

# JewishTimes

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GENESIS

## God's First Words

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

LETTERS

## Whom God Won't Forgive

LETTERS

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- Monotheistic DNA?
- Who Loses Olam Haba?
- The Astrologers Knew?
- Is Grave Praying OK?
- Jewish Arrogance

# Did a

# 2<sup>ND</sup>

# Adam Exist?

GENESIS

## Emotion **vs** Reason

RABBI REUVEN MANN



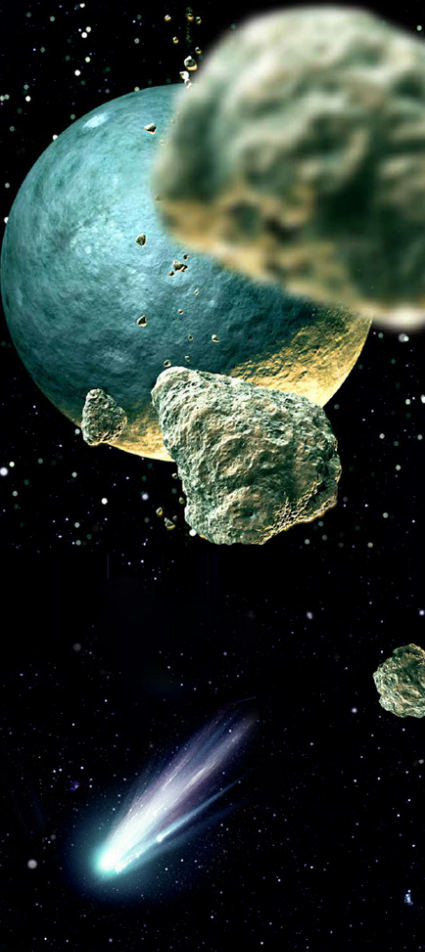
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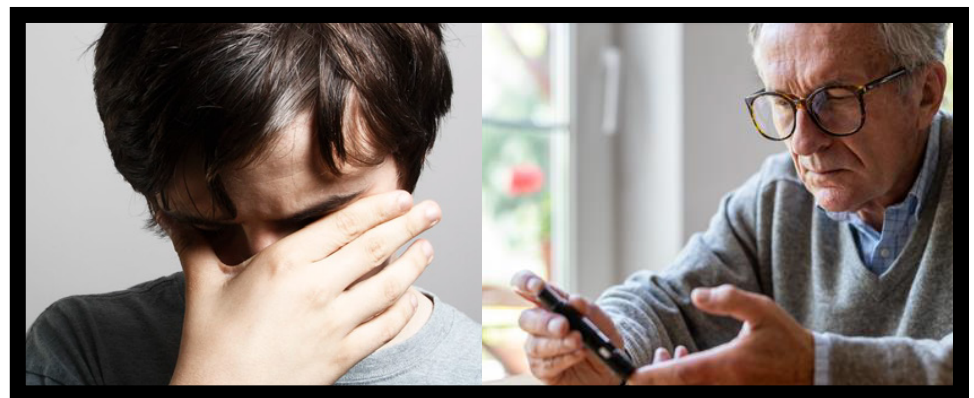
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## OTHERS IN NEED?

Our busy lives, work, family and personal agendas can easily obscure a needy friend or community member. Pause, consider whose paths you cross: Who is acting differently? Who is less social? Who said something that clues you to a need? Child, teen, adult or senior. Take a few moments alone to review these questions...review your contacts. Then reach out.

**MESORA**

## LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

# Why Sinai Occurred Only Once

**READER:** I'm not a Jew, but an ex-Christian who knows that Christianity misinterprets Torah. I also realized that Jewish mystics are a lie too, because of the "Jewish soul" claims [they think Jews are superior]. That leaves me with no one to talk with. I'm also having a lot of trouble believing in the God of the Torah lately. What is the point of God speaking at Mt. Sinai 3,300

years ago and never saying [another] word again? What is the purpose of that? Is it a test? Why is God so hidden?

*Rodrigo  
Volta Redonda City, Brazil*

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**RABBI:** Agreed: Christians, Jews and anyone misinterpreting Torah or defending mysticism cannot discuss truths, making them unfit Torah study partners for truth seekers as yourself. But thankfully there are accessible, reliable print and digital resources and rabbis with whom you can converse. Mesora's goal is to offer all people authentic Torah education. I personally strive to answer all readers' questions, basing answers on authoritative Torah sources. At times, it is also wise to relocate to Jewish communities to improve one's Torah study.

Regarding belief in God, this does not depend on "continued" revelation. The single event of Revelation at Sinai is sufficient to validate God's existence and His will for man. In fact, God said that event would be a one-time phenomenon:

*God spoke those words to your whole congregation at the mountain, with a mighty voice out of the fire and the dense clouds—a great voice never repeated. And God inscribed them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me" (Deut 5:19).*

With this verse—after his repetition of the 10 Commandments—Moses formulates the essential elements of Sinai's revelation: the entire nation was present, they heard an intelligent voice emanating from fire, and those commands were embedded inside stone (sapphire). Those millions of attendees discount the possibility of a fabricated history, as mass conspiracy is impossible. The voice emanating from fire proved this Intelligence was not biological but metaphysical. And the sapphire's internally written commands proved to all future generations that Torah is from God. The event was orchestrated as a testament to God and Torah, obviating any need for a repeat performance: "a great voice never repeated."

One must realize that witnessing miracles does not defend a corrupt person from sinning. For the Jews heard God's created voice at Sinai, and yet, they still created the Gold Calf. Thus, miracles are not the key to recognizing God. What is required is intelligence, where one derives from God's actions and words His intended lessons and proofs. ■

## Monotheistic DNA?

**READER:** While I personally believe any human being—Jew or gentile—can arrive at the truth of Judaism using reason, logic, research and critical thinking, a fellow believer in Judaism asked me this question: "Does one who has Jewish ancestors, and is not aware of it, cause one to seek monotheism or the faith of Israel? Meaning, is Jewish lineage like DNA?"

Mark Abir  
India

**RABBI:** Had man benefitted from his father's monotheism by "naturally" following his father, it would be unnecessary for God to command every member of mankind in Torah law...just command Adam, and the rest of world population should follow! However, that God and Moses do in fact ask each person to choose the proper life (Deut. 30:19), we derive that each person's choice is not a natural reaction, but an independent decision. Moses' descendants were idolatrous while the sinful city of Ninveh repented: freewill is not predetermined or genetic. God tells us "Each man in his own sin is punished" (Deut. 24:16). ■

## Losing Olam Haba

**READER:** Maimonides ridicules one who uses the mezuzah as an amulet. Doing so, "One loses his Olam Habah," he writes. But in Hilchos Teshuvah where he lists all the categories of sins that forfeit Olam Haba, into which category would the amulet fall?

