

**Nature: A Teacher**

This week's article "Wisdom vs Actions" discusses a metaphor in Pirkei Avos. It is interesting that so many truths are derived from a parallel between nature, and rational ideas and moral perfections. Maimonides dedicates a chapter in his "Guide" describing the parallel between the universe and man. Why is it that the physical world is designed to allow for such parallels? Write in with your responses to: [mesora@mesora.org](mailto:mesora@mesora.org)

**IN MEMORY OF ZEV LICHTER, FATHER OF OUR DEAR FRIEND JOSEPH LICHTER, A TESTAMENT TO THE MERITS OF HIS FATHER, ALSO IN MEMORY OF NICOLA ROTH'S GRANDFATHER, MAY YOUR FAMILIES BE COMFORTED AMONG ALL MOURNERS OF ZION.**

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## Matot / Masai

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"Take vengeance against the people of Midyan and afterwards you will be gathered to your nation." (BeMidbar 31:2)

The closing passages of Parshat Balak provide an introduction to our passage. Women from the nations of Moav and Midyan enter the camp of Bnai Yisrael. These women

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## Torah & Superstition

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

What does the word Torah mean? Many interpretations have been given. Most people understand it to mean teachings or learning. Accordingly, we find in Leviticus 10:11, "ulehoros" and to teach, or more accurately to interpret and legislate. There is no doubt that the word Torah has the same root as "horah" teaching, legislating. But is that all it means? Sometimes we find the word in the singular form as Deuteronomy 1:5 "...Moses began to explain this Torah," or in ibid 4:44, "and this is the Torah Moses placed before the people of Israel." At other times we find it in the plural such as in Leviticus 26:46, "These are the ordinances, the judgements and the Torahs," or as in Gen. 26:5, "my commandments... my ordinances and my Torahs." Why is there a necessity for two forms of the word? Indeed in the above examples the word Torahs would seem to be superfluous since teachings is already included in the terms ordinances, judgements and commandments.

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## WISDOM VS ACTIONS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Pirkei Avos, "Ethic of the Fathers", 3:17, we are taught that one whose wisdom exceeds his actions is incomparable to one whose actions exceed his wisdom - the latter person is praised. The former is likened to a tree with many branches but few roots, and is susceptible to winds which uproots it, and turns it on its face. But one whose actions exceed his wisdom, is likened to a tree with fewer branches than its roots. Such a tree stands firmly in its place, despite the force of all the winds in the world. What is the analogy? What is the principle?

The tree is clearly equated to a person. A root is that which gives stability to a tree. In essence, we

are being taught that a person's stability is in proportion to his actions, his mitzvos. ("Stability" refers to one who aligns his actions with the right life, outlined by God in His Torah.)

On the contrary, one might think that without knowledge (branches) one cannot have actions. "Knowledge is indispensable to my actions". This makes knowledge more primary, and more prized than actions, and suggests that our Rabbi's statement is inverted, and incorrect.

Another problem arises from a section the Talmud Moade Katan 9a-9b: Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai's students compared two statements of King Solomon found in the

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# WISDOM VS ACTIONS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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book of Proverbs. One statement said Torah study is incomparable to anything man desires. Their deduction is that man's desires may not compare to Torah study, but perhaps God's desires - other mitzvos - do in fact equate to Torah study. But then, these student found another statement, "all desirous things cannot compare to it (Torah study)." The students now found proof that there is nothing comparable to Torah study, not even other divine commands. This being so, how are we to understand our statement that actions are more prized than one's learning? Learning Torah is the greatest command!

To answer our problem, we must define 'action', and this explanation must answer how Pirkei Avos praises actions over Torah wisdom.

What is 'action'? It is the implementation of one's knowledge. But do not many people have knowledge, yet, fail to act? One may see how destructive cheating is, yet, in his business practices, he is dishonest for the sake of accumulating greater wealth. He cheats others just to grow richer.

Does this man have a true knowledge of the destructive nature of cheating? Does he really feel others are as important as himself? Clearly not. 'His' wealth is a good, but the wealth of others is a small matter to him. It is precisely for this reason that the Torah demands a crook repay double that which he stole. He must experience the loss of his own, equal amount of money so as to realize - first hand - the evil that exists when one has no money for his needs.

