

Moses recalls how Revelation at Sinai incorporated a voice of intelligence that the Jews "heard from inside the fire." Moses says, "You have been shown to know that God is God, there is none other besides Him". (Deut. 4:35) Sinai was a proof of God's existence. About 8 times in Deuteronomy, Moses repeats that the event was "from inside the fire."

## How was intelligent speech emanating from a fiery mountain indispensable for the proof of God?

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## Maimonides' Formulation of Molech

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Maimonides' work, the Sefer haMitzvos (the Book of Commands) he classifies the 613 Positive and Negative commands. In the second section on Negative Commands, he commences with formulations of idolatrous prohibitions: "And the The first

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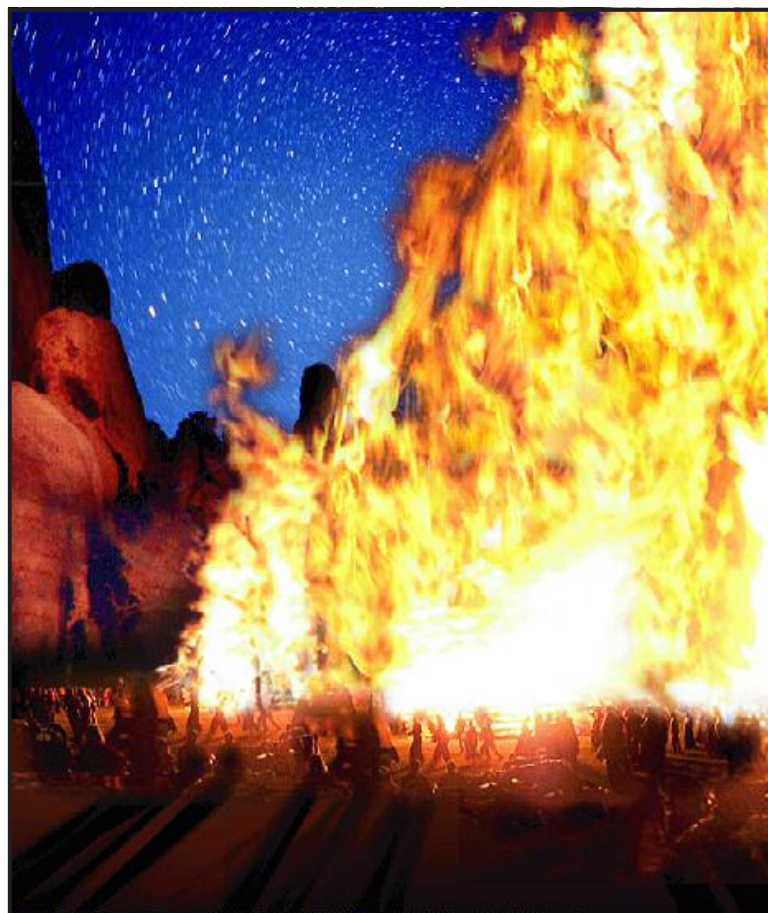
## Can We Affect God?

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Why should we worship God? Does God need our worship? Does it give Him satisfaction? Are we benefiting Him in any way? Or does God not need our service and does not care whether or not we worship Him? For most religious people the answers to the above questions comprise the most patent aspects of their religious motivation. Yet when these questions are presented squarely to a religious person the answers are often garbled, unclear and even self-contradictory. In other words religious people have strong feelings about the answers to these questions but not very strong ideas. For the Torah loving person such a state of mind is not tolerable. "Know the God of your fathers and serve Him," (1 Chronicle 28:9), King David instructed Solomon before he departed from this world. The Rabbis underscored this statement, "know Him first, then serve Him" (see Radak, Hosea 6:3). It is not proper to serve God without a clear understanding of the 'what' and the 'why' of this service.