Alex Kahgan  
New York, NY

**RABBI:** You refer to Hilchos Teshuva (chapter 3) where Maimonides identifies those with no share in the World to Come, but suffer excision. He identifies atheists (Min), infidels (Apikores) who deny prophecy, Torah traducers (Kofer) who deny Torah's divine origin, and apostates (Mumar) deniers of the commandments. These sins refer to wrong ideas about God, prophecy and Torah. But there are other categories of sins which also forfeit Olam Haba, such as idolatry and superstitions (including belief in amulets) which might not fall into these categories. Idolaters accepted God and Torah, but believed in additional gods and other powers.

**READER:** There are articles on your website which talk about the three parts of the soul: ruach, nefesh, neshamah or id, ego, superego. How does that fit with Rambam's division of imagination, emotions, rational?

**RABBI:** Ruach is the individual emotion of ego, whereas nefesh is the faculty of all instincts/emotions, which contains the ego. Neshama is the soul and is separate from the instincts, and can control, the instincts. The intellect/rational element can enhance the soul's attachment to truths and morals, while the instincts can steer the soul towards evil attachments. Imagination is part of the function of the mind in its search for answers, but can also be used to imagine sinful thoughts and lead man to perform them. ■

## Magicians and Blessings

**READER:** I had 2 different questions which I was hoping you could provide answers to.

I read your article regarding the Egyptian "magicians" and how they told Pharaoh that the redeemer of Jewish people will be destroyed by water, and how all the magicians' powers are fake. However, at the end Moshe wasn't allowed to enter the land of Israel because he was punished for hitting the rock instead of not speaking to it to get water. So one can say the Egyptian magicians were in fact right: Moshe was destroyed by water.

Regarding the concept of a father blessing his children as we see in the Torah when Yaakov blesses his sons, he blesses each one according to his own unique attributes and potential. So a father's blessing does not possess some type of magical or mystical power. Yet, we see with Issac, how Rivkah has a whole plan for Yaakov to get the beracha of the first born by tricking Issac - so we see how significant it was for Yaakov to get this important beracha from Issac. This would seem to indicate that the beracha is a lot more than just a father telling his son of his own unique potential but something far beyond.

Thank you and Shana Tova,

Roy Assouline  
Great Neck, NY

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**RABBI:** The magicians told Pharaoh many things, they must, lest they lose their positions as advisors. They incorrectly predicted Moses' birthdate. They also could not perform anything more than sleight-of-hand, explaining why they could not produce lice or remove the boils from their bodies, or halt any plague. Their suggestion that the Jewish redeemer will perish by water was based on their historical knowledge of God previously destroying man by water (the Flood).

Regarding blessings, there are 2 types as you outlined: 1) a father's natural advice for his children based on their traits, and 2) divine blessings such as Isaac's blessing of Jacob. ■

## Grave Praying Options

**READER:** I watched your video on davening at tzaddikim's graves and I was wondering: If you have a choice between two tzaddikim's graves, and there's only time to go to one of them, should one opt for:

- 1) the tzaddik with greater madreiga,
- 2) the tzaddik with closer familial relation,
- 3) the tzaddik related more to your particular situation of need, or
- 4) the tzaddik from a specific sect of Judaism (chassidish, modern-orthodox, sefardi, ashkenazi, etc.)?"

*Asher Zelig Fogel  
New York, NY*

**RABBI:** We must first clarify that we do not pray to the dead; this is a clear Torah prohibition.

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that what Judaism gave the world was not monotheism, as Jeremiah taught, "Who would not revere You, O King of the nations?" (Jer. 10:7). All nations accepted the single God. Rather, Judaism taught the world to reject their belief in intermediaries (sun gods, moon gods, etc.). We pray to God alone, as He is fully capable to alone hear each of our needs, and respond alone.

What then was Calev doing praying at the patriarchs' and matriarchs' graves? Calev prayed to God, not to the dead. Calev faced strong opposition from the other 10 spies seeking to defame Israel and reject the Jews' ability to conquer the land. Calev wisely sought to fortify his conviction in God's promise of successfully vanquishing the inhabitants. To do so, he visited the graves of those to whom God originally promised the land. Making God's promise a tangible reality, Calev strengthened his values, but he directed his prayers to God alone (Tosfos, Sotah 34b). Thus, Calev followed your 3rd option above.

This question suggests that dead tzaddikim might improve our lives. However, we must be mindful of Torah's most primary fundamentals, one being "Reward and Punishment": we are the sole cause of our merits and sins. What others do, cannot remove our sins or earn us merit. Thus, praying to dead tzaddikim is prohibited, it is of no use, and it also denies Reward and Punishment. Many times Torah says, "Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents; each man in his own sin shall be killed" (Deut. 24:16, Kings II 14:6, Chronicles II 25:4). Thus,

God's system is where others do not impact our reward or punishment...we are the sole cause.

Visiting graves of righteous people should be done only to inspire us with their values. But we must not think they can hear us, that the dead have powers, or that God treats us differently based on the actions of others, dead or alive. ■

## Sinful Jewish Arrogance

**READER:** While having a conversation with a Chabad Rabbi, he informed me that only the Jew has a "special relationship" with God, and that a Noahide/Gentile does not. He went on to elaborate that even if a Jew was to walk away from his faith and Torah, that he would still be in a "special relationship" with G-d, and that G-d would bring him back at some time in the future. He added that a deeper relationship can be acquired by the Noahide/Gentile ONLY by his own initiative, but never to the level of the Jew—only if the Noahide/Gentile converted can he then reach this "special relationship."

Well, that was discouraging to me to say the least, since I am presently a Noahide who faithfully attends a Chabad Shul and have always had a desire to convert, but cannot at this time. I must be honest with you Rabbi; I was extremely hurt and still very confused. Can you help shed some light on the subject.

PS: When I was a Christian and I would read the Old Testament, every promise of G-d, everything G-d said, I felt G-d was always speaking to me; I felt as though I was eating from a banquet table. But now I feel as though I am eating scraps from the floor. It is the place I see myself in: "If you are not in, you are out." I do not want to feel this way.