Subsequent to repaying double, the crook may understand his evil. He will not steal again. His refrain from additional acts of stealing is his "root". This means to say that one who expresses his wisdom in his actions has successfully reached the highest level of 'conviction'. Until one acts on his knowledge, he

has yet to fully agree with his knowledge. Abstract wisdom alone is not man's perfected state. Man must follow through in action. His actions are a "barometer" of his convictions. This does not contradict the other Talmudic lesson, that Torah study is the most prized activity. This merely teaches that one's learning must culminate in conviction. Knowledge is supreme, but knowledge is measured by conviction, by action. One who incorporates his knowledge into his actions is incomparable to one who does not.

This is a vital lesson. How many of us study Torah, but do not act on our knowledge. Either out of complacency, emotions opposing Torah ideals, or due to a lack of clarity, many of us do not act on our Torah knowledge. We know we must dedicate time each day and night to learning, but we don't, or we slack off. We know we must be charitable, but we don't give, or we give less than the prescribed 20% outlined in the Shulchan Aruch. We forfeit much if we do not fully agree with the ideas encased in each command, to the point of action.

Our lives have one goal: to perfect ourselves in accord with God's will. Our perfection - our "merit" - is measured by 'conviction', and our actions. If our knowledge is at a distance, and our actions do not reflect our wisdom, then we must stop, relearn, and rethink our Torah studies. To perfect oneself, means that one is fully convinced of the good instilled in each of God's commands. He studies the command, analyzes it, and understands how it benefits him. He does not act by rote behavior. Realization of the benefits afforded by God's commands propels this person to act, for his own good. Moses told the people that keeping the Torah was "...I'tove lach", "...for your own good." (Deut. 10:13) Each person possesses an innate

desire to do the good for himself. All one must do is learn, and he will find the good encapsulated in each command, and he will act accordingly.

Why do many people fail to act on their knowledge? One reason is a lack of awe for the Creator of our Torah and the universe. If one truly comprehended the gravity of God's role as our Maker and the Designer of the Torah, and that his happiness could be excelled to newer heights through Torah study, he would most certainly indulge. But until one invests time, proving God's existence, His act of giving us the Torah at Sinai, and learning 'how' to learn, he dismisses learning as something which bores him. Interesting, the greatest minds disagreed, and conversely, spent all their waking hours in study, be it physics of the universe, psychology, ethics, or Torah. Doesn't this teach something? Don't dismiss learning so quickly. And if you are older, it is never too late to start.

Overestimation of material goods versus spiritual knowledge is another mistake. Most of our world follows the ethic that happiness is derived from wealth, travel, and beautiful homes and cars. Until you analyze this belief, why follow it? Don't waste your life following others, who waste theirs, and do so with no rationale.

Most of the world feels our limited, physical existence is more precious than the spiritual life. Thus, more energies are expended on material gain, and little energies are devoted to Torah study. Many justify their countless hours at work, because they have expensive homes and cars to pay off. But who told them to buy such exorbitant things? One must correct this literally "grave" error by coming to terms with his own mortality. Would a person really value 70 years in a luxurious villa, over an eternity of wisdom? And even this is not the best attitude, as one only learns out of a true thirst of knowledge, when the Future World is not a consideration. The Sages only anticipated the Future World as a means for an undistracted state of the same

experience of God's wisdom realized while alive.

Pirkei Avos also says, "mi-at b'osek, v'osek b'Torah". "Minimize your involvement in work, and indulge in Torah." Start to bridge the gap between your Torah knowledge and your actions. Only then will you be truly meritorious of your actions, as they will now be based on clear understanding and conviction, arrived at by Torah study alone. □

## Plural Shabboses

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** What is the correlation between the 'plural' use of "My Sabbaths" in Exodus 31.13?

**Mesora:** Plural "shabbos" means that we must keep them all. There are many shabboses in one's life. It is not a "one-time" affair. Man must keep all shabboses, as only then, does man "continually" attest to creation. It is a good question you ask, as it brings out a new point, which I have not yet realized. God's act of creation demands a central focus - throughout our lives - not a one-time activity. A constant cognizance of creation is taught to me by your observation. It appears clear now; man must never lose sight of God as the Creator. This is essential to all of the rest of our learning, and our lives. We must therefore reiterate this concept each and every week. In fact, God's entire creation was performed in part, so that man may have that which he must duplicate - shabbos. God fashioned creation as a formula for man's duplication through his activities. "Sof b'maaseh, b'machshava techila", "last in creation (shabbos) first in (God's) thought". This means that shabbos was the central focus of creation.

