

Defying G-d with the Torah's Objects



MAIMONIDES - LAWS OF IDOLATRY, 11:12:

"ONE WHO MAKES UTTERANCES OVER A WOUND AND ONE WHO READS A VERSE OF THE TORAH, AND SIMILARLY ONE WHO READS A VERSE ON AN INFANT SO IT SHOULD NOT BE FRIGHTENED, AND ONE WHO PLACES A TORAH SCROLL OR TEFILIN ON A CHILD SO HE SHOULD SLEEP, IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR THEM THAT THEY ARE IN THE CATEGORY OF HOROSCOPISTS AND ENCHANTERS (IDOLATRY), BUT THEY ARE IN THE GROUP OF THOSE WHO DENY THE TORAH. FOR THEY MAKE THE WORDS OF TORAH INTO PHYSICAL REMEDIES, WHEN THEY ARE ONLY REMEDIES FOR THE SOUL, AS IT IS STATED, "AND THEY SHALL BE LIFE FOR YOUR SOUL."

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IN THIS ISSUE:

VAYISHLACH	1,5,6
PRAYER VS TEHILLIM	1,3,4
MASTER OF POLITICS	1,2
TORAH AUTHENTICITY	7,8

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Vayishlach

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And Yaakov asked and said, 'Tell me your name.' And he said, 'Why do you ask my name?' And he blessed him there." (Bereshit 32:30)

Yaakov awaits his encounter with Esav. During the night he battles with a man. Our Sages explain that this man is an angel representing Esav. The angel

(continued on page 5)

PRAYER VS TEHILLIM

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Mesora: We received this email this week:

"A XX year old mother from xxxxxx is critically ill and needs a tremendous yeshuah at this very minute. Everyone is asked to say Tehillim for: xxxxxxxx.

We strongly ask that you: a) pass this email on to as many people on your email list as possible and that they in turn pass it onto their list; b) post this email in your office, shul and school; c) please make a Mishibayrach (Blessing) for her. In the zechus (merit) of our tefillos (prayers) may she and all the cholim (sickly) have a refuah shleima (speedy recovery)."

In response to this email, let us take advice from the Gemara in Shabbos 55a, "There is no death with no sin, and no affliction if one has not transgressed." Baba Basra 116a also states, "If a person has a sick person in his house he should go to a chacham (a wise man) and he will request mercy for him."

The reason I believe a chacham is required - and not a tzaddik - is that only a wise man is able to identify a problem, namely, why G-d had brought this person close to death. A tzaddik is not necessarily a chacham, so he is not able to identify the problem. It is evident

(continued on page 3)

JACOB BOWING BEFORE HIS BROTHER ESAV



VAYISHLACH:

MASTER of POLITICS

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by students

Chazal say that from parshat Vayishlach, specifically Yaakov's interactions with Eisav, we can learn how to deal with the other nations of the world, and we can gain an understanding of the concepts underlying anti-Semitism. The gemara emphasizes this point by noting that one of the Tanaaim would carefully study this parsha before visiting Rome and meeting with the Caesar. Vayishlach is a parsha of political insight conveying the narrative of Eisav's hatred for Yaakov, carefully describing how Yaakov precisely calculated how to confront his brother's hatred, avoiding contention and potential destruction by the great army of Eisav.

Yaakov was a true master of politics; this is made clear from his dealings with Lavan. Even from the first encounter with Lavan's household, Yaakov demonstrates his political savvy as Vayetzei 29:12 reads: "Yaakov told Rachel that he was a relative of her father..." whereupon Rashi comments that the Midrashic

(continued on next page)

VAYISHLACH: THE MASTER of POLITICS

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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interpretation of this verse is that Yaakov's implication was: "If he [Lavan] intends to be deceitful then I, too, am his brother in deception..."

In this light let us examine Yaakov's message to Eisav at the beginning of Vayishlach: "Yaakov sent messengers ahead of him to Eisav, his brother, to the and of Seir, to the field of Edom. He commanded them saying, this is what you should say to my master, Eisav. 'Your servant Yaakov says, with Lavan I lived, and was delayed until now.'" (Vayishlach 32:4-5) Rashi commenting on the words "with Lavan I lived" states that Yaakov was implying to Eisav that he "did not become an officer or anyone of importance but remained solely a transient guest. It is not worthy of you to hate me on account of your father's blessings, 'Be master over your brother for it has not been fulfilled in me..." Rashi is emphasizing the extent to which Yaakov acted to avoid battle with his brother. Yaakov diminished his own stature, allowing Eisav to feel superior, in order to foster peace.

