

Idolatry

It's All About Ego

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| PERFECTION |

"If a person forgoes his personality (not retaliating when it is due) —Ma'avir al midosav—God passes over all his sins" (Rosh Hashanna 17a). God does so, as this person is now on the road to perfection, and punishing him for his sins will deter the greater good of his perfection.

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Honoring Evil Parents?

READER: I have a problem with the Ten Commandment (just read last week). How can I honor a father who abandoned his wife and children and went to set up another family with another woman?

RABBI: "Even if your father is a wicked person and has violated many sins, you must honor him and be fearful of him" (Hilchos Mamrim 6:11). Earlier in law 6:1 Maimonides equates honoring parents to honoring God:

It is a great positive precept to honor father and mother; so too, to pay reverence to father and mother. Scripture considers the duty of honoring parents and revering them equal to the duty of honoring and revering God.

His principle follows the idea conveyed in the Ten Commandments. As the first five commandments are laws between man and God, why is honoring parents included in that section? The answer to both the Ten

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Commandments and to Hilchos Mamrim is that honoring parents is an expression of honoring God. We don't honor our parents because of who they are, but as a recognition of an authority. It is only through honoring parents that we come to honor the Greatest Authority. Therefore if one does not honor parents, he has closed off the path to honoring God: as he cannot make the first step to recognize a human authority, he will certainly not recognize God, for he has no model of authority through which he can transfer on to God.

The rabbis teach that 3 matters were taught in Marah, to where the Jews traveled after leaving the Reed Sea: honoring parents, courts, and the Sabbath. The common denominator of these 3 laws is that they target the acceptance of an authority. We must first honor parents as our initial encounter with an authority, then we accept judges, courts and their rulings, and finally we accept God through the Sabbath which celebrates His role as the ultimate authority, the creator.

These laws—primary lessons of accepting in authority—were given at Marah en route to Mount Sinai as a prerequisite to accepting God's Torah at Sinai.

We now understand that honoring parents has nothing to do with honoring their character, but their capacity of their role. However emotionally difficult it may be to show honor and reverence to your father, remind yourself continually that this is God's command and that you were respecting His institution, not a person. ■

Justified Pride?

READER: How do you reconcile Jeremiah's words with the mishnah from Avos, both cited below?

Thus said the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the strong man glory in his strength; let not the rich man glory in his riches. For only in this should the one who praises, praise himself: be understanding (wise) and know Me for I am God who performs kindness, justice and charity in the Earth. For in these do I desire," so says God (Jer. 9:22,23).

If you have learned much, do not ascribe greatness to yourself, for this is the reason you were created (Avos 2:8).

—Alex Kahgan, NY

RABBI: You propose a contradiction: Jeremiah praises understanding God, while Avos says one must not praise himself for learning much Torah. Thus, is wisdom to be praised, or not?

Jeremiah addresses which "quality" one should praise. One must not value mere ethical wisdom, mere strength or mere wealth...each one when divorced from a life following God. Rather, the true value is knowledge of God, and then following His kindness, justice and charity. Malbim (Ibid) identifies what man should in fact pride himself in regarding these 3 matters: expressing wisdom of God and His will through 1) using one's wisdom to foster kindness, 2) using one's strength to support justice, and 3) using one's wealth to support tzedaka. Man cannot pride himself on his actions unless they align with God's will.

Avos addresses a different issue, not which quality is of value, but whether "quantity" of knowledge is a value. One must not pride himself for learning much. Quantity is an ego issue, as it converts Torah into an "accomplishment," which is not learning lishma: learning for the beauty of the ideas

alone. Torah must not be viewed as accomplishment, as Rabbi Chait taught, for then it is worthless. By rendering learning into an ego satisfaction of accomplishment, one forfeits learning for the sake of the ideas, seeking ego instead. But that's not of any value.

In terms of identifying what is valuable, one should feel good that he selects a life of wisdom. There's a prayer said in the morning by those who follow a Torah life, where they praise that life, and ridicule those who forgo it and whose lives are an "empty well." When completing a tractate, we read the Hadran:

For we arise early, and they arise early; we arise for words of Torah, and they arise for words of emptiness. We work, and they work; we work and receive a reward, and they work and do not receive a reward. We run, and they run; we run towards eternal life, and they run to a pit of desolation.