There should be a creation of the physical world, but it is merely a means by which man may procure his needs, so he may eventually have a shabbos where no work may be performed for the exclusive dedication to studying God's creation and Torah. □

# Matot / Masai

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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seduce members of Bnai Yisrael. The heathen women use these illicit relationships to lead their partners into idolatrous practices. Discipline and sexual restraint begin to break down. Ultimately, Zimri – a leader of Shevet Shimon – publicly enters into a romantic liaison with a woman from Midyan. The woman – Kazbi – is a princess of Midyan. Hashem strikes Bnai Yisrael with a plague. Pinchas, the son of Elazar the Kohen, takes action. He executes Zimri and Kazbi. In response to Pinchas' zealotry, the Almighty ends the plague.

In Parshat Pinchas, Hashem commands Moshe to avenge the evil done by the people of Midyan. Moshe is told to "afflict" Midyan. Now, Hashem seems to repeat this command. He tells Moshe to take vengeance against the people of Midyan. This raises an obvious question. Why did Hashem repeat the command? Why is the command first stated in Parshat Pinchas and then repeated in our parasha?

It seems that each command is unique. The command in Parshat Pinchas does not indicate any specific action. It establishes a relationship. Bnai Yisrael is to view the nation of Midyan as an adversary. Our relationship with Midyan should be predicated upon this assumption. We should assume that the people of Midyan feel animosity towards Bnai Yisrael. We should act aggressively to protect ourselves. However, this command does not include a specific obligation to wage war.

The command in our parasha is more specific. It requires engaging Midyan in war. Moshe is commanded to seek out the people of Midyan and wage war against them.

Our pasuk makes an interesting connection. Hashem tells Moshe that he will die only after completing this task. This implies that Moshe's involvement is essential. Why is Moshe's participation important?

In order to answer this question, we must review the Torah's comments concerning Moshe's special status. In the final passages of the Torah, Moshe's uniqueness is described. The Torah writes that no other individual can achieve Moshe's prophetic level. The Torah also explains that the wonders performed through Moshe exceed those executed through other prophets. These passages teach another important lesson. The pesukim link Moshe's prophecy to the wonders he performed. Moshe was the greatest prophet. His closeness to the Almighty was reflected in the profound level of his prophecy.

This same intimacy allowed Moshe to perform wonders beyond the ability of other prophets.

Based upon the above analysis, Gershonides answers our question. He explains that Moshe could not die until Midyan was destroyed. This is because this war would be fought through the Almighty. Hashem would destroy Midyan through His wonders. Moshe's participation allowed for the performance of the greatest miracles. No other prophet could destroy Midyan as totally and wondrously.[1]

**"And Moshe sent one thousand men from each tribe as an army. And with them was Pinchas the son of Elazar the Kohen as part of the army. And in his hand was the sacred vessels and the trumpets of the teruah."** (BeMidbar 31:6)

This passage presents a problem. Hashem commanded Moshe to destroy Midyan. As we have explained, Moshe's involvement was crucial. Yet, Moshe did not lead the nation into war. Instead, he sent Pinchas. Why did Moshe, himself, not lead the nation into battle?

Da'at Zekaynim offers two answers to this question. Let us consider each answer. We will begin with the second explanation. Da'at Zekaynim explains that Pinchas had previously executed Kazbi – a princess of Midyan. He had begun to fulfill a mitzvah. Punishing the people of Midyan completed this mitzvah. It is appropriate for the person that initiates a mitzvah to complete it. Therefore, Moshe charged Pinchas with the duty of completing this mitzvah.[2]

This answer presents a problem. According to this interpretation, this war completed a mitzvah initiated by Pinchas. Therefore, Pinchas was chosen to complete the mitzvah he had begun. However, the exact identity of this mitzvah is not clear. Pinchas executed Kazbi because she was publicly engaged in sexual activity with Zimri. The war against Midyan was a response to Hashem's command to destroy a dangerous enemy. These seem to be two separate commands.

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik Zt"l deals with this problem. He explains that a more careful analysis does indicate that a single mitzvah underlies Pinchas' previous actions and the war against Midyan. Let us reconsider Rav Soloveitchik's analysis.

Pinchas acted within the law in executing Zimri and Kazbi. The Torah prohibits sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. Primarily, this prohibition restricts relations in the context of marriage. However, even casual sexual relations are prohibited. If a liaison is flaunted publicly, a zealot is permitted to execute the parties involved. Pinchas acted within the authority granted by this law. He was such a zealot.[3]

Maimonides points out that the Jew and the non-Jew are not executed for the same reason. The Jew is executed for violating the laws of the Torah. Obviously, non-Jewish partner cannot be punished for this reason. The non-Jew is not obligated to observe the laws of the Torah. Maimonides seems to maintain that the non-Jewish woman is executed because she served as the vehicle of the Jews abandonment of sexual morals.