To demonstrate the difficulty, into which these questions lead us, let us take the last one. Does God care if we do or do not worship Him? If we say He does care then we are maintaining that God is subject to

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## A Mountain Ablaze

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In the book of Deuteronomy, long after the event of Sinai, Moses recalls elements of that event. Interesting, he makes numerous mentions of one particular aspect; (4:12) "And God spoke to you from inside the fire, a voice of words did you hear, and no form did you see, only a voice", (4:16) " And be exceedingly careful regarding your souls, for you did not see any form the day God spoke to

you in Horeb from inside the fire", (4:33) "Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from inside the fire, and survived, as you have?", (4:36) "From the heavens He made heard His voice to train you, and on Earth He showed you His great fire, and His words you heard from inside the fire", (5:4) "Face to face, God spoke with you on the mountain from inside the fire", (5:19) "These matters God

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# Can We Affect God?

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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different states of existence. He is, so to speak, happier under certain conditions, i.e., when we worship Him, and less happy under other conditions, i.e., when we do not, or refuse to worship Him. We are also maintaining that we can affect God, that is, we human beings, are capable of affecting the Creator, which seems a bit egocentric if not preposterous. On the other hand if we maintain God does not care if we do or do not serve Him, our service then seems meaningless and God appears to us as a being indifferent to man. This latter view reminds us of the view of those who deny God's omniscience and His relationship with man. They say, "God has abandoned the earth" (Ezekiel, 8:12, 9:9).

It seems either view we take leads to some untenable position. Most religious people, therefore, have either removed this question to the far recesses of their minds or believe implicitly that God is more pleased when we worship Him. "What can I do for God today", we hear people say, as if God needs their help. Is it any wonder that we often encounter religious people of great arrogance? What can be more ego boosting than to believe that God is waiting each morning for one's service to Him, or to think that one can affect the Creator of the universe? Most non-religious people would be happy if they could affect a few human beings.

What does Torah have to say about this? Let us turn to the thirteen principles of our faith. The fourth principle states that God is not physical. By this we mean God is not comparable to any created thing, animate or inanimate. This is stated by Isaiah in 40:18, 25, "And to whom can you liken me... sayeth the Holy One." The created world is subject to change, a rock decays, plants grow, matter is converted into energy and vice versa. Man changes, he can go from poor health to good health, from

sadness to happiness, from evil to good and vice versa. God, being most perfect, is not subject to change. As the prophet states, "I, God, do not change," (Malachi 3:6). As Rambam states in the Yad, Laws Concerning the Fundamentals of our Faith, ch.1 Law 11, "and He does not change, for there is nothing that can cause change in Him. There does not exist in Him... anger or laughter, happiness or sadness..." God is not improved, happier, in a better state of being if we serve Him or in a worse state if we do not serve Him. Our God is awesome and we cannot affect Him in any way whatever. Whether we are evil or righteous, religious or atheistic, God remains unaffected. He, the Supreme Being, is not in need of anything including our worship of Him. Why do we worship God? Because in so doing we fulfill the divine potential God has endowed us with. The worship of God through Torah brings into realization the highest element in our nature and gives us true existence and fulfillment.

Is God indifferent to our worship? It depends upon how we mean this. If by indifferent we mean that God gains nothing from our worship, the answer is yes. If by indifferent we mean that God is not concerned about us the answer is no. God in His great mercy has given us the potential to perceive to some degree His knowledge and His truth. In other words this awesome God who gains nothing from our worship nevertheless shows us mercy and kindness in giving us the ability to obtain the greatest good for ourselves - perfection. God is the only true benefactor. His goodness does not stem from any possibility of gain but from His very essence.

As followers of Torah we are not permitted to be motivated to worship by the false notion that we are helping God. While this notion may be emotionally satisfying and motivating, it belongs to the class of the idolatrous who attempt to make God in man's image. As Isaiah states in his vivid description of idolatry, "and he makes it in the likeness of a man, in the glory of a man, to dwell in [his] house." Idolaters are moved by powerful emotions, but we are moved by the awesomeness of the one true God. ■

## A Mountain Ablaze

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain from inside the fire...", (5:21) "...and you said 'and His voice we heard from inside the fire'...", (5:23) "For who of all flesh has heard the voice of the living God speaking from inside the fire, and survived, as us?", (9:10) "And God gave to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and upon them, as all the words that God spoke with you on the mountain from inside the fire on the day of the assembly."