Therefore, there is no contradiction. Jeremiah teaches that wisdom which aligns with God's Torah is of great value; pride in this is justified. "Understand and know Me" is God's command that man lives optimally. But Avos addresses, and ridicules a different matter: studying Torah for the sake of accomplishment. Torah's goal is to offer man an appreciation of God's wisdom. But when man uses Torah for ego motives, he misses the mark: man is the focus, not God. When we use our minds to delve into Torah, to creatively think and analyze, we then leave egoistical matters of amassing knowledge, and we focus solely on God's wisdom. We are not focussing on the self at all.

Furthermore, Avos says that one should not take pride in learning much, since "this is what you are created to do." Meaning, as God is the designer of the human being, He is ultimately the reason why man can learn much. As we did not create our human design, we cannot take credit for our capacity to amass much knowledge. Thus, mechanical activity is not praiseworthy. Accomplishment through amassing facts is mere mechanical activity, like breathing; it's part of our innate design, and not a new perfection to our souls. But when we arrive at new ideas through thought and creativity of our minds, this is in fact a new perfection to our souls, and is praiseworthy.

But Avos 2:8 does not end after ridiculing one's pride for amassing learning. It continues to identify whom we should praise:

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai used to say: "If all the sages of Israel were on one scale of the balance and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus on the other scale, he would outweigh them all. For he was like a plastered well, which never loses a drop (of his Torah studies)." Abba Shaul said in his name: "If all the sages of Israel were on one scale of the balance, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus also with them, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach was on the other scale, he would outweigh them all, for the latter was like a wellspring always growing in its force (he continually brought forth new Torah insights)."

These rabbis disputed who was of greater value: Is it the one who never forgot his Torah, or the one who always generated new Torah insights? Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus' value of never forgetting ensures the next generation receives Torah fully intact. This view held the greatest man was he who secured Torah transmission. But the second view argued that this is not the highest objective. For even if all wise men were on a scale, along with Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who retained all his knowledge, Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach's creativity as a wellspring of ideas would outweigh them all. This second view values something other than securing Torah transmission: it values Torah's beauty, love of God. For this view held the only purpose in securing Torah transmission, is if it arrives at people loving God's wisdom, achieved only when Torah's beauty is shared and grows due to a creative mind like Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach. ■

Idolatry

It's All About Ego

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by a student



STUDENT: Why did star worship include false prophets? Was this an expression of ego? Rambam says, “False prophets asserted that God commanded them to worship a star,” and also, “Other liars asserted that a star, planet or angel instructed them saying, ‘Worship me [that star] in such a way.’” [1]

RABBI CHAIT: The ultimate goal of all idolatry is self-aggrandizement. The worshippers used the fact that the star spoke to them as an indication of how great they are. By identifying with this object of worship, they themselves become the object of worship. Haman carried an idol on his garment, truly viewing “himself” as worthy of worship [2]. Behind the physical idol is really the self.

Pharaoh presented himself as a god, as Rashi says:

For Pharaoh claimed to be a god and asserted that because of his divine power, he did not need to ease himself; and therefore he used to rise early and go to the Nile and there eased himself in secret. [4]

Pharaoh also said, “The Nile is mine and I created myself” [5]. Rashi comments: “And I made myself — With my might and with my wisdom, I enhanced my greatness and my dominion.” Here we see idolatry par excellence.

Nevuchadnetzar too sought honor himself by creating an image in front of his house:

Rav said: “Had they flogged Chananya, Misha’el, and Azariah instead of casting them into the fiery furnace [6], these three would have been induced to worship the graven image” [7].

Tosfos (Ibid.) states that Nevuchadnetzar’s image did not embody a deity’s form. From here we learn that Nevuchadnetzar’s idol was not a true idol, but he made it to glorify himself. For had it been a true idol, Chananya, Misha’el and Azariah could not have worshipped it, even if tortured; but the Gemara says these three would have bowed to it. Thus, it was not technically idolatry, but it was an image that stood for the deification of Nevuchadnetzar. Thus, Haman, Pharaoh and Nevuchadnetzar’s idolatry were expressions of self-aggrandizement.

It is interesting to note that halacha demands one to give up his life only when all the components of idolatry are present: the physical worship of the object and the self-aggrandizement.