Maimonides compares the status of this woman to another case. This is the case of an animal involved in an act of bestiality. The animal is destroyed. Clearly, the animal is not responsible to observe the Torah's laws. It is destroyed because it was involved in an act of sexual depravity. In our case as well, the woman is executed because of her association with immorality.

Maimonides adds another point. In order to understand this comment, a brief introduction is required. Bnai Yisrael defeated Midyan. They executed the men. However, initially they spared the women. Moshe was angered. He observed that these women had corrupted the men of Bnai Yisrael. Maimonides explains Moshe's objection. Moshe maintained that it was inappropriate to spare these individuals. They were associated with corrupting the sexual morality of Bnai Yisrael.

Based on Maimonides' comments, Rav Soloveitchik explains that a single mitzvah underlies Pinchas' initial actions and the war against Midyan. Pinchas executed Kazbi because of her association with Zimri's corruption. In order to complete this mitzvah, he led Bnai Yisrael in battle against Midyan. The commandment was completed with the execution of the women of Midyan. These women – like Kazbi – were put to death because they were associated with the corruption of Bnai Yisrael.[4]

Now let us consider Da'at Zekaynim's first answer. The first answer is that Moshe had received a kindness from Midyan. Moshe killed an Egyptian taskmaster. Moshe knew his life was in danger. He fled to Midyan. He remained there until Hashem commanded him to return to Egypt and rescue Bnai Yisrael. Da'at Zekaynim explains that it was inappropriate for Moshe to lead a campaign against Midyan. Midyan had provided him sanctuary. Moshe was obligated in hakarat hatov – acknowledging the benefit that he had received from Midyan. [5]

This answer presents a problem. Hashem commanded Moshe to wage war against Midyan. The Almighty wanted Moshe to be involved. This involvement was necessary to assure that Midyan would be devastated. This seems to mean that Pinchas was merely Moshe's proxy. Moshe was the true leader that destroyed Midyan. In short, Moshe did not spare Midyan in any way. How did Moshe demonstrate his hakarat hatov? He

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# Matot / Masai

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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destroyed Midyan thoroughly! Where was Moshe's show of appreciation?

It seems that this answer is based upon a novel understanding of hakarat hatov. We usually, understand hakarat hatov as an obligation to repay a debt. An individual who receives a kindness is obligated to repay the kindness. This interpretation of hakarat hatov confounds us in attempting to understand the position of the Da'at Zekaynim. We can now better define our question. In order to repay a debt, some significant benefit must be proffered. Moshe did not show any mercy towards Midyan. He did not repay his debt through providing a substantial kindness in return.

Apparently, Da'at Zekaynim understands hakarat hatov in a more literal sense. Hakarat hatov means that we are obligated to demonstrate that we recognize receiving a benefit. Generally, the most meaningful act of recognition is to return the kindness. However, sometimes this is not appropriate. Moshe faced this situation. He was commanded to completely destroy Midyan. He could not show mercy. Hashem's commandment prevented him from returning the kindness he had received.

Nonetheless, the obligation of hakarat hatov applies. Even when we cannot return the kindness we must acknowledge its receipt. Moshe provided this acknowledgement. He refused to personally lead Bnai Yisrael into battle. This was not an act of kindness. However, it was an acknowledgement of the kindness received.

**"These are the journeys of Bnai Yisrael that went out from Egypt in their groups through Moshe and Ahron."** (BeMidbar 33:1)

The final parasha of Sefer BeMidbar reviews the travels of Bnai Yisrael in the wilderness. The commentaries are concerned with the inclusion of this material in the Torah. The Torah is written very concisely. The recounting of the journeys in the wilderness seems superfluous.

Rashi explains that these journeys are recounted in order to communicate a key aspect of the wilderness experience. The Almighty had decreed that the nation should spend forty years wandering in the wilderness. Hashem did not constantly move Bnai Yisrael from one location to the next. The nation only traveled forty-two times during the forty years.[6]

This is a fitting conclusion for Sefer BeMidbar. The sefer recounts the changing of the relationship between the Almighty and His nation. This change was brought about by the nation's refusal to enter the land of Israel. Hashem decreed that Bnai Yisrael should wander in the wilderness for forty years. According to Rashi, these passages capture the nature of this decree.