What is so significant about fire? Why on a mountain? Why was Moses so careful to recall these two aspects of Sinai so many times?

Placed in the context of the event and appreciating the goal, let us rephrase the question: How is a voice emanating from a fiery mountain, indispensable for the proof God wished to offer man of His existence? Moses also recalls, "you did not see any form the day God spoke to you in Horeb from inside the fire." Is this a new lesson, or that which supports the goal of the "fire"?

How is fire different from all other elements, such as earth, water, air, wind, metals, ice, etc? How is a mountain different from all other topography, from lakes, oceans, valleys, hills, etc? I ask this, because Moses repeats these two aspects. He must be driving a some essential feature of the Sinai Revelation. But what?

Man has discovered life everywhere on this planet. In the most frigid zones, insects live in glacier ice, and fish, under frozen seas. In the highest altitudes, spiders with parachute-like webs keep them afloat on journeys to new locations. In hot, arid deserts, mammals hydrate themselves by licking condensation off of stones placed at the entrances to their borrows. In mud, frogs survive, and deep inside sand dunes, animals breath air through tiny nostrils filtering sand grains from air. However, fire seems to be the one element in which no form of life can survive. Why was it used by God to prove His existence? The answer is apparent.

God desired man to know that He exists, not just believe blindly. To this end, God orchestrated an event which would leave no doubt as to the Cause of the event - that this Cause is not a created being, but the Creator of the universe. How was this

to be proved? Fire. This one element is mutually exclusive to all life. Yes, certain substances remain intact in even the most severe temperatures, but not life. No one at Sinai assumed anything physical could "speak to them from inside the fire." Perhaps someone was dying inside the fire, and shrieked so loud, and that is what they heard? No, the verse says "a voice of words", meaning, they heard intelligent speech, not someone's dying shriek. A voice of intelligence emanating from "inside fire" proved beyond any doubt, that they were hearing words caused by God. They were being addressed by the Creator of fire, the Creator of all matter, the One Who is not controlled or affected by all creation or laws of creation. He is the One Who designed the universe. He is the only One who could go unaffected by a mountain ablaze. The Jews had solid proof for God's existence, for the divine nature of the Torah, for God's will that they follow His commands, and for Moses' selection as God's prophet.

Moses also recalls that the Jews saw no form. He says to them, "And be exceedingly careful regarding your souls, for you did not see any form the day God spoke to you in Horeb from inside the fire." Moses wishes to stress the that one's own soul is at stake, if he imagines any form coexisted with the Revelation at Sinai. The Jew's idolatrous tendencies would seek to explain away this unintelligible phenomena at Sinai. Man desires that everything fit into his own, limited framework of understanding. But Moses alerts the Jews to this dangerous endeavor. He warns them that this event was not one as any other, that could be explained by natural law. "You saw no form", "And be exceedingly careful for you life", meaning, an error in connection with what God is, is the greatest error, and one's life loses it's purpose when he imagines God as physical in any way. "You saw no form."

We now understand Moses' numerous recollections of the event at which the Jews heard God's voice from inside the fire. Fire dispelled any probability of an earthly existence being the cause of this event.

I believe the reason for a mountain was to enable such a large crowd of 2-3 million people to witness the event. Had this taken place on flat ground, those in the distance would see nothing. The mountain acted as an inverted stadium, where the event may be witnessed from afar, unobstructed, and by many. ■



# Me, is a Very Small Word

## *The Book of Ruth*

RABBI REUVEN MANN

### I. The Problem

The Book of Ruth begins with tragedy. Famine engulfs the land of Israel. To escape its clutches Elimelech with his wife Naomi and their two sons journey to Moab. In and of itself this does not seem like a crime deserving of death. However it brings calamity. Elimelech dies. His sons then marry Moabite women who had not converted. After ten years both sons die leaving Naomi bereft of husband and children. We cannot help but wonder at the severity of the catastrophe which befell this family. True they had sinned but the Torah does not mandate the death penalty for emigrating from Eretz Yisrael. Indeed halacha permits one to leave in circumstances of dire need such as famine. Inter-marriage, on the other hand, is a great sin yet does not call for the death penalty. We cannot help but wonder, what was the cause for the harshness of the divine judgment?