STUDENT: How was Enosh serving stars an expression of self-aggrandizement?

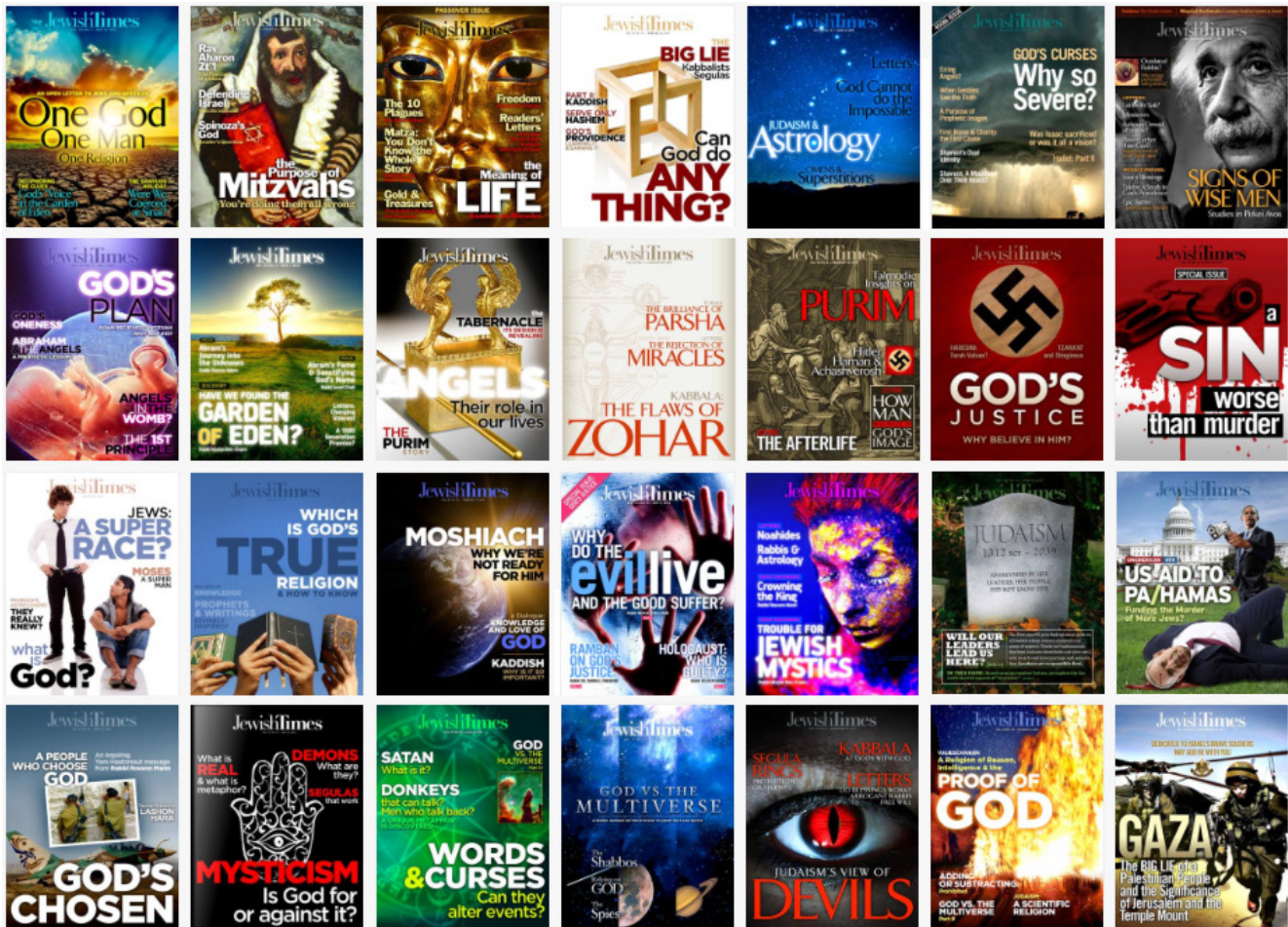
RABBI CHAIT: By honoring stars through worship, Enosh felt recognized, i.e., the stars needed him and appreciated him. This rendered Enosh an important player. The verse says, “Can a man make gods for himself? But they are not gods.” [8] This means man desires power, and by making gods, he gains power. This is self-glorification. ■