*Blessings,  
Peter  
Titusville, NJ*

**RABBI:** While the Jew does have a unique role, this regards only obligations, not human design, the latter is equally shared by all, men and women. If a Jew sins, he can forfeit his Olam Haba, which contradicts the Chabad Rabbi. We see countless cases of sinful Jews like Korach, who God did not "bring back."

There continues to exist a Jewish arrogance not based in Torah, but in man's ego. God is the authority, and He rejects the Rabbi's words you quoted.

God created "all" people with a soul, as He desires all people to attain the greatest good, which means knowledge of God and human perfection. Thus, all people possess the identical potential. Maimonides states (Shmitta v'Yovale 13:13) that "every one who enters the word" (not just the Jew) can equally earn God's providence.

You can rest assured that you are a creation equal to every other human. But those who say otherwise are on a lower level than you as they disparage God's words.

**READER:** Thank you Rabbi for your response, you have helped me tremendously in my walk.

*Blessings,  
Peter ■*



**B**ereishit, describes the creation of the world with particular emphasis on man and the “human condition.” The difference between man and the animals becomes quite clear. Animals are fundamentally and exclusively instinctual creatures. Man, however, while possessing instinct, is unique. For Hashem said, “Let us make Man in Our image, after Our likeness. They shall rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and over the animal, the whole earth, and every creepy thing that creeps upon the earth. So G-d Created Man in His image, in the image of G-d He Created him; male and female He Created them”(Bereishis 1:26-27).

The “Image of G-d” refers to man’s special soul which enables him to think, reason and comprehend the universe. Man also possesses an instinctual makeup which is basically no different from the animals. Commenting on why the Torah prohibits killing an animal with its young on the same day, the Rambam states:

*It is also prohibited to kill an animal with its young on the same day” (Vayikra 22:28), in order that people should be restrained and prevented from killing the two together in such a manner that the young is slain in the sight of the mother; for the pain of the animals under such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings; since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young ones is not produced by reasoning, but by the imaginative faculty which is found in most animals, just like it is found in man.*

This would seem to run contrary to those who regard emotion as the highest expression of the human spirit. Man’s feelings often derive from his instincts, which are not a part of the Tzelem Elokim (Image of G-d). This is not to say that there is no relationship between reason and emotion, but we should ask, are they two entirely different and separate institutions or are they designed to function together in harmony?

This would seem to be the case, but if so, what is the nature of the relationship? Are the feelings in command, and must employ the intellect to secure their objectives, or is it the other way around? The former arrangement is peculiar to animals who utilize what intelligence they have in the process of securing their needs, especially food. When those wants are satisfied, no further “thinking” takes place. The same is true for many people. Their decisions are based on feeling, not reasoning. Their intelligence is brought into play only to obtain what their hearts desire.

But it does not need to be that way. Man differs from animals in another significant way. Animals can’t say “No” to their own desires. Wants must be immediately and automatically gratified. There is no internal mechanism to

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**GENESIS**

**EMOTION VS.  
Reason**

**RABBI REUVEN MANN**



## GENESIS

cause it to say, "I don't think I'll eat that tasty morsel in front of me because it may not be good for my health." But humans have the capacity to hold their desires in abeyance and decide when, how and if they should be fulfilled. This is why animals don't possess free-will. But humans do.

This means that we should not just be slaves to our instincts and pursue whatever they demand. Rather, the human mind should be in the driver's seat. The thinking part of man should, on the basis of careful reasoning, make the decisions concerning the major issues of life.

This is not to say that the emotions don't have a crucial role to play in human life. Man must not be content with abstract understanding unrelated to his complete psyche. The knowledge one obtains should not remain external, but should be fully internalized into one's personality so that all of his doings are based on wisdom.

Man must work hard to train his emotions to be in line with objective truth. Rabbi Israel Chait once referred to this process as that of "educating the emotions." The Torah is not only concerned with our speech and action, but with our thoughts and feelings as well. We are commanded to hate Amalek and love the Ger (convert) among us, as well as all fellow Jews. But that is not how I feel, you might say. But the Torah believes that we can educate our emotions and train them to be in line with its exalted ideals. May we succeed in this endeavor.

Shabbat Shalom

Dear Friends,

My newest book, Eternally Yours: G-d's Greatest Gift To Mankind on VaYikra was recently published, and is now available at:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09SHRXS3Q>

I hope that my essays will enhance your reading and study of the Book of VaYikra and would greatly appreciate a brief review on Amazon.com.

Additionally, for those in Eretz Yisrael, my books are available at David Linden's bookstore located at Emek Refaim Street 21, Jerusalem and at Pomeranz Book store, Be'eri 5 Jerusalem. They are very nice stores to visit and browse.

—Rabbi Reuven Mann ■

M MESORA



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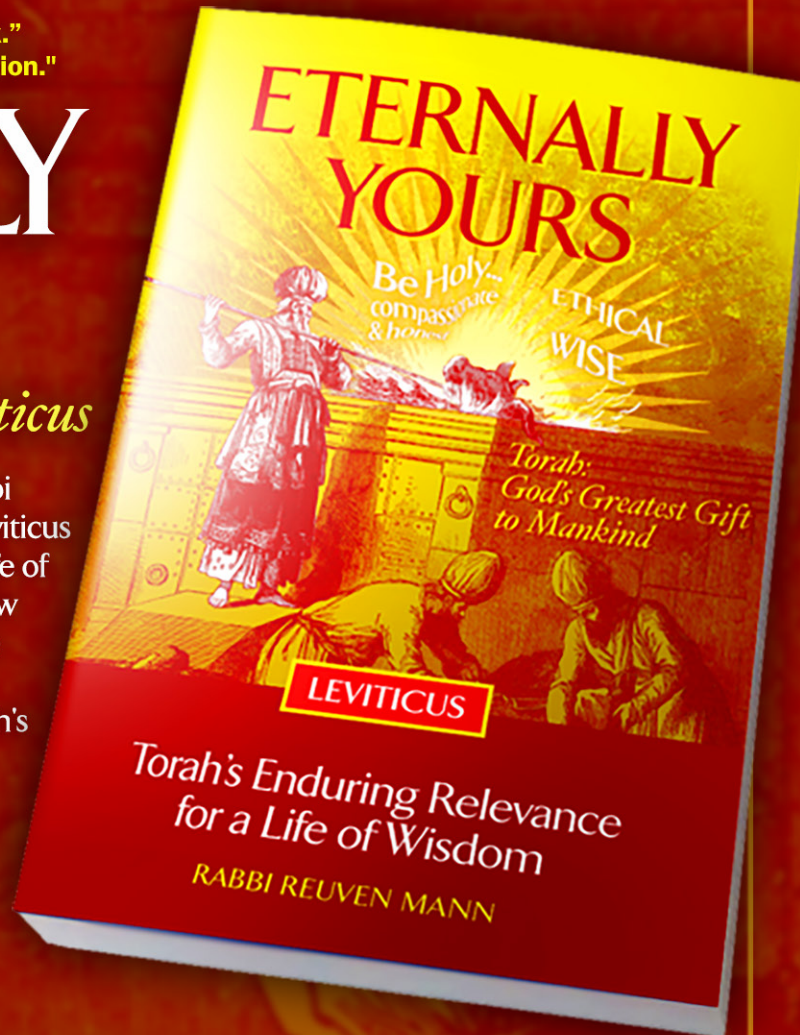
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# Did a 2<sup>ND</sup> Adam Exist?

