes after the King, after He already made him? (Koheles 2:12)*

Man can investigate only those matters subsequent to creation. Why man was created a certain way is God's knowledge alone.

If it were possible for man to experience his original infantile physical enjoyments, he would not be happy because his energy level is too great to be satisfied with physical enjoyments. Man can only find complete satisfaction in the world of wisdom. [Wisdom is the only pursuit that enables man to consume 100 percent of his energies, which is the meaning of satisfaction.] That is why as long as man does not pursue wisdom he will fail to achieve satisfaction. [The physical world is limited, and therefore man's immense energies are not consumed in the pursuit of the physical, thereby yielding frustration.] Most psychological problems are due to man's abundant energies. People fall ill because of neuroses, and certain adolescents have a high likelihood of experiencing mental illness because of their levels of dissatisfied energies. Before adolescence, there are insufficient energies to cause problems. But with the onset of adolescence, when there is a new influx of large quantities of energies, one's emotions become dammed-up as one's psychological mechanism is incapable of enjoying so much, creating a lot of pressure. This also explains why intellectual people—despite this damage—do not fall ill, as they are capable of directing their great amounts of energy toward thought. This spares them from mental illness. This is a psychological fact. ■





## Pharaoh's Altering Personality

**READER:** As Pharaoh followed all Joseph told him, why did he act differently when Moses and Aaron sought the Jews' freedom?

—Rivkah Nachmias, NY

**RABBI:** Pharaoh was desperate for a solution to the famine's onslaught. Joseph devised a plan which catered to Pharaoh's need to lead. But as Rabbi Israel Chait taught, Pharaoh's identification with—and dependency on—Joseph, could no longer be realized once Joseph died. Pharaoh's ego was momentarily depeleted when his alter ego Joseph passed on. To bolster his self-image, Pharaoh denied Joseph's existence which also translated into anti-Semitism towards all Jews whom he now enslaved. He would pay no heed to any Jew, including Moses. ■

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# LEAVING EXILE

Rabbi Reuven Mann



**T**his week's Parsha, Vayigash, describes the most moving event in all of Tanach: Yosef's reunion with his brothers. The story, which contains intense drama and suspense, ends on an amazingly happy note. All of the hatreds, suspicions and rivalries which darkened the past, suddenly vanish.

That is, because the dreams of Yosef have come to pass in an unmistakable manner. The brothers, are at his mercy; because the famine, has made them dependent of him, for sustenance ("your sheaves surrounded mine and bowed down to my sheave"). As a result of the economic situation, Yosef emerged as the spiritual leader of the Tribes.

The reconciliation was possible, because of the exalted moral level of Yosef. He who had acted recklessly—due to excessive vanity as a youth—had now emerged as the "champion of forgiveness". Hard as it is to imagine, he harbored no hostility against his brothers. He did not believe, it was his responsibility to "settle accounts"; and therefore, did not regard himself, as being in the "place of G-d". When the time came to make up, he did so with a full heart of love, for his father and all of his brothers. Whenever former enemies beseech us for forgiveness, it would be wise to read this chapter, before responding.

However, the famine was still in force, and would be for another five years. Thus, Yosef's immediate problem, was to find a way to sustain his father and the family for the duration of the crisis. Yosef wasted no time addressing this issue:

Hurry - go up to my father and say to him, 'So said your son Yosef: 'G-d has made me master of all Egypt. Come down to me ; do not delay. You will reside in the land of Goshen and you will be near to me - you, your sons, your grandchildren, your flock and your cattle, and all that is yours. And I will provide for you there - for there will be five more years of famine - so you do not become destitute,

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you your household and all that is yours.”  
(Bereishis 45:9-11)

The question arises, why was Yosef insistent, that the family uproot itself from the land of Canaan—which Hashem had designated for them to live in—and relocate in the land of Egypt? Indeed, Yaakov, upon hearing the news that Yosef was still alive, agreed to go and visit him; with the intent of returning afterward to Canaan. It was only, because Hashem came to him in a night vision, and reassured him, that he should not fear to settle in Mitzrayim; because, “I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up, and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes”; that Yaakov agreed, to settle the family in this strange land.

But, the initiative itself, came from Yosef, without any Divine instruction. What prompted Yosef to do this? In my opinion, it was because of the severity of the hunger, which only Yosef fully grasped. His goal, was not merely to provide enough to keep his family members physically alive, but to provide for all the needs of their livestock; “...so you do not become destitute, you, your household, and all that is yours.”

Yosef, did not want the family to go bankrupt, and live in a context of extreme poverty; as that could be very dangerous, on many levels. As the famine in Egypt, kept getting more severe, it would have been very difficult to export vitally needed foodstuffs, for foreigners in a different land; even if they were close relatives of Yosef. He felt, that in order to sustain the family, in a healthy and viable manner, they would have to settle in Egypt; and be viewed as members of that society.