On one level, Judaism can be viewed as a personal guide to living which governs one's relationship to the Creator. On this level the damage of sin, even those pertaining to mistreatment of others, is purely to the self. Whenever one sins his personal relationship to G-d is affected. In this framework all sins are not equally severe. Some are more harmful than others. Thus, leaving Israel during a famine is not a crime. Marrying a gentile is very serious but does not call for death at the "Hands of Heaven". A superficial reading of the text creates the impression that Machlon and Kilyon died because of their marriages. However the Rabbis deny this. The verse says "and Machlon and Kilyon also died...". The word also is intended to associate their death to that of Elimelech. The text is teaching that they too died for the sin of leaving



the land. This exegesis is extremely perplexing. It raises two questions. First of all, why does the plain flow of the text associate their deaths with their forbidden marriages? Second, and more troubling, is the notion that they were treated more harshly for leaving the land than for taking forbidden wives. The matter requires elucidation.

### II. The Individual and the Community

Hillel said (Pirkey Avot 2:5) "Do not separate yourself from the community." On the surface this seems like sound practical advice as one derives many benefits from the community. It certainly is in line with the idea of religion as an important personal interest. However it is a concept with greater implications and reveals an entirely new dimension of Jewish existence. The Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva (Laws of Repentance) lists those sins which due to their great evil, cause one to lose the world to come.

Included among them is a category of wrongdoing, which at first glance, does not seem to warrant such a harsh penalty.

Rambam-Yad HaChazaka-Laws of Repentance 3:6: "The following types of people have no share in the World to Come, and are cut off, destroyed and excommunicated forever on account of their very great sins and wickedness: An infidel; a heretic; one who denies the Torah; one who renounces the resurrection; one who renounces the coming of the redeemer; one who converts from Judaism; one who causes many to sin; one who withdraws from communal ways; one who sins publicly in a defiant way like Jehoiakim did; an informer against Jews; one who instills fear on the congregation but not in the Name of God; a murderer; one who relates lashon harah; and one who pulls back his foreskin in order to cover his brit milah."

Rambam-Yad HaChazaka-Laws of Repentance 3:11: "Someone who withdraws from communal ways, even if he didn't commit any sins, but separated from the Congregation of Israel and does not join with them in the performance of mitzvot and does not concern himself with their sufferings and does not join them in their fast days but goes in his own path as though he were of another nation and is not part of them (the Jewish people) has no share in the world to come."

This statement makes it clear that Judaism is not only concerned with the personal fulfillment of the individual. It is not enough to just conform to halacha and perform the mitzvot. This is very important but in itself does not render one a true Jew. One cannot practice Judaism in isolation. The essence of being a Jew is to be a full-fledged member of a unique metaphysical community which has been established by G-d. The individual has importance but only insofar as he is part of the Tzibur (community). Klal Yisrael is the primary instrument through which G-d's purpose in creation is fulfilled. The Torah provides great personal benefits to any individuals who follow it. However, when it is embraced and implemented on the societal level it achieves the ultimate aim of making G-d's name known and sanctified in the world. Thus when G-d offered His Torah to the Jews he told them that their acceptance would have the effect of making them a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation". The aim of the Torah is to establish a society whose holiness derives from the fact that its way of life is based on knowledge of G-d and imitation of His Ways. The national mission of the Jewish people is spelled out in the words of our Creator: "and I shall be sanctified in the midst of

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# Me, is a Very Small Word

## *The Book of Ruth*

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the children of Israel." The preeminence of the Tzibur finds eloquent expression in the Rambam's formulation of a basic rule of prayer.

Rambam-Yad HaChazaka-Laws of Prayer 8:1: "The Prayer of the Tzibur (community/congregation) is always heard. And even if there were sinners amongst them the Holy One Blessed is He does not despise the prayers of the multitude. Therefore one must join himself to the Tzibur and should not pray alone whenever he can pray with the Tzibur. And one should always go to the Bait HaKnesset (shul/synagogue) in the morning and the evening, because his prayer is only heard at all times from the Bait HaKnesset. And one who has a Bait HaKnesset in his town and does not pray there with the Tzibur is referred to as a bad neighbor."