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

## Metaphysical Man

*And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth. And God created the man in His form, in the form of Elohim (God of justice) He created him, male and female He created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, and fill Earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all beasts that creep on earth" (Gen. 1:26-28).*

Here we read of human intelligence and of genders.

"In His form" refers to intellect, a quality absent in all other earthly creations. Intellect is required for a creature to dominate other creatures, and to also master Earth. God's plan is that Earth serve man in his pursuit of God's wisdom. This explains why God brought the animals to Adam, that he would engage in pondering their unique traits and thereby classify (name) them accordingly. God wishes man to ponder the universe's every corner; each equally reveals God's wisdom.

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that when a number of ideas are placed in a single Torah verse, this proximity indicates a close relationship. Here, genders are aligned next to intellect. Perhaps here, "male and female" indicate not the sexual distinction, but the genders' "psychological" characters. Genders are essential psychological traits that cause attraction and ultimately drive procreation, to "fill Earth." We later read "And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but no fitting counterpart for man was found" (Gen. 2:20). Adam was psychologically dissatisfied with animals as a mate. When God finally builds Eve from Adam's body, Adam says, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Ibid 2:23). Man requires identification with his mate, explaining why God created Eve from Adam. Psychological factors were essential for Adam to mate with another, namely Eve.

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Thus, in Bible's first account of Adam, God prioritizes man's role as an intelligent being, and as a psychological being. These faculties provide man with the capacities to ponder God's wisdom and produce more humans to carry on the same. But these faculties are not physical in nature: the tie between these 2 faculties, explaining their proximity in a single verse.

*This is the account of the generations of Adam, in the day when God created man, in the likeness of God He created him. Male and female He created them, and He blessed and called their name "Adam" in the day He created them" (Gen. 5:1,2)*

Again we see man's intelligence and genders associated with the "likeness of God." Torah's repetition of intelligence and gender validates the tie between the two. This first account of Adam can be described as "Metaphysical Man."

### Physical Man

We then read another account of man's creation. This is the same Adam, but now describing his other nature:

*God formed the man—dust from the Earth—blowing into his nostrils the breath of life: the man became a living being. God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He fashioned (Gen. 2:7)*

*And God, Elohim took the man and placed him in Garden of Eden to work it and guard it. And God commanded upon the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the*

*tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for the day you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:15-17).*

"Dust from the Earth" and "living" refer not to man's intelligent, metaphysical faculty (soul), but to man's tangible physical self as a living being. Here, there is no mention of intelligence or genders. Rather, Bible cites man's origins from dust, his breathing, his life, and God's procurement of vegetation for his nourishment. Here, man is described in his physical capacity alone. Thus, a divine command and man's capacity to sin stems from this physical, instinctual part of man.

It is worth noting these 2 "placements" of Adam in the garden. The first describes God's kindness in planting a garden full of all forms of vegetation, making all fruits and vegetables in easy reach. Here, God simply placed man without Adam's opposition. But in the second placement required God to "take" man: "to appease man to enter" (Rashi). This can be due to man's need to now "work" the garden. By nature, man sought wisdom alone, but in His wisdom, God saw that a life of only learning and no work leads one to sin (Avos 2:2). Thus, man required some coaxing to engage in labor, removing him from thought. This second account of Adam can be described as "Physical Man."

Thus, God depicts not two Adams, but Adam's 2 natures: metaphysical intelligent man, and physical man. Man's intellectual role is rightfully mentioned first to indicate it is man's essence and priority. It is man's intellectual pursuits that define his purpose and his greatest joy. But God made man intentionally dependent on the breath of his nostrils and on sustenance. This directs man to humble himself before whom he

depends. He must also humble himself by laboring to procure his basic needs. God created man's metaphysical faculties separate from his physical faculties. This indicates that the soul can exist independent of the body. And in death, this is precisely what occurs; the soul separates from the body and endures eternally. In man's case, the body has no purpose if man abuses his life chasing animalistic desires alone. Animals exist without a soul, but man cannot, for some reason. Prior to Adam's human life, God created his soul as an independent entity, and He then joined it with a body that breathed and lives, and required the Garden's produce. Upon death, coming full circle, the soul once again exists apart from the body, as it once did. Eventually, man will end this earthly existence and his soul will live on eternally without a body. He will exist as do angels. But as Torah is for earthly man, God discusses our dual nature, directing us to grasp that our temporary physical natures serve our eternal metaphysical soul. We must not invert this reality and prioritize earthly existence by chasing wealth, fame and pleasure, thereby forfeiting our eternity.

Adam's dual nature then sets the stage for the following account of God's command of the forbidden fruit, and of Adam's disobedience. God's command causes man's two opposing natures to battle each other, but it also teaches that Adam possessed the capacity to follow his mind over his emotions, to follow God. Ultimately Adam failed. This story about failure presents God's design of our dual natures, how our vices operate, how we justify, blame, gain a faculty of remorse, fear mortality, crave immortality, and continue onward. ■







Baal: god of fertility

# Whom God Won't Forgive

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**READER:** I recently heard a rabbi say something unique, derived from Jeremiah 18:23. The rabbi quoted a rishon by the name of the Ramah (from Spain) who seems to say that there is such as thing a giving Tzedaka to an unworthy recipient. So in essence, Jeremiah was asking Hashem to ensure downfall of those plotting against him, that even when they try to be straight and do a good deed like Tzedaka, they donate to an unworthy recipient and therefore won't get any reward.