Footnotes

- [1] Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:2
- [2] Rashi, Esther 3:2, Esther Rabbah 7:5
- [3] Esther 5:9
- [4] Exod. 7:15
- [5] Ezek. 29:3
- [6] Daniel 3:15
- [7] Kesuvos 33b
- [8] Jer. 16:20

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Maimonides on Idolatrous Deterioration

In the days of Enosh (Adam's grandson), the sons of man erred exceedingly, the advice of the wise men of that generation was nullified, and even Enosh himself was among the victims of that folly. Their mistake was this: They thought: "God created these stars and planets to rule the world, He placed them high above [in the skies] thereby honoring them, and as they are ministers who render service in His presence, it is proper that they be praised and glorified and honored, this is the will of God, to exalt and honor him whom He exalted and honored, even as a king desires to honor those who stand in his presence, for such is the honor of the king."

As soon as they entertained this in their heart, they commenced to erect temples in honor of the stars, to offer sacrifices to them, to praise and glorify them in words, and bow down to them in order to reach the will of God, in their evil thoughts. This was the essence of the worship of stars.

Over much time, there arose among the sons of man false prophets, who asserted that God commanded them saying, "Worship such a star, or all of the stars, and offer sacrifices to it, and anoint it, and erect a temple for it, and hew its image so that all of the people, women and children and the rest of the populace included, bow down to it." And these false prophets informed the populace of an idol which they imagined (lied), and told them that this was the image of the star which was pointed out to him in his prophecy.

In this manner they commenced to draw images in temples, beneath trees, upon mountain-tops and

elevated places, where they congregated to bow down to them and sermonize to the people, saying: "This image has it in its power to do good and evil, and it is proper to worship it, and be in awe of it." Their priests, moreover, said unto them: "By this worship you will increase and succeed; do thus and such, but not that and this."

Then, still other liars rose up to assert that the star itself, or the planet, or the angel spoke to them and instructed saying: "Worship me thus and such," and thereat made known to them the way to worship them, instructing them, "Do this, but do not do that." In this manner this thing [star worship] spread throughout the world, and the worship of images with varied ceremonies, to sacrifice to them and to bow down to them.

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Star Worship

How it Started & the Psychology of this Sin

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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After the lapse of a long time the Glorified and Awful Name was forgotten to be mentioned by the mouth of all substance and blotted out from their consciousness, so that they gave Him no recognition, as a consequence whereof all the people of the earth as well as women and little children knew nothing [about God] except the image of wood and stone, the story temple wherein they were brought up from their infancy to bow down to it, to worship it and to swear by its name. As for their wise man, for example, their priests and their like, they supposed that there was no God, but only the stars and planets [existed], for whose sake, and in whose likeness, those images were made; but the Rock of Ages, no man recognized Him or knew Him, except some individuals in the whole world, for example, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, and Ever. And, on this path the world continued its course of circuitry until the birth of the firmest pillar of the world, Abraham our father.
(Maimonides, Laws of Star Worship 1:1,2)

Stages

Why did man's deterioration into star worship follow "stages," instead of an immediate plunge into the lowest stage?

In Stage 1, man erred by projecting human qualities on God's will, imagining stars were "near" God, that they "minister" to God, and that God "desired" His planets and stars to be honored.

In Stage 2, false prophets arose, when man further deteriorated, claiming God commanded man to "Worship such a star." False prophets arose who informed others of an idol, which they conjured-up in their fantasies (false prophets and idols did not exist in Stage 1).

In Stage 3, God no longer was the authority, and the liars claimed the star or angel directly commanded them in star worship.

Finally in stage 4, "After the lapse of a long time, the Glorified and Awful Name was forgotten."

We find similarly in Rashi on Leviticus 26:15:

TO MAKE VOID MY COVENANT — Denying the great principle of the existence of God (Sifra, Bechukotai, Section 2 3). — Thus you have here seven sins, the first sin brings the second in its train, and so on to the seventh. And these are: He has not studied and therefore has not practiced the commandments; consequently he scorns others who do practice them, he then hates the Sages, followed by preventing others from practicing, he then denies the Divine origin of the commandments, and finally he denies the existence of God.

