

If a given man is cruel to others, and by God's Torah law, deserves property loss as punishment, is it reasonable that another man, a Rabbi, can "bless" away God's punishment and cause his success?

Sadly, many people today believe that a man can, with words, bestow a new fate upon others.

Man overriding God is antithetical to Judaism.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

RABBIS' BLESSINGS & GOD'S RULE	I,2
VESSELS' COVERINGS	I,3
ANGELS	4

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The Vessels' Coverings

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

At the end of Parshas Bamidbar, we find various coverings used in connection with Tabernacle's vessels when traveling. What is the significance of these different coverings, their colors, and the order of layering in which these coverings were commanded?

(continued on page 3)

Rabbis' Blessings & God's Exclusive Rule

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Genesis, Rashi states (Gen, 30:2) when Rachel desired children and had none, she asked Jacob, her husband, that he should have prayed for her. Jacob responded, according to Rashi, "God has withheld children from you and not me". We must know that Jacob was not vicious or callous to another human being, certainly not to his own wife. Jacob meant to say, "You have the need, not me, and God has not answered you. It must then be you who prays". A Rabbi mentioned that the person's prayer is the essential one, and not what someone else prays for you.

When what we seek from God goes unanswered, prayer enables us to reflect on our needs and our flaws. Hopefully, we spend time in self contemplation. We must wonder, "what in me has caused God not respond to my request?" This institution of prayer assists us in detecting our flaws that render us unworthy of God's response.

The reason for this is that prayer, when performed correctly, has an elevating reaction on the one praying. The ideas one ponders in the prayers actually raise his knowledge and awareness of these concepts to a higher level. When one adheres to these values, he is more under God's Providence, and will experience a different, more perfected existence than before, now benefiting from God's involvement in his life to a higher degree. (Maimonides, Moreh Nevuchim.)

It is the raising of one's perfection



that causes this good. God is not the One who changes in this scenario. Rambam made a statement which I will very loosely paraphrase, as I cannot locate the source: "it is like something distant from a fire, it is in darkness, as it approaches, it becomes illuminated, closer, it is heated, even closer, the fire actually changes its form." This is our relationship with God. The more distant, the more in darkness we are. The closer we come, the more the fire (God) effects us. However, the fire never changed. The analogy being that God does not

change. What is perfect, can be no more perfect, and therefore, He cannot change. We cannot change God. Even through our prayer. As God said Himself, (Malachi, 3:6) "I am God, I do not change....". This concept also explains the Mishneh in Pirkei Avos, (Ethics of the Fathers) where 10 miracles are said to have been created at sunset on Friday of the Six Days of Creation. All other miracles were also created then, but in their proper day, as Maimonides states in Ethics, 5:6. All this means that God made the world with all miracles built in to the fabric of

(continued on next page)

Rabbis' Blessings & God's Exclusive Rule

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from page 1)

their respective substances. God did not need to 'wait' until the miracle is necessary in order to render it. He has foreknowledge, and was able to implant all miracles into the creation - during creation.

This also teaches us clearly that God is the One Who performs ALL miracles, and man performs none. People today believe that Rabbis perform miracles. From Pirkei Avos we see that the Torah's words declare absolutely, that God alone causes ALL the miracles, as ALL miracles were built into creation.

It is crucial to note here that a person cannot effect changes in the world outside of his ability as a mere mortal, a weak individual. Even Moses prayed to God on numerous occasions to make changes. Moses alone had no power to do so. The concept of a Rabbi having any power whatsoever is against Judaism, and against God's recorded accounts of Moses, who was the greatest man to have ever lived, or will ever live. If Moses prayed to God for change, it follows that we must do the same, and we cannot effect changes in nature ourselves. Saadia Gaon says openly in his work, "The Book of Beliefs and Opinions" that man, not even the prophets, had no powers at all. Had they been given power, or protection from death, mankind would project false notions of their being superior to other mortal men, and this is not so. Saadia Gaon gives numerous arguments against the idea that man has any power whatsoever. God is the Sole wielder of power. This has never been given to man,.... even Moses. There is a Gemara which discusses "three keys" which were given to man. But like all Rabbinic statements, do not guess at the underlying idea based on a superficial assumption, based only on the topic's title. This statement that God has given certain "keys" to man, cannot mean that God relinquished His unique role as Creator, the Master of all laws.