Omphile Tshipa  
Gaborone, Botswana  
Africa

**RABBI:** Let's place your question into context:

*And now, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Turn back, each of you, from your wicked ways, and mend your ways and your actions!" But they will say, "It is no use. We will keep on following our own plans; each of us will act in the willfulness of his evil heart."  
(Jer. 18:11,12)*

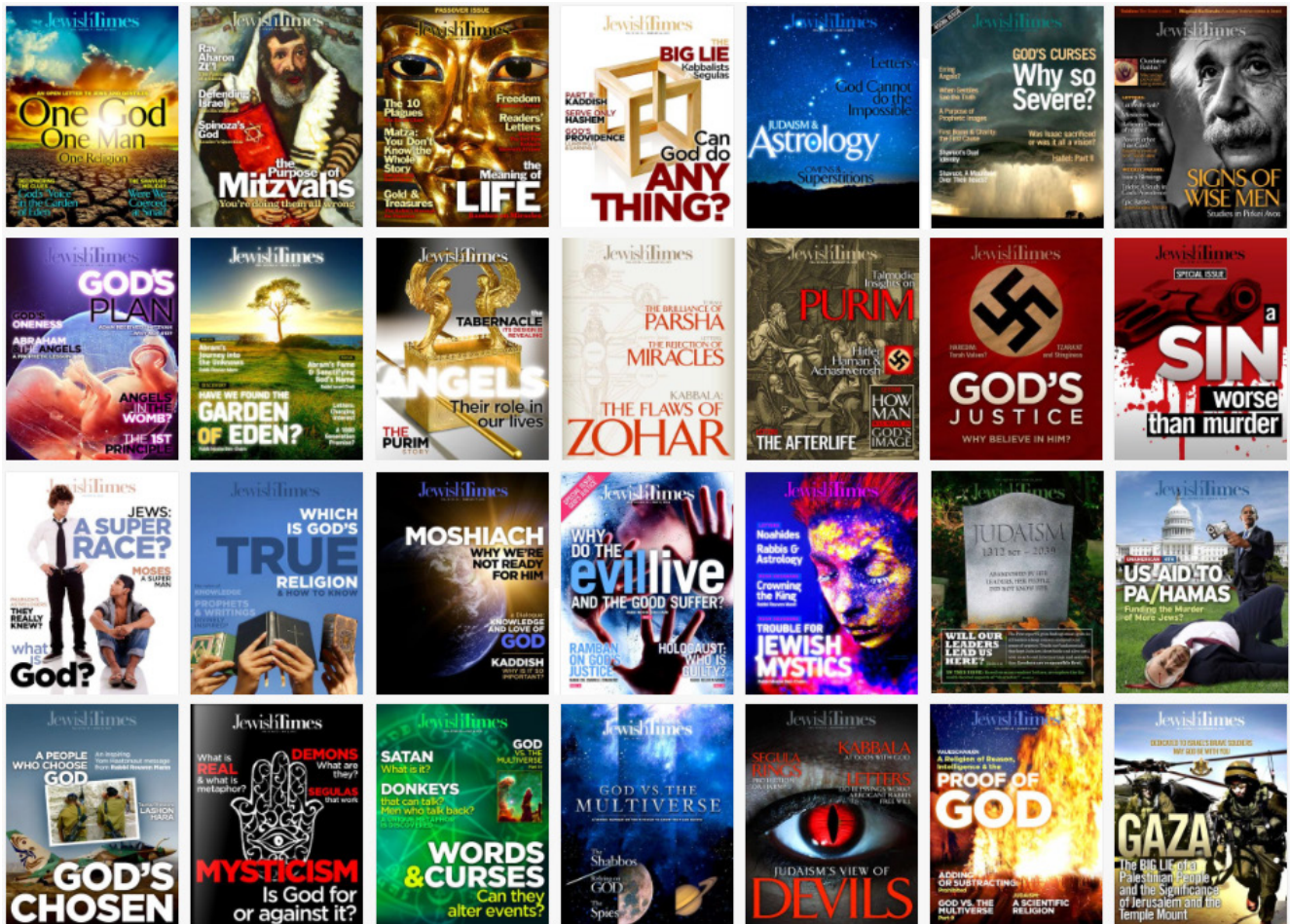
*Like the east wind, I will scatter them before the enemy. I will look upon their back, not their face in their day of disaster. They said, "Come let us devise a plot against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not fail from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor oracle from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and we shall no longer have to listen to all those words of his."  
(Jer. 18:17,18)*

*[Jeremiah said] Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for me. Oh, give their children over to famine, mow them down by the sword. Let their wives be bereaved of children and husbands. Let their men be struck down by the plague, and their young men be slain in battle by the sword. For they have dug a pit to trap me, and laid snares for my feet. O LORD, You know all their plots to kill me. Do not pardon their iniquity, do not blot out their guilt from Your presence. Let them be made to stumble before You—Act against them in Your hour of wrath!  
(Jer. 18:20,23)*

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On this last verse the commentator Metzudas Dovid says Jeremiah asked God to prevent the evil Jews from successfully fulfilling God's commands. However, in light of the many times God says, "I desire the repentance of wicked people over their death" (Ezek. 18:23, 18:32), how does Jeremiah seek their destruction? Omphile, this is your question.

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that there are no new principles in Prophets and Writing, not already found in Bible, the authoritative source of all scriptures. To answer you Omphile, Jeremiah had a precedent from Bible's condemnation of idolaters:

*When hearing the words of these sanctions, they may imagine a special immunity, thinking, "I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart." God will never forgive that person. (Deut. 29:18,19)*

This is identical to Jer. 18:12 — "We will keep on following our own plans; each of us will act in the willfulness of his evil heart." Jeremiah follows God's principle that idolaters feeling justified by their feelings will never be forgiven, and thus, Jeremiah was justified to seek their destruction. These sinful Jews too were idolatrous, as Jeremiah 18:15 says, "My people have forgotten Me; they sacrifice to a delusion." Thus, idolaters who feel justified in following their emotions (hearts) over following reality have no path back to truth, and thus, forfeit their existences.