Maimonides offers an alternative explanation for the description of the various journeys. He explains that the wilderness experience involved a great miracle. The nation was sustained for forty years in a land of complete desolation. The Almighty provided Bnai Yisrael with water, food and all other needs. The generation that experienced these wanderings could recognize the miracle of survival. However, future generations would not have the benefit of experiencing the forty years of wandering. These future generations might not appreciate the extent of this miracle. They might assume that the nation traveled near populated areas. They might believe that the path taken by Bnai Yisrael avoided arid areas. The Torah provides a detailed description of the journey. All of the stations at which the nation camped are enumerated. This route does not pass through populated areas. The path described in the parasha leads through an arid, desolate wilderness. With this information the reader can appreciate the miracles required for Bnai Yisrael's survival during these forty years.[7] □

- [1] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), p 142.
- [2] Da'at Zekaynim, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 31:6.
- [3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Beyah 12:4.
- [4] Rav Shimon Yosef Miller, Shai LaTorah (Jerusalem 5755), volume 3, pp. 214-215.
- [5] Da'at Zekaynim, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 31:6.
- [6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 33:1.
- [7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 3, chapter 50.

## Rabbi Tannenbaum & Silver Rings

MARK ROTH

Dear Rabbi Tannenbaum / Jewish Press,

I am sure you are receiving many letters regarding the recently published article regarding the silver rings. I have read this article and I am perplexed by the idea that objects can have supernatural healing power and at the quotes that are used to prove that Chazal had such a notion. Whereas I admit that I am not fully versed in the area of medicine and/or the healing powers that Chazal had, I can only recourse to what we learn in Tanach, what our great sages have written in the Talmud, and our Rishonim.

Firstly, Rabbi Tannenbaum quotes a Gemarah in Baba Basrah (16b) regarding a special stone that Avraham Avinu had around his neck that could effect cure. The Maharsha comments that Avraham was a great physician who knew cures that were natural and some that were hidden. Even the hidden ones, says the Maharsha, were all b'tevah ha'olam, naturally occurring not supernatural. According to the Maharsha, nothing mystical was used to cure the sick, Avraham knew a great deal about medicine. Furthermore the Maharsha asks, if the stone worked so well, why didn't Avraham use it to cure his Bris Milah?

Secondly, Gemarah Baba Metzia (87a) tell us that from the time of Avraham until Yitzchak nobody got sick. If no one was sick, who was Avraham healing?

Continuing on in the article Rabbi Tannenbaum mentions that the Nachash Nechoshet (fiery serpent) was continually used to heal people. In Parshat Chukas (21,8) Rashi comments that people had to have intent (kavanah) in order to be healed. In fact Rashi Quotes a Mishnah from Gemarah Rosh Hashanah (last Mishnah of the third perek), which deals with the case of when Moshe raised his hands up so B'nei Yisrael would win the battle against Amalek, the Mishnah says "and did Moshe's hands win or lose the war?, NO! when B'nei Yisrael looked up to their father in heaven they would overcome their adversaries." similarly the Mishnah continues "and did the serpent kill or heal? NO! when B'nei Yisrael looked to their father in heaven they were healed, and if not, they would die". In fact, if we look at Malachim 2 (Kings 2 (18,4)) we see that when Chizkia became king, he destroyed the Nachash Nechoshet "...and he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moshe had made; for unto those days the children of Israel offered to it..."

The Passuk earlier (18,3) says that Chizkia did that which was correct in the eyes of hash-m

We see clearly from these Passukim that when B'nei Yisrael start believing that objects can have powers, Hash-m wants the object to be destroyed.

It appears to me, that the greatest sages of our history rejected the idea that objects can be imbued with powers, even when Hash-m tells us to create the object. Looking at these sources and researching this topic can only lead to one conclusion, that the Nachash Nechoshet, Moshe's hands or any other object can not be endowed with any supernatural power, and just like Chizkia, any time B'nei Yisrael start to believe that objects have powers the object must be destroyed. □



# Torah and Superstition

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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Let us see how the word Torah is used in the Bible. In Leviticus 11:46, after the Bible gives a detailed account of the complex laws of the clean and unclean animals, it states, "This is the Torah of the animals and the birds and of every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that swarms on the earth." We may clearly infer that the word Torah means a system of laws. Torah means a logically structured, internally consistent and conceptual system of law given by God to man. The Bible contains many such systems. There is a system of laws concerning leprosy (not an exact translation). Accordingly, the Bible states in Leviticus 13:59, "This is the Torah of the plague of leprosy...." Again, when the Bible is giving a detailed account of the laws of the uncleanliness that involve contact with the dead, the Bible states, "This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent...." God's law contains systems. All individual systems are then subsumed under one major system. The word Torah usually refers to the major system, but sometimes the Bible wishes to connote all the individual systems. Hence, when God praises Abraham for keeping His commandments, in Gen. 26:5, it uses the plural form "Toros." The Bible wishes to convey the message that Abraham kept every detail of all the systems of law that God had given to him.