Indeed, Pharoh, was very happy to hear, that Yosef’s brothers had arrived; for he assumed, that they partook of their brother’s great capabilities, and would make a significant contribution to his Kingdom. Therefore, he said: “I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you will eat of the fat of the land.”

It therefore, seems clear that the exigencies of the famine, were responsible for Yosef’s relocating his family in Egypt. However, they did not return to Canaan; even after the years of hunger were over, and things returned to normal. But, why not? Avraham, took up temporary residence in Egypt, to escape a famine; but he had no intention of staying there longer than necessary. True, after the incident with Sarah, Pharoh threw him out of the country; but even if he hadn’t, we must assume that Avraham would have returned to Canaan, as soon as possible. So, why didn’t Yosef make any efforts to



shepherd his brothers back to the land that Hashem wanted them to live in?

In my opinion, if the Jews had come to Egypt for sustenance, accepted Pharoh’s generous provision of superior grazing land, and then had left, when this largesse was no longer needed; it would have constituted a Chillul Hashem (desecration of the Name). The understanding with Pharoh was, that in exchange for his offers of hospitality, the brothers would not just stay temporarily; but actually settle, in a permanent manner, in Egypt. They, could not betray that understanding—by picking up and leaving—even if dwelling in Eretz Yisrael was on a spiritually higher plane.

We can contrast the behavior of the Jews, with that of the Egyptians. They lacked the virtue of Hakarat HaTov (appreciation of the good) toward the Jews. When a “new” Pharoh arose and turned against them, he accused them of being enemies; who would not hesitate to join with Egypt’s adversaries, in bringing the country down. He totally forgot all of the good things that the Jews had done for the country; not to mention, that Yosef was responsible for actually saving it from a famine, which would have destroyed it.

This has been the fate of the Jews through-

out history. We have been a source of great benefit, to all the societies we were invited into; and have enriched them, in manifold material and cultural ways. But, the element of gratitude, was always lacking. To the contrary, so many countries which should have appreciated us, turned against us; and became rabid Jew haters.

To a large extent, this phenomenon is responsible, for the restoration of the Jewish state of Israel; in modern times. If the nations, had treated the Jews properly, and refrained from persecuting them; there would not have been a Zionist movement. We must face the fact, that anti-Semitism has played a major role in the preservation of Jewish identity; and a vital one in bringing Jews back, to the land Hashem wants them to live in.

At a certain point in time, Hashem informed Yaakov, that it was time for the Jews to leave Canaan, and take up residence in a strange land; but, “I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall also bring you up.”

In our history, there was, “a time to leave Israel”. But, as we have seen, there is also a time to return. May this time be now, and not because of the hatred of the anti-Semites, but because of the yearning of the Jews, to fulfill the Mitzvah of Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom. ■

# TALMUD

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Rav Kahana elaborated on Joseph's capture by his brothers:**

**Rav Natan bar Manyumi taught in the name of Rav Tanhum, "And they took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it" (Gen. 37:24). Since it states, "the pit was empty", do I not know that "there was no water in it"? What then is the additional teaching of "there was no water in it"? Water it did not contain, but there were serpents and scorpions in it. (Sabbath 22a)**

**Why does the Talmud insert Rav Kahana's discussion of Joseph's salvation in the midst of a discussion on Channuka lights? Despite the venomous creatures, God saved Joseph from his many brothers who placed him in the pit. So too, God saved 5 Maccabees from myriads of Greeks. Perhaps that is Rav Kahana's theme and why the Talmud inserted Rav Kahana on Joseph's salvation in the midst of a discussion on Channuka lights. He wished to show God's repeated providence for those deserving it: the righteous, although few, are unaffected by the many. King David said the same: "A thousand may fall at your left side, and ten thousand at your right, but it (harm) shall not reach you" (Psalms 91:7). Numbers cannot overpower God's will to save the righteous man.**

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CONDÉ NAST



# 54 Ways of Looking at Evil

## 11TH WAY: RATIONALIZATION Man's Most Dangerous Power



**RABBI RICHARD BORAH**

In the parsha of VaYigash, Yoseph ends the ordeal he has been putting his brothers through and reveals himself to them in an emotional reunion. The brothers are frightened and shamed by the realization that Yoseph, who they had dealt so harshly with, now stands before them and wields the full power of Egypt. It seems that the brothers would also have realized at this point that they were wrong in their judgment of Yoseph. His qualities of leadership and righteousness were revealed to them. Here he stood as the leader of Egypt, having been brought there as a slave. Not only that, Yoseph had also stayed true to his faith (he showed them his circumcision-Rashi) and made clear to them that his commitment to Judaism was unaffected by

his life among the Egyptians. With this new understanding of Yoseph, the brothers were forced to confront that they had grossly misjudged him and acted in an evil manner towards him. Yoseph, knowing that this situation would cause the brothers to reproach one another, warns them, as the Torah states: And he sent off his brothers, and they went, and he said to them, "Do not quarrel on the way."