One's service of G-d is bound up with love of His "anointed one", the Jewish people. Whoever denies the sanctity of Klal Yisrael denies Torah. Whoever maligns the Jewish people or hates them is an enemy of the Almighty. The Torah records what Moshe proclaimed when the Ark traveled. (Bamidbar 10:35) "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let your enemies be scattered; and let them who hate you flee before you."

One wonders who are the "haters of God"? Rashi, the great biblical commentator, explains, "These are the haters of Israel". The words of the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva now make perfect sense. One who separates from the Tzibur renounces the eternal relationship between God and the Jewish people and is unworthy of the ultimate reward.

### III. The Sin of Elimelech

We can now understand the deeper dimension of the sin of Elimelech and his sons. A severe famine had descended upon the land

as a result of spiritual corruption. The nation was in dire need of help. Elimelech was a man of great wealth and national influence. He had a vital role to play in guiding the people through its calamity. However he faced a crisis. He feared that his personal fortune would be consumed in the great Tzedaka demand that the famine had created. Rashi refers to him as Tzar Ayin, stingy. This is a defect but in and of itself does not warrant destruction.

However the seriousness of a defect is determined by the context in which it is manifested. Cowardice is not so consequential in times of peace. Elimelech abdicated his responsibility in order to escape from his conflict. There are times when all personal considerations must be put aside in order to save the Tzibur. The Torah warns, "Do not stand by the blood of your brother." A genuine leader is completely immersed in the objective welfare of Klal Yisrael. In leaving the land at a time of such need Elimelech placed personal concerns above the community. In my opinion, the essence of his sin was that he was Poresh Min HaTzibur (abandoned the community). His "sojourn" in Moab was supposed to be temporary but "they remained there". Actions have unintended consequences.

The sons were attracted to Moabite women. The decision to marry them without conversion indicated a further break with the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Thus the Rabbis say that they died not so much because of the halachik violation of intermarriage but for the separation from the Tzibur which it expressed.

### IV. Naomi and Ruth

Naomi was a unique personality. She was the inspiration for the conversion of her daughter-in-law Ruth. Ruth was attracted to the spiritual ideals reflected in the

personality of Naomi. She discovered that they did not originate with her but could be traced to the nation from what she sprang. She fell in love with the Jewish people and wanted to be part of them. The words of Ruth clearly express the chief motivation behind her desire to convert. (Ruth 1:16-17) "And Ruth said, Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d; Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; the L-rd do so to me, and more also, if even death parts me from you."

Ruth embraced the Tzibur because she recognized its profound importance as the instrument of G-d's purpose. She expressed her deep gratitude for the privilege of belonging to Klal Yisrael by her determination to marry the much older Boaz who was her "redeemer." She realized that she owed a debt of gratitude to her departed husband who in spite of his sin had remained true to the philosophical beliefs and ethical ideals of the Jewish people. She wanted the world to know that he had not cut himself off from the teachings of Judaism and that, to the contrary, he was the original inspiration of her quest to be part of G-d's community. The objective of her marriage to Boaz was clearly expressed in his declaration: (Ruth 4:10-11) "And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Machlon, have I bought to be my wife, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place; you are witnesses this day. And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. The L-rd make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Israel.

May you prosper in Ephratah, and be famous in Beth-Lehem"

### V. Me, Is a Very Small Word

This lesson has great relevance to contemporary American Jews. We live in a culture whose major theme is personal gratification. The highest aim is the unfettered expression of the individual. This sometimes assumes more importance than the welfare of the society. There is no sense of involvement in a community which reflects values that are greater than the personal wants of individuals. This petty individualism affects Jews in their attitude towards Judaism. The center of gravity is the self. Today many Jews are drawn to Judaism in search of "meaning". Few are concerned with objective truth. For most the questions are: What does it for me?, What makes me feel comfortable? What caters to my particular feelings about the "spiritual?" One doesn't get the feeling that people are engaged in a genuine and intellectually honest search for an objective truth. "In those days there was no king in Israel, each did that which was right in his own eyes".