On many occasions, God destroyed peoples (Jews, Egyptians, Canaanites), cities (Sodom, Gomora) and even the world (the Flood). Those beyond repair risk dissuading others away from God and are rightfully annihilated. Jeremiah saw no redeeming qualities in the sinful Jews out to lynch him for his attempts to return them to Torah. Jeremiah asked God to prevent the evil Jews from successfully fulfilling God's commands as a description of how useless mitzvah would be for such sinful people. Other prophets too scolded the Jews saying, "God does not want your sacrifices." Those Jews continued to pervert justice and spurn the cause of the orphan and widow, while wrongly assuming their mitzvahs had merit:

*Stop bringing oblations is futile, incense is offensive to Me. New moon and sabbath, proclaiming of solemnities, assemblies with iniquity I cannot abide. Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing; they are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them. And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime. Wash yourselves clean; Put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow." (Isaiah 1:13-17). ■*

*This idol belongs to the female statue type that characterizes the art of the Polovtsians, a nomadic Turkic people who came from the East and settled on the steppes of southern Russia between the 11th and 13th centuries*





# What Constitutes a “Trial?”

**DANI ROTH**

**I**n Lech Lecha, we learn of many of Avraham’s perfections. This Dvar Torah will delve into a few of them. The first we see appears in pasuk 12:10 which describes Avraham facing a famine. The Rabbis say this is one of Avraham’s 10 trials. We can understand the trial in sending away Ishmael, and certainly sacrificing Yitzchak. A trial presents one’s perfection; it’s not for God to gain new knowledge, as God knows everything before it happens. Avraham displayed perfection by sending away Ishmael, since Sarah

saw that he was a negative influence, and Avraham still loved him, but he displayed perfection in sending him away, because God endorsed Sarah’s wishes. Avraham also displayed perfection by sacrificing Yitzchak, as he put aside his own plans to educate the world through a son, and accepted losing him.

The question is, what perfection did Avraham present by facing a famine? God told Avraham to leave his land, and when he arrived at the new land, there was no food, and that’s why he went to Egypt, where there was food. How was this a trial? What was Avraham’s perfection? The answer lies in the fact that we believe if God commands us on a mission, and we follow his command, we will be secure from any mishap. This ideology is wrong to believe, and is egotistical. Just because we are doing God’s will doesn’t mean that we are allowed to proceed carelessly, or that we can rely on God for every step of success in our mission. Rabbi Chait said that when Avraham experienced the famine at the new land, he momentarily felt this should not have happened since he was following God’s words; he felt he should be protected. But then he corrected his thinking with his realization that this was a false belief. This was the trial, to reject traces of superstitions. So we learn that a “trial” God places on man, can allow man to detect and overcome imperfections, from child rearing (Ishmael), to forfeiting our plans (Yitzchak) and to abandoning false beliefs (famine). ■



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CONDÉ NAST





# Shiva Reflections

*Rabbi David Fischbein*



**M**y mother Regina Fischbein was born in a displaced persons (DP) camp in the town of Furth, Germany, in 1947. Her parents were holocaust survivors. My uncle was also born in a DP camp in 1950, although he almost wasn't. The doctor told my zaide (grandfather) that they could not save both my grandmother and my uncle, and that he would have to choose. My zaide, a battle hardened survivor, looked at the doctor and told him no, he would not choose, and they had to save them both. However they managed to do it, they saved them both. My uncle was born a premature baby, perhaps 1 or 2 pounds, and was fed with an eye dropper. He eventually grew to a healthy size.

My mother's family moved to the US in 1951. They came in through New Orleans, and settled in Brooklyn. When my mother was 9, there was a fire in their apartment. My zaide carried out my 6 year old uncle in his arm. My mother had to jump from the fire escape. She broke her hip, but she fully recovered (although she was left with a fear of heights). They then moved to Rego Park (Queens), where they settled in. They davened in a survivors shul that was led by a rav named Rav Picarsky. My mother went to Dov Revel, Central (Manhattan), and Queens College. She earned her masters in Communications.

My parents married in 1970. They moved to Far Rockaway in 1974, settling down on Harris Street, just an 8 minute walk from Yeshivah Bnei Torah (YBT).

My mom was the type of person who was interested in everyone, and got along with everyone she knew and met. She had great relationships with her mechutanim (children's parents-in-law) and all 3 of her daughters-in-law. Children of the extended family treated her as their grandmother and would refer to her as "bubby". Her derech of helping her children was with wisdom and nuance. She would offer her assistance, but never overstep her bounds. She would offer her advice where appropriate, but respect our final decisions. One visitor during shiva was a fellow staff member from the high school she taught at, and identified herself as my mom's best friend at school. She said my mother taught her how to be a good a mother

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in law. We asked what were some of the details of this. She offered a couple of points. One is that you should never offer your advice until asked; and when asked, you should start off saying "well what do you think?" Another point is that whatever your feelings are about your son-in-law/daughter-in-law, know that that person loves your child, and your child loves them, and there is a reason for it; this should be a foundation for how you see them. My mother exemplified the middah of doing chesed with chochmah. All of the good that she did for others flowed from the thoughtfulness she had developed throughout her life. As one of the minachamim (comforters) suggested, this is embodied in the pasuk "v'soras chesed al leshonah" ("and the teaching/guidance/instruction of kindness is on her tongue").

My mother raised her boys with an emphasis on the things that mattered, and was more relaxed about the things she knew we would grow out of. Throughout the shiva, we repeatedly brought up an example of this. As a child, I was a very picky eater. My regimen for school lunch consisted of alternating english muffins and pizza bagels (prepared the day before and refrigerated overnight) every other day for many many years. At a certain stage my mother would make microwaved pancakes every morning, as well as a cup of hot chocolate. But by far the most extreme expression of my stubbornness with food was my need for french fries. My parents had a large circle of friends and would eat Shabbos meals at various friends' houses on a regular basis. I was the youngest child out of all the children in the friends circle. And I would always insist on my mother bringing french fries for me to eat. And so she would make them on Friday, and on Shabbos day she would bring along a small crumpled up tin foil with day old french fries in it to put on the blech at our host's house. All of my parents' friends were good sports about it, and I was too naive to realize the inappropriateness of insisting on bringing your own food to a friend's house for a meal. A close member of the family was surprised for years that my mother would allow this, and was sincerely concerned that I would be spoiled by this. But looking back, we agreed that this did not spoil me, and I indeed grew out of that level of stubbornness with food. My mother's wisdom was that she could tell all along that this was a matter that would not

affect me in the long run. She reserved discipline for the things that mattered - being diligent with our studies, doing our homework before engaging in play time, being on time for dinner and bed, respecting our elders, and teaching us proper manners and behavior in speaking to others.