It is clear to anyone who has read Leviticus, even in a cursory manner, that the systems of the sacrifices, the kosher laws, the laws of uncleanliness, the sexual restrictions, etc., are complex and in need of interpretation. Even the plain meaning of the Biblical text cannot be ascertained without interpretation. Take, for instance, the verse in Leviticus 11:8, "From their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch, they are unclean to you." Does this mean that if a camel dies in the street, no one is permitted to remove its carcass and it must remain wherever it dies until it rots? This is obviously absurd. Or take the verse in Deuteronomy 23:25, "When you come into

your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you have satisfied yourself; but you shall not put any in your vessel." Does this mean that people can just go into someone's vineyard and eat to their heart's content? Even the most primitive society could not survive with such a violation of another's rights of ownership and defiance of justice.

Interpretation is indispensable for the laws and the systems of the Bible. But the question is, whose interpretation? It cannot be anyone's, because then there would be no law whatsoever; each person would interpret things to suit himself. There must then be one authoritative body to interpret the Torah. The Bible speaks of such an authoritative body in Deut. 17:8-11. But who is that authoritative body today? Can we identify it? We are fortunate that God has made it singularly easy for us today to know whose interpretation He wishes us to follow. In Isaiah 59:21 God states through His prophet Isaiah, "and as for Me, this is My covenant with them (the people of Israel), saith the Lord, My spirit that is upon thee, and My words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of the seed's seed, saith the Lord, for henceforth and for ever." We thus have God's promise that the words of the Torah and the proper approach to Torah shall never cease among the nation of Israel. Now there is only one group which has consistently studied, interpreted, taught and legislated Torah for the past two thousand years (and before as well) and they are the Talmudic scholars of Israel. Of all the sects of the period of the Second Temple, only the Pharisees have remained. God's promise has been fulfilled to the Talmudic scholars who have kept and established the Torah law throughout the generations. So it is a relatively easy matter to identify, in our day, the ones to whom the interpretation of Torah has been entrusted. In earlier times it would be a more difficult task. One would have to study the claims of the

various groups and use his God given intellect to determine which group is authentic and which is fraudulent. In our times, thank God, it is an easy matter. No religious group of any significance keeps the Torah laws or claim they understand them. Anyone who takes the laws of the Bible seriously, that is, as the word of God, must make recourse to the only institution that has meticulously studied the Torah laws throughout the ages the Talmudic scholars.

The oral law, or Talmud, does not merely add facts to the written description of the Torah's laws, it gives us a unique approach to these laws. Talmudic laws result from a specific reasoning and methodology. This methodology gives us great insight into the systems of law of God's Torah. To appreciate the beauty of these insights one must have achieved a level of Talmudic scholarship; much as to appreciate mathematical beauty one must first have attained a certain level of mathematical knowledge. Thus the praises of the Psalmist about the beauty, love and appreciation of God's laws (see Psalms 19:8-11 and Psalms 119) cannot really be understood by the uninitiated or layman. To paraphrase the Psalmist is Psalms 1:2, the delight in God's law goes hand in hand with total devotion to the study of God's law. This is a full time commitment that only very few people are able or willing to make. But just as there is much knowledge a layman can gain even though he is not an expert in scientific methodology, there is much knowledge one can gain regarding Torah without being a Talmudic scholar.

One important principle that emerges from the Talmudic approach is that there is no religious taboo in Torah law. A few examples will help make this clear. We all know that pig is a prohibited food for the Jew according to Torah law. Yet, in Deuteronomy 6:11 we read that when the Jewish people enter the land of Israel they will find homes filled with all kinds of good things which they will be able to partake of. The oral law identifies these good things as inclusive of foodstuffs,

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# Torah and Superstition

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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even pig. The people were permitted upon entering the land to consume all prohibited foods they find at the time. The Bible, interestingly enough, refers to these very prohibited foods as "good." Thus even though the Torah prohibited certain foods they are not considered "bad." The prohibition is merely to teach man to exercise control over his appetitive desires not that there is anything "unclean" about a pig or camel or horse. God does not, so to speak, like the cow more than the donkey. They are all equally His creation. In a similar vein the Rabbis of the Talmud have stated, "Do not say, I dislike the flesh of the pig, but rather, I like it but God has decreed that I abstain from it." If one abstains from pig because he things it is "bad" in some sense, he is functioning on a primitive taboo level not on the level which God has prescribed for him so that he gain perfection as a human being.