The Talmud on Blessings of Rabbis

There is a Gemora (Moade Katan 9a) that states that both Rav Shimon ben Yochai and Rav had sent their son's to receive blessings from their respective students. Why didn't Rav Shimon ben Yochai and Rav bless their sons themselves? They were definitely greater than their students! Yet, they both desired that their students give the blessings. It is also interesting to note that Rav Shimon ben Yochai only sent his son to his students after he saw that these students were "anashim tzura", "wise men". The gemara also inserts that Rav Shimon ben Yochai's desire to have these students give blessings was only after they came back to take leave of him an additional time. As the story goes, Rav Shimon ben Yochai was visited by these two students. They said their goodbyes, and left that night. The next morning they returned to say goodbye again, at which, Rav Shimon ben Yochai asked why they did so. They responded, "Rebbe, you taught us that if a student takes leave of his teacher, but sleeps over in that town, he must once again take leave the next day". To this, Rav Shimon ben Yochai turned to his son and said, "these men are wise men, go to them that they may bless you."

What is so significant about this mechanical activity of returning to take leave a second time, that Rav Shimon ben Yochai thought of these men as wise? Aren't there more difficult commandments which would convey greater intelligence more readily than merely traveling back to say goodbye to a teacher? It is a very simple activity with no real intelligence required! I believe the gemara says that this command was followed by these two students for good reason, and very germane to this story.

Rav Shimon ben Yochai could have very well blessed his son. But blessing doesn't mean one performs miracles or controls nature in any way. Man does not have this ability. Moses didn't perform miracles without God's intervention, and anyone on a lower

level certainly cannot perform miracles.

When these two men returned to Rav Shimon, as a friend suggested, Rav Shimon was testing the students by saying, "why have you returned?" Rav Shimon ben Yochai didn't forget the law. He was merely testing to see if their return was one of a personal nature. Meaning, were they so attached to him they didn't want to leave, or perhaps was their return merely out of respect to objective law? When they answered Rav Shimon that they returned "as the law prescribes", Rav Shimon saw in them an intellectual objectivity, and not a lower, emotional dependence. It was this objectivity which he felt was necessary for one to see his son's true nature, and bless him accordingly. Rav Shimon may have felt that he held some bias towards his son, and this is why I believe both Rav Shimon ben Yochai and Rav had their students bless their sons, and they themselves did not. They both saw the need for objectivity.

We now see how the gemara cleverly cited that these two students returned for this specific halacha. This halacha of returning, is to remind oneself of the town's real importance - the Rabbi, the teacher of God's Torah. These students displayed their relationship to their own Rebbe as an objective, intelligent one, not a personal and emotional one. This performance may be simple in action, but it is indicative of one's perfected relationship with his fellow man. Interesting also is that both Rav Shimon and Rav did not instruct their sons to request a blessing on a specific matter, as is done today when people ask a Rabbi to bless them with children or monetary success. Both, Rav Shimon and Rav let the wise students decide what is best for their sons. No preformulated requests. Respect for wisdom alone was the motivation of these two great Rabbis.

What is a "bracha", a blessing?

A Rabbi once expounded on this topic. He mentioned that when Jacob blessed his sons, he merely pointed to each son's nature, and underlined it. Without bracha, one may have to decide whether to take a position or not. He has no knowledge how it will play out later in life. He can be very successful, or a real failure. However, with prophecy, as Jacob had, he was

able to remove doubt from his son's lives, and share with them Divine Knowledge to assure their successes.