Rashi explains this warning by Yoseph as follows: According to the simple meaning of the verse, we can say that since they were ashamed, he (Joseph) was concerned that they would perhaps quarrel on the way about his being sold, debating with one another, and saying, "Because of you he was sold. You slandered him and caused us to hate him."

The brothers had sinned by rationalizing their hatred of Yoseph as a reasonable assessment of his danger to the family and, therefore, the Covenant that had been bestowed upon Avraham and was to be carried on by the children of Yaakov. What they did to Yoseph was viewed by them, at the time, as an act of righteousness. We saw earlier that the brothers did not have an attitude of outer rage against Yoseph, but instead showed an eerie calm in their disposing of him. Right after throwing him in the pit, the Torah tells us, they sat down to a casual meal. This detail reveals the brothers' attitude that their murderous actions were justified and reasonable. The Torah states (Bereishet 37:23):

*And they took him and cast him into the pit; now the pit was empty there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat a meal, and they lifted their eyes and saw, and behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spices, balm, and lotus, going to take [it] down to Egypt.*

The brothers were involved in a self-deception in which they supported each other's false assessment of Yoseph as a dangerous,

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



egotistical person who needed to be destroyed in order to save the family and the Covenant. This act of rationalization is one that each of us confronts every day as we strive to think clearly and live reasonably, while at the same time battling self-deception caused by our fears, desires and strong feelings about ourselves and others. The power of rationalization cannot be underestimated, as it accounts for most of the decisions made by people—especially those decisions which are unjust and inaccurate. Rationalization is described in the "Diagnostic Manual of the American Psychiatric Association" as:

*...when the individual deals with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by concealing the true motivations for his or her own thoughts, actions, or feelings through the elaboration of reassuring or self-serving but incorrect explanations.*

Ernest Jones, the famous psychoanalyst, defined rationalization as: "the inventing of a reason for an attitude or action, the motive of which is not recognized."

The nachash (serpent) tempted Chava (Eve) by providing her with an enticing rationalization that eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil would not be a destructive or evil act, but one which was just and would bring her great fulfillment. Often one is tempted to evil action by another person who concocts and "sells" him or her a rationalization that is satisfying. The prohibition against "placing a stumbling block" ("lefnay eyver") relates to this type of activity. It is rare that a person says to himself or to another that he should commit some evil action because the pleasure of the act is worth the commission of the evil. Instead, what usually occurs, is that the person convinces himself or another that the evil act is, in reality, a good act. History's most evil people, including Hitler and Stalin, viewed their acts, not as barbaric, vicious ones, but as noble, selfless ones to save the nation and create a better world. More recently, Bin Laden of Al Qaeda fame and Bashar Assad of Syria both have viewed themselves as noble, righteous men—not as base lovers of dominion, glory and violence. The power of rationalization is seemingly boundless and man's most dangerous power.

What made the brothers, who were people of excellent character and great minds, capable of such self-deception? What is instructive is that the Torah, in describing the hatred and selling of Yoseph, describes the brothers, for the most part, as a single unit. There are separate agendas of Reuven, who wants to save Yoseph and Yehuda, who convinces the other brothers to sell him instead of kill him. But, for the most part the brothers act in consonance with each other and supported each other's point of view.

*And they saw him from afar, and when he had not yet drawn near to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.*

The brothers, throughout the narrative, are referred to as a unit, almost as if they are a single organism. Although we must be cautious in the psychological analysis of exceptional people, the Torah is meant to provide us with information that is useful in our own quest for refinement. How do we see this insidious factor of rationalization today? It is everywhere where people take solace in belonging to a group that promises simple solutions to complex problems. There are of course, legitimate reasons to belong to a group, including moral action, mutual support, protection and comradery. Community solidarity is an essential dimension of Judaism as well. However, the moral danger for the individual in the group, that accompanies these benefits, is the loss of his or her individual assessment of a situation and the temptation to join into the false rationalizations the group cultivates for its own purposes. The online world of Facebook and other social media platforms has facilitated the creation of groups made up of Facebook or other "friends". Many benefits and enjoyments result from these groups. However, one does have to be cautious not to use one's friend group, online or otherwise, as a means to cultivating rationalizations about oneself and others. For some, a friend is someone who supports his or her point of view, uncritically. Torah has always seen this as being less than a true friend. True friendship includes the ability to speak honesty to one another and be sensitively critical ("tochaha") when necessary. Without this dimension, the friendship can do more harm than good, creating a false sense of justification for a person who may be doing things that are evil and destructive. ■

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