Thus, man declines progressively—"After the lapse of a long time"—not sudden deterioration. Rashi says above, "the first sin brings the second in its train." Why is this? Why couldn't man skip the first 3 stages of idolatry and deteriorate from full knowledge of God, directly to stage 4 where God was forgotten altogether? What psychological truth determines that man acts progressively, from stage 1 to stages 2, 3 and then 4?

Furthermore, in Stage 2, man claimed God spoke to him. This was not true, but why did man's deterioration include ego—"God spoke to me"—claiming himself as a prophet?

Slow Progression

Sinful man operates by catering to his emotions. At various stages in life, man experiences different emotions. At first, Adam possessed accurate knowledge God, as Ibn Ezra says, "Adam was a great intellect." But 2 generations later, his grandson Enosh caved to his emotions. Enosh projected human qualities onto God, assuming God is like a human king, that God desired honor be bestowed upon those ministers close to Him. Instead, Enosh should have accepted complete ignorance of God's true nature and followed his grandfather's awe and acceptance of the "unknowable God." Thus, Enosh made a number of errors. One error was as we have just stated. Another error was assuming God exists "in the sky," leading him to another error that stars are "near" God. The next error was that stars "minister before God." And this finally lead to honoring and worshipping stars.

Man Reacts to His Current Restrictions

We deduce that man reacts only to his current assumptions. Meaning, as Enosh still accepted God, but assumed He was in the sky, his reaction to this was that the stars are "near" God. He did not deviate too far and reject God's existence, for his understanding was still closely related to his grandfather's acceptance of the true God. Complete denial of God would not satisfy his current world purview, which was that God exists. Thus, he rejected that God is outside of space and time, forcing God into the heavens. That is all that was needed to satisfy his current discomfort with an abstract metaphysical God. The rule: Man seeks only to alleviate what disturbs his current state.

The Core Error

We must emphasize that the underlying error was this: man attributing physicality and location to the true God. And this error was due to man's

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inability to escape his senses. Man could not mature intellectually, as was God's will by granting man intelligence. Instead, man, unable to accept God's unknowable nature, forced a wrong and physical understanding of God onto his infantile psyche, which, from youth, grew attached to physical parents. As man could not escape the clutches of the physical sensual world, and his dependance upon tangible parents, he forced God into his tangible world, attributing to God a location in the skies, and the emotions of human kings.

Not the Same Man

Sin deteriorates man's psyche. Only once a person has deteriorated to stage 2, is Stage 3 attractive. This is the key: In Stage 2, one is no longer the same person he was at Stage 1. The rabbis say, "One sin causes another" (Rashi on Deut. 22:14). Once man sins, he is no longer the same person he was prior to sinning. Also, "Rabbi Yo anan said: 'There is a small limb in man; if he starves it, it is satiated, but if he feeds it, it grows hungrier'" (Succah 52b). Both statements teach that once man excites his desires, they crave more satisfaction and gratification. As Enosh sinned, and mankind followed, each stage produced a more sinful personality, where over each succeeding year and generation, man grew more attached to emotional satisfaction, and further from intelligence and truth. At first, Enosh recognized God, but his sensual nature could not tolerate an abstract God, so he viewed God as "in" the skies. This in turn allowed a deterioration where man assumed stars held a high status, as they were "near" God, a thought that could not exist prior to Stage 1, when God was still viewed by Adam as non-physical. Thus, with each succeeding corruption, man built fallacy upon fallacy. Therefore, once stars were viewed in an elevated rank over all other creations, man's insecurities projected "will" onto the stars, and he believed they communicated with man. This cleared the path for man to forget about God altogether.

Similarly, as noted above, Rashi writes:

He has not studied and therefore has not practiced the commandments; consequently he scorns others who do practice them, he then hates the Sages, followed by preventing others from practicing, he then denies the Divine origin of the commandments, and finally he denies the existence of God.

This progression starts with the failure to follow Torah. But as he senses Torah is true, his self-worth is jeopardized. To retain an acceptable self-image, he must view others as evil: "They're wrong, I am right" his ego maintains. But as one's peers are not the authority, he must now attack authorities, namely the rabbis. His intolerance forces him to prevent others from practicing Torah, since his mere hate alone of Torah practicing Jews fails to placate his ego. He needs to stop others from following Torah. Then he realized God as the source of Torah so he denies Torah as divine, and ultimately he denies God Himself. Again, the train of events deteriorates as in each succeeding regression the person is faced with a new realization that must be dealt with. At first the sinner doesn't jump to a denial of God, as the matter he confronts at first is his peers following Torah, so it is this alone to which he reacts by scorning them. With each new stage of decline, the sinner is confronted with new obstacles at which he must lodge an attack to maintain his self image.