According to the oral law, if one piece of non-kosher meat becomes mixed up with two pieces of kosher meat (under certain circumstances) all three pieces may be consumed. It is clear from this that the Torah does not consider the non-kosher piece of meat to contain any soul contaminating element. What contaminates the human soul is the failure to abide by God's law and gain the perfection it affords man. In a similar manner, it should be understood that the laws of the menses, Leviticus 15:19, 25, 18:19, 20:18), have nothing in common with menstrual taboos found in primitive societies. Even on a practical level, the two are incommensurate. A woman may be menstruating biologically, but not Halakhically, that is, according to the formula of the Torah, and vice versa.

Religious rites and practices revolve around two institutions, taboos and symbolic performances. The former is negative, the latter positive. (A primary example of the latter is the Eucharist). Just as the Torah is free of taboos it is equally free of symbolic performance. About this last point, I know, the reader will express disbelief. Is it not true,

he will say, that the unleavened bread eaten on the eve of Passover symbolizes freedom and the bitter herbs slavery? Does not the Bible state that the fringes with its blue thread remind one of all God's commandments? The medrash explains that the blue color reminds one of the sea, the sea of the heavens, and the heavens of the infinity of God. Is not all of the above symbolic?

Here we approach a subtle but fundamental point of Torah philosophy. We must distinguish between an act whose very essence is to act something out, or experience something emotionally, and one which has ideational content related to it. Allow me to elaborate. The Talmudic analysis of mitzvot gives each of God's commandments a very detailed and precise formulation. Each commandment has a logical structure at the root of which is a concept. This concept is structural rather than philosophical. The performance of mitzvot must be done in strict compliance with the formula of the commandment. There is also a philosophical ideational component that is associated with each commandment, for example: In the performance of the eating of the unleavened bread, even if one knew nothing of the exodus from Egypt, as long as he complied with the proper definition of the performance of eating, he will have fulfilled the commandment. Conversely, if one did not eat the unleavened bread in conformity with the proper formula, although he may have had the most profound thoughts about the exodus from Egypt, he did not fulfill the commandment.

The same is true for the commandment of fringes. Even if one never looked at his fringes, as long as he wore them in accordance with the prescribed formula for the mitzvah, he fulfilled the commandment. If, on the other hand, one hung the fringes on his wall, as was the practice of the Karaites, although he may have thought about God every time he entered his home, he did not fulfill the commandment. While this sounds

strange to most people it makes perfect sense to the Talmudist. Those who do not understand Halakha Talmudic law, cannot appreciate the beauty of the abstract formulae in God's Torah. They can, at best, only relate to some basic idea. People are usually attracted to performances that symbolize religious notions. God, in His Torah, saw it differently. The Torah's religious performance is the bringing into reality of abstract Halakhic ideas. There is very little explanation given for the vast majority of the laws. (It is for this reason that even gentiles who believe the Torah to be the word of God have never been attracted to the commandments though the Torah repeatedly stresses their significance). Even the oral law is sparse in this area. The Torah has veered away from symbolic performance.

There are two reasons for this: 1) The Torah wishes to reach man primarily through his appreciation of the intellectual world of abstract thought. Only when one's mind and appreciation of knowledge has been developed can one expect to arrive at true religious philosophical ideas. Rather than giving man fixed philosophical explanations, which of necessity would be simplistic, God gave man a system of Torah which perfects his mind and his personality. He then becomes capable of searching out for himself the deep philosophical meaning behind God's Torah. The Torah values most of all knowledge discovered by man through his own creativity. 2) The Torah saw a great danger in symbolic performance even if this performance is associated with correct ideas. Symbolic performance is the basis of the most primitive religious practices, practices which the Torah abhors and warns incessantly against. In Torah, God created a unique institution through which man can worship Him through Halachah. This religion stands alone as the only one totally devoid of primitive expression. Through its practice man is converted from an instinctual creature to one who is capable of standing in God's presence. ■

# INTERMARRIAGE

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Intermarriage is something which we all must dissuade others from committing. The consequences include the cancellation of potential Jews, as all children born of Gentile mothers are not Jewish. The Torah in no way condones intermarriage, which is at the very core of the current destruction of the Jewish people. Many protective laws were instituted by our wise Sages to guard against intermarriage. If these wise men instituted such laws, let us take them as seriously as a vaccine aimed at saving our very lives.