We have lost our sense of appreciation for the sacred Jewish community. In this respect we are very shortsighted and lack Hakarat HaTov (gratitude-Lit. recognition of the good). It is only because of the eternal Tzibur that Judaism survived, developed its spiritual treasures and transmitted them through every generation. We should come to our senses and recognize that all genuine Torah blessings come to us only because of the Tzibur. Ruth fell in love with the Jewish nation because she discerned its true character and beauty. Let us be inspired by her example to eliminate baseless hatred from our hearts and seek out the many positive ways in which we can contribute to the welfare of Klal Yisrael. □



# Thoughts on Shavuos

RABBI BERNARD FOX

**"I am Hashem your G-d which took you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (Shemot 20:2)**

Eliyahu, the prophet, challenged Bnai Yisrael to choose between the worship of Hashem and the worship of the Ba'al - an idol that was popular at the time. He asked the people, "How long will you skip between the two opinions? If you choose Hashem, go after Him. If you choose the Ba'al, go after it." [1]

This is an amazing statement. It is appropriate for Eliyahu to urge the people to follow Hashem. But, Eliyahu continues beyond this point. He tells the people that if they cannot completely devote themselves to Hashem, then they should follow the Ba'al. Would it not be better to leave those undecided in their state of confusion? Why encourage these doubters to totally abandon the Almighty for the Ba'al?

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik Ztl explained that the answer to these questions requires a clear understanding of the fundamental principles of the Torah. Maimonides outlines thirteen basic convictions. These convictions are the basis of Torah Judaism. These thirteen principles are different from the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot. If an individual repeatedly violates a mitzvah, this does not excuse this person from observance whenever possible. For example, a person who eats non-Kosher food in restaurants is not permitted to disregard the laws of Kashrut at home. Each opportunity to observe a mitzvah must be seized. A person should not hesitate because of an inability to make a total commitment to observance of this command.

In contrast, belief in the fundamental principles of the Torah



must be complete. This stems directly from the definition of the term conviction. Convictions cannot be accompanied by doubt. For example, a person who is in doubt as to the non-corporeal nature of Hashem has not accepted this principle. Similarly, belief that the Messianic era is possible does not represent conviction regarding its reality.

This was the message Eliyahu delivered to Bnai Yisrael. Acceptance of Hashem leaves no option for belief in Ba'al. A person choosing to believe in both lacks conviction in the fundamental principle that only Hashem is G-d. Those in doubt are no different, in this manner, than those following Ba'al whole-heartedly.[2]

**"Rabbi Elazar says about the Torah that the major portion of it is written and the minor portion is an oral tradition. And Rabbi Yochanan says that the major portion of the Torah is an oral**

**tradition and the minor portion is written."** (Talmud, Tractate Gitten 60B) The festival of Shavuot celebrates the revelation of the Torah at Sinai. The Torah received at Sinai is composed of two parts. It includes a written portion and an oral portion. The written portion is recorded in the five volumes of the Chumash. The Oral Torah was also received from Moshe at Sinai. This Oral Torah is an elaboration on the material in the Written Torah. It was not originally recorded. Instead, it was taught as an oral tradition and communicated through the generations by teacher to student. Eventually, a brief synopsis of this body was recorded as the Mishne. Later, a more detailed written account of the Oral Torah was created. This is the Gemarah. Over the centuries, an enormous body of writings has supplemented these early records of the Oral Torah. These works include all of the interpretations and elaboration on the basic material in the Written

Torah. It is the product of the insights of Sages throughout the generations.

The text above recounts a dispute between two Sages. Rabbi Elazar asserts that the major portion of the Torah is contained in the Written Torah - in the Chumash. The Oral Torah is the smaller of the two components of the Torah. Rabbi Yochanan disagrees. He contends that the majority of the Torah is contained in the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is the smaller component of the Torah.