Ego

Why did star worship include false prophets, an expression of ego? Rambam says, "False prophets asserted that God commanded them to worship a star," and also, "Other liars asserted that a star, planet or angel instructed them saying, 'Worship me [that star] in such a way'" (Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:2). Why did ego enter into star worship, that false prophets made such self-aggrandizing claims, that stars selected them? Rabbi Israel Chait answers this in this week's essay on page 5, "Idolatry: It's All About Ego." ■



Identifi- cation & Sin

Rabbi Israel Chait

Written by a student

STUDENT: Rashi on Gen. 39:6 says that Joseph’s beautification of his hair while his father was mourning precipitated his descent to prison which lasted about a decade. It seems the punishment is far more severe than his crime. What is your take on the “measure–for–measure” aspect of this? Thank you.

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT: By beautifying himself while his father mourned, Joseph broke his identification with his father Jacob. Thereby, he was open to many sins. The rabbis comment on, “And Joseph went into the house to do his work” (Gen. 39:11) saying this refers to Joseph’s intent to sleep with Potiphar’s wife (Sota 36b). What saved him from sleeping with her was the image of his father which appeared to him at that moment. Had Joseph always maintained his identification with Jacob, he would not have intended to sleep with her. Rashi means that Joseph breaking his identification with Jacob left him open to many wrong actions. And even though Joseph ultimately refrained from sleeping with Potiphar’s wife, he still possessed some corruption (demanding his imprisonment to remove his flaw).

STUDENT: “But they rebelled against me and would not hearken to Me; they did not — every man — cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said I would pour out My fury upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt” (Ezek. 20:8).

Sforno (Gen. 15:13) quoting Ezekiel, says the Jews’ idolatry earned their Egyptian bondage. Sforno adds, “While the 12 Shevatim were alive, no servitude began.” Rebbe, you said that Joseph beautifying himself while Jacob mourned expressed Joseph’s breach of his identification with Jacob, which opened him to sin. Here too it appears the Jews’ identification with Jacob’s sons restrained their idolatrous tendencies. Only once the Shevatim died did the Jews succumb to Egypt’s idolatry.

Thank you again for your explanation. ■

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Exercising POWER with Justice & Compassion

RABBI REUVEN MANN

A major theme of this week's Parsha, Mishpatim, is the manner in which a true Torah Jew, is expected to treat others. The opening subject of the Parsha is that of the Eved Ivri (Jewish Slave/Servant). He is not an actual slave, but is bound to cater to the needs of the "master" much like a butler or a valet.

One can become a Jewish Servant, by either being sold by the court or by selling oneself. The court can sell him, when he has committed a theft and lacks the funds to make restitution. The Torah eschews corporal punishment or incarceration for strictly monetary crimes. Rather, the thief is required to provide compensation. In some cases, he is fined an additional amount beyond the principal, so that stealing should not come to be regarded as a risk-free endeavor.

Therefore, all a robber must do according to Jewish Law, is pay back the amount he has heisted. It is only in the instance that he can't come up with the funds, that the Beit Din (Court) is permitted to sell him to another Jew, as a Jewish Servant. The money obtained in this transaction, may be used to compensate the victim of the theft.

The institution of "slavery" is designed with great compassion. The master is beholden to the needs of the servant. He can't overwork or mistreat him, nor enjoy comforts that are not provided to the servant. Thus, if there is only one pillow available, it goes to the Eved; to avoid the master indulging a higher lifestyle than his worker. He also assumes the servant's financial obligations to his wife and small children. The Rabbis famously said, in tractate Kiddushin 20a, "whoever acquires a Jewish Servant it is as though he acquires a master for himself." Such is the extent of Jewish Rachmanut (compassion).

There is more to the intriguing story of the Jewish servant. A person can enter into this institution voluntarily, by selling himself because of extreme poverty. It is better for him to accept a lowly position, than to become so destitute that he is tempted to steal. But the Torah, clearly, does not view this situation as desirable. The term of service, is limited to six years; after which, if he wants to stay, he must have a hole drilled through his ear. This, is to remind him, that he is departing from the Torah ideal; as the Talmud states in Bava Metzia 10a, "For unto Me are the Children of Israel servants, they are My servants... (VaYikra 25:55) but not servants to servants."