All religions - other than Judaism - distort ideas regarding true monotheism. Intermarriage - an acceptance of other religions - is therefore a denial of God's word - to a high degree. It is an act which denies all the principles of the Torah. If one marries a Christian, he goes further and displays an acceptance of idolatry. God gave one system, Judaism. Marrying someone from another religion is an acceptance of that religion to some degree, and Judaism is intolerant of any degree of acceptance of alien notions. God's word and His Torah are perfect, not to be altered at all, as we are commanded not to add or subtract from the Torah, or to veer from the words of the Rabbis.

God selected Abraham as the founder of a new nation, as Abraham exemplified par excellence the ability to extricate oneself from the clutches of idolatry, to examine the world using intelligence alone, and arrive at the conclusive conclusion that there is one God,

and His that man engage intelligence, by which he must make all decisions in all areas of life. God created from Abraham a great nation which would preserve and teach true monotheism, and the singular truth, to the rest of the world's population. In order to insulate these teachers from false notions, intermarriage was forbidden. It is for the good of mankind that there be one people who preserve and follow God's ideals, God's Torah, which is purely for mankind's benefit. If the teachers of Torah become diluted with the false notions of other cultures, God's plan for the world to realize the truth becomes compromised. Intermarriage is then a disregard for God's plan for mankind.

Think about it: God created man, and gave him rules by which he must live his life. He is rewarded for obeying them, and he is punished for violation. But, reward is not the only good. Man also lives the best life here on Earth when observing the Torah. God would not create man with such a great ability to achieve happiness, for the sake of steering him to an unhappy life. No, God wishes man to be happy, and He outlined a method for this happiness. But happiness is not simply "what feels good". Happiness is defined as what the ultimate good is for man.

At times, we feel this plan of the Torah impedes our emotionally-driven goals. But this is precisely when one must stop, and determine with his God-given free choice what will be best for him, not what 'feels' best. When one lives the life of Torah,

he will in fact also 'feel the best', but one must realize that there is some pain involved. I mean the pain of altering one's life, from living comfortably in his heretofore habituated lifestyle.

All changes are difficult, even when changing for the better. But do not make the terrible mistake of confusing the "pain of change", with "pain of Torah adherence", as there is no pain in Torah adherence. Your pain comes from the redirection of your emotions to new areas of involvement. Moving to a new home, so much more luxurious than your present home, still carries with it some pain; the pain of breaking old ties, of moving, of establishing new friends, and of accustoming yourself to new surroundings. Even though there is pain, you still move. You realize the larger picture which you feel is better for you. The same applies here. There is pain in altering your life to follow Torah, but the pain must not be attached to the Torah's ideals. A bit of study will reveal to you the precious ideas contained in each and every one of our commands. Our God embodies ultimate wisdom, as seen from His creation of literally billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stars, each approximating the size of our Sun. Amazing. This same God created the Torah system. How foolish one would be to sacrifice such precious knowledge from the universe's Creator, and follow his own emotions of the moment.

The prohibition of intermarriage does not mean you cannot find and marry someone you love. But it does mean that

your selected spouse must not be based on romance alone. Your goal in life as a Jew should be to yourself first, and to service yourself, don't lose the opportunity you have, the one opportunity, to enjoy a true life, one where you indulge in wisdom, and act it out. A life where you don't simply concern yourself with your own, selfish desires for romance, but a life where you care to uphold truths for the rest of mankind. If you do not uphold the Torah, there is no way to calculate the number of other human beings who you could have enlightened through your acts of Torah adherence.

Abstaining from intermarriage means you care to create more Jews, and that you are concerned to secure God's plan that all mankind learn of God's truths. Violating and marrying a non-Jew means you care less about the world.

Try to think past the initial infatuation which accompanies many new relationships. As this emotional "high" dies out, you will be living with another person who does not share your ideals in every area. And many times, the differences result in divorce. "Who is wise? One who knows the results (of his actions)." Don't assume initial, emotional love will secure a good marriage. This intensified love ends. You require one who will echo your values, who will raise your children with a value system identical to your own. When shared values are absent, not too long after, so will be your marriage. There is much more to be said on this topic. ■