But we today, as well as Rav Shimon and Rav, do not have prophecy. So what does bracha - blessing - mean in this sense? Also, what does the gemara mean that when sick, one should go to a chocham - a wise person? It means that a wise person looks at you objectively, studies your character, and points out your wrong doings so you understand how to operate better, and remove yourself from sin. The reason why one gains illness may be due to a misguided life. "Many evils befall the righteous, and they are saved from them all." This teaches that one who is not righteous, may suffer illness. To teach man of his wrong, God may deliver illness apropos of the mistake, "mida kneged mida" or "measure for measure", as He did to Miriam the prophetess. She was smitten with leprosy for speaking against Moses, her brother.

It is of the utmost importance we realize that in no case does a person display the ability to change nature or perform miracles alone. This, the gemara and Chumash do not state. When prophets 'seem' to revived dead children, the commentaries explain that when they laid upon the child and he revived, eye to eye, mouth to mouth, he only laid upon him so as to concentrate more on his prayer. The prophet prayed, and God revived.

The Blessings of the Rabbis' Students

These wise students of Rav Shimon ben Yochai asked Rav Shimon's son upon his arrival, "What do you request here?" He responded, "My father sent me to you to receive a blessing". When these students heard this, they quickly surmised that this son of Rav Shimon was clearly still taking direction from his father. Perhaps, this is why their blessing was longevity, for Rav Shimon's son, his wife and his children. By making this wish to the son, perhaps, this young man will abandon his current paternal dependency and feel secure through this blessing, to start a life of his own. This I believe may be the purpose of this specific blessing.

Rav Saadia Gaon stated clearly and numerous times, "man has no power over the elements". ■

The Vessels' Coverings

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from page 1)

We can commence by deducing for ourselves that these coverings did not all act as "coverings". There are two reasons I say this: 1) Only one covering is needed to achieve the quality of "covering" any given vessel. Additional layers do not add to the state of being "covered". Once something is covered, it remains so until that last layer is removed. 2) The second reason is that the word "begeg" (garment) is used in connection with the blue wool, not "kisooy", (cover) as is used with the animal skins.

What is the purpose of having both, blue sheets and animal skins covering the vessels of the Tabernacle when traveling? Why was the order of layers for the Ark; animal skin covered with a blue sheet, whereas the remaining vessels were the opposite i.e., the blue sheet was placed over the vessel first, followed by the animal skin above? If one layer achieves "cover", what is the purpose of a second layer?

The commentators state that the animal skins served to protect the vessels from the elements. But protection is only one reason to cover an object. Another reason is to hide something from visibility. Perhaps, when not together forming the halachik structure of the Tabernacle, the vessels were not functioning in their true purpose. Meaning, the vessels served to complement the essence of the Tabernacle, I mean the Ark. In "The Temple and Tabernacle" article, I suggested the vessels (aside from the Ark) served to teach man those ideas which are within man's grasp. But this is only taught as these vessels are placed outside the Holy of Holies. It is precisely from this

positioning that we derive this idea. The restriction from entering the Holy of Holies where the Ark rested, teaches man that he cannot approach any understanding of G-d in this life. Therefore man's abstention from entering this room demonstrates his inability to approach G-d. The other room, the Holies, where the Menora, Table and Altar are found, represent areas of knowledge which are in fact available to man. Therefore, when the vessels are not in the Tabernacle, and not in proximity to the Holy of Holies, this derivation is not apparent, and perhaps even other man made ideas might be projected onto these impressive, golden vessels

when seen. Therefore, an additional blue sheet is placed on these vessels, not for protection against the elements, but as an act of "concealment". Teaching that these vessels have no intrinsic value when not forming the total Tabernacle, where they actualize their purpose, contributing to the structure of the Tabernacle. This is why, (although already protected from the elements via the animal skins) we find the command to cover them with blue sheets. This extra layer is therefore not acting as a protection, but as a veil.