A very strange law makes its appearance in the institution of Eved Ivri. If the master possesses a gentile female slave—who, though not Jewish, is bound to keep the positive commandments that are not dependent on time—he may give her to his servant as a wife, in order to have children. They will bear the status of slaves and belong to the master.

In order to appreciate the significance of this law, we must recognize that an ordinary Jew is prohibited from marrying or even having conjugal relations with a gentile maidservant. Yet, in this case, this very significant sexual prohibition has been removed – thereby allowing the master to give his servant a wife – in order to provide the master with more slaves, from the offspring.

But what about the religious well-being of the servant? Certainly the Torah doesn't want him to deviate from the Mitzvot during the time of his service! What is the rationale for this very strange dispensation?

In dealing with this issue, we must note that the condition of furnishing a gentile charwoman as a wife, is only available regarding a Jewish servant, whom the court has sold because of his crime. One who sells himself due to poverty, is prohibited from entering into a marriage with the gentile slavewoman. What is the reason for this difference?

In my opinion, the Torah's judicial treatment of monetary crimes, is rooted in its absolute commitment to the principles of justice. Whatever the burglar stole, must be repaid – sometimes with an additional fine – so that he suffer some loss for his crime. If he cannot make payment, he must enter the jurisdiction of a

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master, in order to make some kind of restitution.

Why does the Torah allow the master to give him a gentile maidservant to bear him children? The answer may be found in the words of the Torah. “If his master will give him a woman and she bears him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out by himself. (Shemot 21:4)”

The entire purpose of giving him a wife and his having children with her, is that they shall be taken away from him. The governing philosophy behind this regulation is, that if a person cannot empathize with the hurt of another person, it is vital for his rehabilitation, that he experience the same pain he visited upon his victim.

The individual in question, stole money, and was thus insensitive to the financial loss of his victim. In accordance with the principle of “measure for measure”, he must endure the experience of what it is like when something he has become attached to i.e. his wife and the children he sired—who are not actually his legally, because they are from a non-Jewish mother—are taken away from him. He thus learns to respect the ownership rights of all people.

It therefore makes sense, that this provision to marry a gentile charwoman, is not permitted in the case of the one who sold himself, due to poverty. He committed no theft. Therefore, there is no need for the remedial act of taking the woman and children from him.

We thus see, the Torah’s method of dealing with criminals. Punishment is meted out; but it is wholly based on the principle of justice, and the desire to enable the individual to overcome his moral defect, and function as a productive member of society. Additionally, the Torah insists, that the master be fully cognizant of the need to preserve the servant’s dignity and revitalize his self-esteem.

We must internalize these lessons and seek to emulate the Ways of our Creator. We must seek to treat all people with consideration and sensitivity; and when punishment is necessary it should be meted out with great wisdom, justice and compassion. This constitutes a unique manifestation of the great Mitzvah to “love your friend as yourself.”

Shabbat Shalom. ■



54 Ways of Looking at Evil

18th Way: Cruelty Towards the Defenseless



Rabbi Richard Borah

Parshas Mishpatim states (Shemot 22:20-13):

You shall not oppress any widow or orphan.

If you oppress him, [beware,] for if he cries out to Me, I will surely hear his cry.

My wrath will be kindled, and I will slay you with the sword, and your wives will be widows and your children orphans.

The Torah gives special consideration and protection to widows and orphans, as stated in these pasukim. A number of questions can be asked about this special status:

1) What precisely is the way to fulfill the mitzvah of lo taanoon (“do not oppress”) - how does one violate this prohibition?

2) Why is a separate mitzvah needed to prohibit oppression of the widow and orphan when there is already a mitzvah of “v’ahavta rayecha kmoecha” (that you should love your fellow (Jew) as you do yourself)? Certainly, if one must love his fellow, he cannot oppress him!

3) Why does the Torah state the punishment for violating this prohibition as God “slaying you with the sword, and your wives will be widows and your children orphans”? God does not use weapons such as swords and isn’t it obvious that the person’s death will leave his children as orphans and his wife as a widow? What does this add?