This is a perplexing dispute. One merely needs to look at any library of Torah works to understand the problem. The Written Torah is recorded in the five books of the Chumash. This work can be contained in a single volume. The Oral Torah fills endless volumes. It is true that the published material has grown over the centuries. During the time of Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yochanan, the published or written portion of the Oral Torah was quite limited. Nonetheless, the body of material encompassed in this Oral Torah surely was larger than the five books of the Chumash.

There is another problem with this dispute. Both Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yochanan were great Torah scholars. They certainly had disagreements. However, they studied the same Torah. They were both fully aware of the scope and detail of the Torah. Yet, the disparity between their positions is immense. How could they present such radically different accounts of the material they studied?

In order to answer these questions, we must ask one more important question. How does one measure the relative "sizes" of the Written and Oral Torah? The Written Torah

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has a size. It has a material form. We can measure the number of words or letters required to record it. But, how do we even measure the Oral Torah? We can count the number of words required to record it. However, this is not its true measurement. The Oral Torah existed before it was recorded in writing. It is a set of ideas. How does one assign a size to a set of ideas? How big is the theory of relativity? Is it larger or smaller than the Newtonian mechanics? These are absurd questions! Concepts do not have size.

It is apparent from this last question that Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yochanan are not disputing the relative material size of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. This is not the basis for comparison. We have also shown above that, even if we make the questionable assumption that the Oral Torah can be assigned a size based on the words required to transcribe it, the dispute between the Sages remains enigmatic. They would both have to agree that the Oral Torah fills more volumes than the Written Torah. So, what are they disputing?

In order to understand the dispute between these two Sages, we must consider the relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. We will begin by outlining two fundamentally different possibilities.

The first possibility can be understood through imagining the following scenario. Consider an immense library. Some poor soul has been assigned the enormous task of preparing a single work that summarizes the knowledge contained in this entire library. How might he proceed in accomplishing this task? Let us propose the following. First, he should divide the library into sections. One section would be works on agriculture. Another section might contain all works on business and finance. Once the library has been so divided, these sections will be divided into smaller subsections. The business and finance section would include an accounting section and investment section. Once the sections and subsections are created, the real work can begin. A brief summary should be prepared of each volume in the library. Based on these summaries, a summary will be created of the works in each subsection. The subsection summaries will then be used to create a summary of each section. Finally, using the section summaries, a summary will be created that encompasses the entire library.

The Torah can be understood through applying a similar scheme. Each Tractate of the Talmud can be viewed as the summary of a large subsection of Torah concepts. The

Mishne of the Tractate is a summary of the Tractate. The Written Torah is a brief summary of the summaries contained in the Mishne. In other words, the Written Torah can be viewed as the summary of an immense body of knowledge. This body encompasses all areas of the Torah - the entire Oral Torah.

There is an alternative way to characterize the relationship between the Written and Oral Torah. Again, let us consider an analogy. Shakespeare is probably the most thoroughly studied playwright or author. Let us consider just one of his works - Hamlet. Countless articles and books have been written analyzing and critiquing this work. These books and articles are commentary on Hamlet. They expand upon the issues and insights that the play reveals.

This description can also be used to characterize the relationship between the Written and Oral Torah. The Written Torah can be viewed as the more fundamental component, and the Oral Torah as a commentary and elaboration on the Written Torah. The Oral Torah explores the meaning and significance of each passage and nuance of the Written Torah. It reveals the Written Torah's full meaning.

These two relationships are very different. If the Written Torah is a summary of the entire Torah, it is - by its very definition - smaller than

the Oral Torah. The summary is a condensation of the body it describes. However, if the Oral Torah is a commentary on the Written Torah, it is the less fundamental of the two works. Again, this is a result of its very definition. The commentary is an elaboration on the more fundamental work it explains.