The Ramban says that the blue sheets are meant to remind one of the "essence of the heavens for

purity". So what is to be understood by "heavens"? Heavens are euphemistically used to connote the metaphysical or spiritual realm, also the area of knowledge. Although the heavens are no less physical than the Earth, being out of man's reach, and lofty in estimation, Ramban uses the heaven's aura as a metaphor for the spiritual world. So the blue of the sheets is to signify that the Ark and the other vessels partake of leading man towards the true world of knowledge. These are the goals of the vessels. But since the other vessels do not achieve this goal when not assembled in the Tabernacle, even this "spiritual" aspect is hidden, and therefore under the animal skins. The Ark however derives no compliment from the other vessels, and therefore the blue sheet is exposed, teaching that its purpose never diminishes, even when the structure is not in existence.

This concept was discussed in the article "The Ark's Poles".

#Question from reader: It is a bit confusing...You say the vessels are covered first with the blue sheets and then the skins for protection. The blue sheets can't be meant for a veil if they themselves can't be seen through the skins....unless there is some timeframe that the skins are not put on but only the sheets are on. A veil is usually the only thing between eyes and the object being hidden...so what is the explanation?

Mesora: You are right, the blue sheets cannot be 'functioning' as a veil, but they can have the 'purpose' of a veil in concept, to teach that the vessels "should" be covered. □



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ANGELS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Question: What is the true view of Judaism regarding angels, in general and when mentioned in T'nach? Thank you.

Mesora: Your question touches on the issue of "evil forces". Another reader recently wrote in after having read of a well known Rabbi who endorsed this notion of assumed "evil forces". I will address this topic at the very end of this article.

Based on Maimonides, and verses in the Torah, there appear to be multiple and non-mutually exclusive understandings for "angels".

One understanding, Maimonides explains in his Guide for the Perplexed, Book II, Chap. XLI, and writes as follows: "We have already shown that the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream." Maimonides holds that when an angel "appears" or "talks" it is part of some prophecy or dream - it is not occurring in physical reality.

Maimonides found it impossible that man should be awake while experiencing an angel. Why? As Maimonides understood it, angels who appear and speak, are partaking of two characteristics that are impossible to exist on Earth. They are, 1) Intelligence (an angel speaking), and 2) Will (an angel appearing). Maimonides is teaching a crucial concept; there is no intelligence on Earth besides man.

All Earthly creation aside from man, is limited to non-intelligent life. When the passage states that an angel "spoke" or "appeared", Maimonides is forced to interpret the passage as having taken place in a vision. The metaphysical world is the only plain where intelligence other than man exists.

The first type of angel applies to cases when the angel "speaks" or "appears". This type of angel is a metaphysical being and therefore, can be perceived only in a vision, which is a phenomena of the mind, a metaphysical element.

There are however other instances of "angel", not as part of a dream or vision. Maimonides states Torah account of angels must take place in a vision or dream only when the angel "appears", or "speaks". But if no speaking or appearance takes place with the mention of "angel", it would seem from Maimonides that we do not have to understand the account as a vision, and we may take the account as literal. For example, "angel" can also refer to a person, like Pinchus, who Maimonides describes as being on a high level, and could be called an angel. So here, angel refers to a normal human being of high caliber.

In Baruchi Nafshi, (Psalms 104:4), King David says "oseh malachav ruchos, umsharsav aish lohate", "He (God) makes his angels messengers, and His

ministering angels flaming fire". Rashi and Metsudas Dovid explain this to mean that God makes the natural forces his messengers. Angel can also mean a force of nature.

One should note however that we do not see the Rabbis explaining angels as is incorrectly understood today, portrayed in paintings as "humans" with wings. Such images do not accurately depict Scripture's accounts. The cherubs with wings above the ark in the Holy of Holies are another concept to be treated separately.

All I mean to suggest here, is that Maimonides did not accept the idea that besides man, there exists on earth, other intelligences. Any mention of an angel appearing or speaking indicates a being with reason and will, and therefore, must occur only in a vision, in man's mind, not on Earth.

Maimonides' principle discounts any truth to the false notion of "forces" which many people assume to have existence, will, and the ability to affect man. This is false. Man's life is in his own hands, "Hakol b'day shamayim, chutz mayiras shamayim", "All is in God's hands, except the fear of God." This means man's will is his own, unaffected by anything but his will. Therefore, there cannot be anything in creation which could deter man from choosing to follow God. □

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