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Maimonides states in the Mishnah Torah, Hilchos Dayot (Laws of Character Traits 6:10):

A person is obligated to show great care for orphans and widows because their spirits are very low and their feelings are depressed. This applies even if they are wealthy. We are commanded to [show this attention] even to a king's widow and his orphans as [implied by Exodus 22:21]: "Do not mistreat any widow or orphan." How should one deal with them? One should only speak to them gently and treat them only with honor. One should not cause pain to their persons with [overbearing] work or aggravate their feelings with harsh words and [one should] show more consideration for their financial interests than for one's own. Anyone who vexes or angers them, hurts their feelings, oppresses them, or causes them financial loss transgresses this prohibition. Surely this applies if one beats them or curses them.

For one's fellow Jew, the obligation is not identical, as Maimonides states in Hilchos Dayot (Laws of Character Traits 6:3)

Each man is commanded to love each and every one of Israel as himself as [Leviticus 19:18] states: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, one should speak the praises of [others] and show concern for their money just as he is concerned with his own money and seeks his own honor.

A widow or orphan is treated with extreme sensitivity and not with the level of concern that one would expect from others for oneself. The guiding point of reference for how to treat a fellow Jew is how one expects himself to be treated. Every emotionally healthy person has a fairly clear sense of what it means for him to be treated with kindness and concern. All that is required for understanding how to treat a fellow Jew is for a person to reflect on one's own innate standard of how he or she would expect to be treated and to apply that to the other people that he interacts with. Maimonides does give basic guidelines in this halacha quoted above, stating "Therefore, one should speak the praises of [others] and show concern for their money just as he is concerned with his own money and seeks his own honor." In my opinion this is not exhaustive and the halacha refers to monetary and honor-related actions as they are ones often violated when people interact with each other.

Returning to the widows and orphans, a Jew who interacts with them is at much greater risk of causing them pain and anguish. It is extremely difficult for a person to be sensitive to feeling that he or she does not have. A person who has a healthy sense of security and a reasonably secure

ego, is not bothered by what he considers minor slights or insensitivities in the way people talk or act with him. It is like a person who cannot feel the pressure of an extremely light object on his hand. It is as if it does not exist for him. So how is this person to muster the sensitivity in his interactions with the widow or orphan who does feel these minor slights as considerable pain and anguish due to what Maimonides described earlier in the Mishneh Torah as spirits are very low and their feelings are depressed?

I believe the answer to this question will answer two of the questions we asked earlier – why a separate commandment is given for the widows and orphans ; why such a dramatic description of the punishment (that God will slay the person with a sword and make his children orphans and his wife a widow). In order for the average person to achieve the level of sensitivity necessary not to oppress the very sensitive natures of the widow and the orphan, he must be highly motivated to concentrate on the situation of these unfortunate individuals. The Torah often motivates the person with fear. But stating such a severe punishment for a seemingly minor mistake, the person is made to understand that extreme caution must be taken with them in order to protect one's own life. It reminds me of how a person would act in the presence of a king, where one minor insult could result in immediate death or imprisonment. This is the attitude that the description of God "slaying the person with a sword" brings to mind.

But perhaps a more subtle and effective method of aiding the person in keeping this law is the description that, "your wives will be widows and your children orphans". This image, when reflected on by the potential oppressor, helps him put himself in the place of the widow or orphan and feel something of what they are feelings. Although the average person's imagination cannot easily sense the pain of widows or orphans, the average person CAN imagine the pain of his own wife or children if they were in such a situation. This imagining allows for a heightened sensitivity in the person that is needed in order to properly fulfill this mitzvah.

I would like to conclude in posing the question, whether treating the widow and orphan with such "extra" sensitivity is an act of justice or an act of mercy. One might assess this to be a merciful act, since it goes beyond the standard manner of concern with which one treats his fellow and expects to be treated by others. But perhaps the special treatment afforded the widow and orphan is not mercy, but simply justice. For these individuals, the extreme level of sensitivity is what they require to function properly. Their situation is like a baby who can only eat soft food. Is it mercy for the parent to give the baby soft food because the parent can eat hard food? No. It is simple justice. So too, the widow and orphan because of their depressed and insecure state, require the "soft food" of extreme kindness to survive and thrive. ■





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