At the end of shiva, a friend asked about reflections and lessons from the experience. I discussed my experience of tefilah (prayer). There is a spectrum of feelings and states of mind for mourners as it relates to tefilah. A close member of the family was open about how it was difficult if not nearly impossible for her to pray given her state of mind. This is indeed a legitimate position to be in. In my own case, it was very different. I felt very fortunate to be able to pray. During shiva, most torah study is forbidden. The vast majority of the day is spent in the singular mitzvah of being involved in mourning. The 3 daily prayers are a rare break where one can be focused on Hashem through avodah sheb'lev (service of the heart), and for me this was therapeutic. The first time I led the prayers in the shiva house, I thought "I am fortunate that although I am garbed in torn clothing, I am enjoined to enter the mikdash (in my mind) to go before God". There was one time when my feeling going into prayer was one of being torn and conflicted. This was the exception; but even here, I did not feel guilty about my state, but rather embraced it for what it was, and moved ahead. Overall, tefilah was my connection to "normal avodah" amidst the deep sea of mourning that I was embedded in, and which was otherwise my full preoccupation. Tefilah also helped me to move out of myself, by focusing on the tzibbur (congregation/group). My perspective going into each tefilah was that, as significant a person my mother was in my life, she was one yechidah (individual) of the greater tzibbur, and that is ultimately what we must accept and internalize as we move through the mourning period and back into our normal lives.


One thing I cherished was how my brothers and I came together to help my mom transition to a new phase in the last year of her life (before we knew it would be her last year). At the end of 2021, my Mom asked to have a zoom call with the 3 of us. On the call, she expressed how overwhelmed she felt at everything she needed to do to set up her life living alone. She had secured an apartment, but there was everything else that

needed to be done. So we helped her make a list. We went through every item that would be needed, and made sure it was comprehensive. I took notes on my phone throughout the call. We divided the responsibilities - one of us would order a computer and printer, one would help set up cable and utilities, one would set up anti-virus for the computer and roku for the tv, etc. She would also need a new car, so we reached out to our networks to see what was available. My oldest brother Ari and I were in close proximity to my Mom, so we were able to help with setup, troubleshooting, and so on. Once we had talked it all out, developed our plan, and gave our reassurances, my mother felt a whole lot better. I thought this was a very appropriate culmination of her raising us to adulthood - we were able to take our experiences, talents, networks, etc. and put it all to use for the one who had gotten us there.

I feel privileged to have had a mother like mine—Regina Fischbein Aleha Hashalom. ■







Genesis is God's first communications with mankind. But by no means does Genesis cite a complete history. Thus, God must deem these selected stories more crucial than all other events. What are their vital lessons?

## 6 "Days" of Creation

As the sun was not set in place until "day" 4, we are forced to interpret the word "day" as not referring to 24-hour periods. Rather, "day" refers to this: a "significant phase in creation." Significance in creation is given to heaven and earth, land and oceans, luminaries, vegetation, animal life and finally, humans. With these phases, God highlights creations of importance. But what is the importance of each?

As God instructed man to dominate Earth (Gen. 1:28), we understand why Rashi explained (Ethics 2:8) that if mankind would abandon knowledge (Torah), God would revert the world to primordial chaos. Man is the only earthly creature that can perceive the creator, and is therefore the goal in the creation of Earth. Just as a rock or a plant does not exist for itself as they are inanimate, animals too which possess no soul, exist only for man, just like all else on Earth. The only earthly creation existing for itself is man. This is because the purpose in creation is the recognition of the creator; on Earth only man can perform this. God needs nothing, so His creations must be for something outside himself. Purpose exists only in a being that can perceive God's wisdom. This expresses God's kindness in creating angels and man.

Why is it that only that which perceives God has purpose, while inanimate and soulless creations do not have a purpose of themselves? We ask this as we already understand that God is behind all creation, and all which God does reflects great wisdom and purpose. Therefore, God intentionally embedded His wisdom into all creation, but not for naught. The depth of wisdom displayed in all His creation must be made observable with intent for a being to observe, and appreciate. Those beings are only man and angels. As we cannot conceive of any purpose in a flower existence—if that was the only thing that God created—we would call this purposeless and not something which God would perform. Therefore a flower must exist for another creation's purpose. Even an inanimate entity like a rock must have a purpose. The wisdom embedded in minerals, botany, zoology and all sciences cannot be perceived by rocks, plants or animals. And as does God does not perform futile actions, God expressed His wisdom for intelligent beings to observe and appreciate. Earth exists for man to discover God's wisdom.

## Day & Night

God changed the names of 5 phenomena. On day 1, God called light "day," and darkness He called "night." On day 2 He called the firmament "heavens" and on day 3 He called the dry Earth "land," and the

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# God's First Words

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

collection of waters He called “seas.” However, God does not rename the substance of water, mountains, sun, moon, stars, man, animals, vegetation or any other creation.

Interestingly, these five names relate again to heaven (day, night, heavens) and Earth (land and seas): His first [primary] creations. Furthermore, these 5 are prioritized, addressed first before all other creations. Also, what is the concept of “renaming” one thing and not another: Is the renamed thing thereby highlighted as more significant, and if so, in what manner?

“And it was evening and it was morning, day X,” is repeated many times. Why this emphasis of night transitioning into day? Primarily, what is the purpose of day and night? What in man’s path towards perfection demands this regulated transition between light and darkness? Why must night exist?

These phenomena of light and darkness and day and night are highlighted by the Shema’s blessings:

*Blessed are you God, King of the world, forming light and creating darkness...*

*Blessed are you God, King of the world, with His word He sunsets the evenings...with understanding He changes times, and exchanges the moments...creating day and night, You expire day and bring night, and divide between day and night...*

With “day,” “night,” “heavens,” “land” and “seas” God renamed these—and no other creation—to focus man on the purpose of creation, and our purpose in life. Constraining our ambitions (through darkness) and our geographical habitation to land—not water or heaven—intend to constrain our involvement in a purely physical life—time and space—and steer us towards the higher pursuit of Torah and perfection, matters of the soul. The physical serves only to enable the perfection of our souls. Day and night differ from light and dark, in that day and night are “human measurements of activity,” not visual phenomena of light or dark. God renames light and dark as “day and night” to impose this perspective upon us, preventing our lives from being spent on only physical pursuits. Not only due to lack of light, but night also effects us psychologically, when we recoil from our endeavors. Maimonides says that whomever desires to attain the crown of Torah should not let his nights go without Torah study. This is because with fewer distractions at night, we have greater focus on knowledge and gain so much more wisdom during these hours.