We can now understand the dispute between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yochanan. They do not dispute the relative sizes of the Written and Oral Torah. The issue they debate cannot be resolved through taking some measurement. They disagree over the relationship between these two elements. According to Rabbi Elazar, the major portion of the Torah is written. He maintains that the Oral Torah is a commentary and elaboration on the Written Torah. In this relationship, the Written Torah is the fundamental major component. The Oral Torah plays a secondary role. Rabbi Yochanan asserts that the major portion of the Torah is Oral Torah. He understands the Written Torah as a summary of the entire body of knowledge contained in the Oral Torah. In this relationship, the Oral Torah is the major element or partner in the relationship. □

[1] Sefer Melachim I, 18:21.

[2] Rav Y. Hershkowitz, Torat Chaim, p 203.

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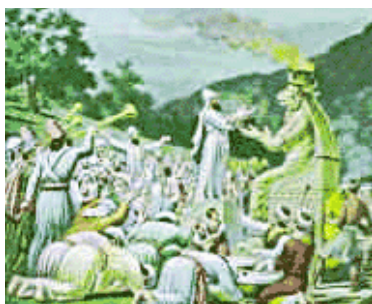
# Maimonides' Formulation of Molech

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from page 1)

command of the negative commands is that we are warned not to believe in gods other than God... And the second command is that we are warned not to make idols to worship....And the third command is that we are warned not to make idols for others....And the fourth command is that we are warned not to make forms of animals from wood, stone or metal..."

But when Maimonides comes to the seventh command, regarding Molech, he writes, "And the seventh command is that we are warned not to give a little of our seed to the worshiped (thing) that was famous at the time of the giving of the Torah, that its name was Molech." Why such a lengthy description in contrast to the other commands? Why not simply say "...that we are warned not to give a little of our seed to Molech"? If that was the practice, then that should comprise the entire formulation of the prohibition. What does Molech's fame at Sinai have to do with its inherent prohibition? Let us assume that Molech was not famous at Sinai, does Maimonides' mean to say that it would not be prohibited? Clearly this cannot be. Such a practice of passing one's child through fire - certainly if the child was to be burned - is definitely contrary to Torah, and even without fame, prohibited in nature. (Burning children is prohibited by many verses.) What does Maimonides mean to teach by his precise formulation? What does Sinai have to do with Molech? Additionally, if another practice was famous during Revelation at Sinai - and Molech was not - would Maimonides apply his formulation there, instead of



applying it to Molech? It would seem so.

True, many other practices are prohibited, and assume forces outside of God, or they assume that there are sub-deities. However, it appears that Maimonides concludes that Molech is unique: It stands in direct contrast to God's Revelation at Sinai, and carries a unique new quality. Molech was popular during Revelation. Those who worshiped it then, or who worship it today, possess a unique corruption. What is it? Not only does a Molech practitioner subscribe to foolish beliefs, but additionally, he commits the following crime: He demonstrates that the Sinai, absolute proof of God's existence is not within his "radar". He does not operate with the basic tools of reason. This is the unique crime of Molech.

Sinai was orchestrated to act as a solid proof for God's existence. One who follows Molech, which was popular at Sinai's era, has thereby made a selection of "something instead of Sinai." This is not so in connection with other practices, such as classical idolatry. With serving Molech, man clearly shows his inability to comprehend an absolute truth, via the absolute proof of Sinai. Such behavior is a sign of a man who is furthest from reality.

Yes, when one serves an idol, he is corrupt, but he is not demonstrating a denial of Sinai. He is not saying, "my mind is useless in the most apparent of truths." Molech worship does say this.

This is what I believe to be Maimonides' concept. He means to teach that Molech worship contains this additional feature: Absence of the most fundamental reasoning. Such a person has reached a qualitatively new level of philosophical corruption, more than one who prostrates himself to a stone god. In the latter case, one may simply be pulled by an

emotion, but if confronted with the proof of Sinai, he would not deny it. Molech worshipers display a mind bereft of base functionality.

In the most extreme contrast, how fortunate are we to have the Torah and teachers who continue to open our eyes to delightful marvels. May we be enabled by these teachers, to do the same for others. Shavuos celebrates the initial step in the transmission of Torah ideas. Continue to learn deeply, patiently, earnestly, and with great honesty and humility. Crystallize your ideas, and continue Shavuos' theme by sharing your ideas with others. □

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