Thus, God organized creation to restrict man from overindulging worldly pursuits and travel, thereby directing him towards greater wisdom.

## Eden & Human Nature

Once we have earth, man and all creations, what need is there for this garden? This question is compounded by the discussion of a river which exited the Garden of Eden and then separated into four individual rivers, with great detail of their names and where they traversed.

We never again hear about these rivers in the rest of Bible (Torah). Therefore they must be germane to Adam who was placed in the Garden of Eden. In a separate essay “Have We found Eden?” I suggest the meaning of these rivers and their names. But briefly, these rivers allude to the human mind, for it is only with this knowledge that we can truly understand our make up, manage our personalities, fulfill our purpose, avoid fantasy and attain happiness. What is a marvelous parallel, we see that King Solomon too commenced his book about attaining happiness (Kohelles) with the discussion of “rivers.” Man’s energies flow like rivers. King Solomon also refers to the sun shining and then setting, i.e., as Rabbi Israel Chait explained, paralleling man’s search for happiness, chasing one fantasy after the next:

*King Solomon continues his illustration of man’s psyche, now engaging metaphor. The metaphor of the sun describes man’s search for lusts. Man obtains the object of his desires, “the sun rises.” But then the experience passes, “the sun sets.” Man then chases the desire again, “and hastens to its place where it rises again.”*

## Adam, Eve, the Snake, the Sword and the Cherubs

God then teaches us about our subservient role to Him, expressed in his command that Adam and Eve abstain from that one tree. We are taught that initially, Adam and Eve did not possess a conscience, explaining why nudity was not a concern. God did not wish man to be distracted by morality: thoughts only possible with a conscience. He wished that man be solely involved in higher knowledge, of truths and rejecting falsehoods (not morality: good vs. evil). God’s desire that man pursue scientific and philosophical knowledge is expressed in God bringing the animals to Adam for him to study and classify: naming the animals. It was only due to man’s inability to control his desires that the conscience was created and placed in man’s mind, generating feelings of guilt, to avert man’s self-destruction through sinning. After this we see nudity became a concern which is an expression of morality and guilt. God’s concession to man of the conscience intends to help man continue life; guilt helps one refrain from what he deems as evil. And with the punishment of mortality for man’s violation and man’s immediate desire for the Tree of Life, we see the dominant role that the fantasy of immortality plays in man. This fantasy again is addressed by King Solomon in his great work Kohelles. As Rabbi Chait explained, all human fantasy is appealing only due to man feeling immortal, that his fantasies could be endless.

The story of the snake is also a metaphor. Maimonides states that the snake never spoke to Adam:

*It is especially of importance to notice that the serpent did not approach or address Adam, but all his attempts were directed against Eve (Guide, book iii, chap. xxx).*

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This indicates that the snake was not a physical creature. For if it was, it could address Adam too. But the snake is in fact Eve's instincts, explaining why her "snake" cannot appeal/talk to Adam; our instincts entice only ourselves.

Sforno follows this metaphor explaining man's "crushing of the snake's head" to mean that man conquers his instincts at the "head" of the battle. But if man allows his instincts to go unopposed, they eventually swell and overcome man drawing him to sin, the meaning of the snake "biting mans heel" — i.e., at the "heel" of the battle, the instincts overcome man.

The spinning flaming sword is an allusion to the threat of mortality and the childlike cherubs give man a sense of immortality. This means that man senses both immortality and mortality, thereby creating a balance to keep man equidistant from both damaging poles: with the punishment of death, man can no longer fantasize that he is immortal, and with a sense of immor-

tality, man will not feel morbid that he's dying tomorrow.

### **Cain and Able**

Now we learn of religion and competition. Cain was jealous that God favored his brother's sacrifice. Thereby, we learn that man seeks validation for his religiosity, and that he is intolerable towards those whom God favorites; Cain murdered Abel...the seeds of anti-Semitism. From God's punishment of Cain, we derive that no prohibition against murder was needed: morality and the evil of murder can be derived from God's creation of a species. As God made many men, His will is disregarded when we treat others worse than ourselves. A species means God desires multiple beings to exist. Therefore we cannot mistreat them.

Although not commanded in sacrifice, Cain and Abel recognized man is subservient to God and that it is proper to embody this in sacrifice: the giving of our efforts to God, who gave us the fruits of our efforts. God

responding to their sacrifices teaches that it is necessary for man's dignity that God validates man's proper actions. Similarly we read "Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces" (Lev. 9:24). Here too, God endorsed man's upright acts.

Additionally God's response to Cain that he can overcome his sinful nature rides on the coattails of Adam's sin, teaching that sin is not something coerced or inevitable.

As we progress in our Torah studies, we must be sensitive that all stories and laws target vital lessons. We must not dismiss a story or a single detail as minor. Maimonides taught that in some Torah accounts, each item in a section teaches something new, while in other cases, many particulars may be providing context, without new lessons for each word or phrase. We must discern when to apply each rule, but recognize that all that is written in Torah is for a purpose. ■



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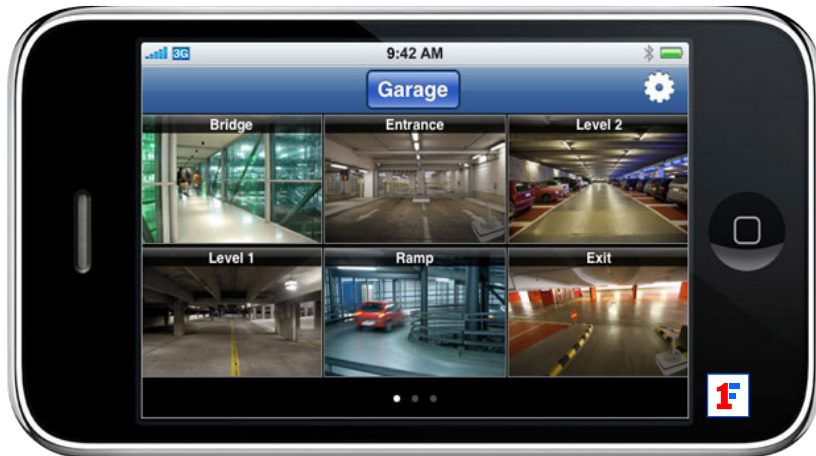
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