While there is much to be discussed regarding this type of political strategy, surely we can see the logic behind this approach, especially when it comes to saving Jewish lives. What is more difficult to understand is the second interpretation of Rashi regarding the words "with Lavan I lived." Rashi writes: "the gimatria [numerical value] of garti [lived] is 613; as if to say, I have resided with the wicked Lavan and yet have kept the 613 commandments and have not learnt from his wicked deeds." What does Eisav, the wicked, the rejecter of Torah values, care if Yaakov kept the 613 commandments while he lived with Lavan? Furthermore, it seems this message could only antagonize Eisav.

Chazal say, quoting the Rambam in his Igeret Teyman, that the reason the mountain from which the Torah was given was called Sinai, was because from this same mountain came down sinah [hatred] to the other nations of the world. Meaning to say that the very

source of the hatred that the other nations harbor toward the Jews is the Torah itself. What then did Yaakov intend to accomplish by implying to Eisav that he kept the Torah, when this very Torah was the source of Eisav's hatred for Yaakov?

Before answering these questions, a psychological principle of hatred must be understood; a distinction must be made between the cause of an individual's hatred, and the action of expressing that hatred. The gemara (Pesachim 48b) tells us that the hatred of an ignorant Jew toward the Torah scholar is greater than the hatred the idolaters have for the Jewish nation. This is indeed a perplexing gemara and must be understood in its own light. For the purposes of our discussion, however, it is interesting to note that these same ignorant Jews, whose hatred for the Torah scholar, according to Chazal, is greater than the hatred of an Eisav for Yaakov, are very often the greatest Torah supporters. The emotion of hate is powerful and complex and is disguises itself in many ways. One part of an individual's psyche may possess great hatred for the Torah scholar while another part of an individual's nature causes him to overcome this hatred and be the Torah scholar's greatest ally. Thus we see that the cause of an individual's hatred for another person does not translate into that individual acting upon that hatred. The question remains, however, why the expression of hatred might at times remains dormant, kept at bay in the unconscious of the human psyche, and why in other instances hatred will manifest itself in its full assertion.

There is one further principle underlying the emotion of hatred, namely, the aggressive expression of one's hatred toward another person always seeks out a justification from reality. The Koran, which expresses great hatred toward the Jews on numerous occasions, often points out that the Jews transgressed their commandments and are therefore lowly people. Sura 2:63 writes:

"And well you know there were those among you that transgressed the Sabbath, and We said to them, 'Be you apes, miserable slinking!' And we made it a punishment exemplary for all the former times and for the latter, and an admonition to such as are God-fearing." The Koran claims that the Jews did not adhere to the tenets of their own law and thus according to their Torah the Jews are despicable people. In this way Mohammed tried to justify the expression of his hatred toward the Jews in the Koran. We can now begin to understand Yaakov's implied message to Eisav. While the source of Eisav's hatred was the Torah itself, this did not mean that Yaakov's adherence to the Torah would antagonize Eisav to destroy Yaakov. As explained, the cause of an individual's hatred does not directly translate into the action of expressing that hatred. Furthermore, by Yaakov's implication to Eisav that he merely lived with Lavan and, rather than learning from his evil ways, that he kept the 613 commandments, Yaakov would not permit Eisav the justification to act upon his anger and destroy Yaakov. Yaakov did not afford Eisav the opportunity to find fault with him and in this way Eisav could in no way assuage his guilt and justify acting upon his hatred toward his brother.

There is an amazing Rashi in support of this idea in Toldos regarding the blessing Yitzchak gave to Eisav. Toldos 27:38-40: "Yitzchak, his [Eisav's] father replied and said to him..... you shall live by your sword, and you shall serve your brother. When you have cause to be grieved, you will throw off his yoke from your neck." And on the words "when you have caused to be grieved," Rashi writes, "... meaning to say, when the Israelites will transgress the Torah and you will have justification to grieve over the blessings which he took, [then] you will throw off his yoke." And so in parshat Vayishlach Yaakov makes it very clear to Eisav, his brother and enemy, that this time had yet to come. ■

PRAYER VS TEHILLIM

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from page 1)

that some sin had brought this illness upon the person, and as of yet, the sickly individual could not discover his wrongdoing, and therefore may have been stricken with illness. Job too remained in his state of physical distress until Elihu informed him of his error. It was this new concept which raised Job to a level on which G-d would now relate to him and heal him.

The chacham is one who can discuss matters with the sick person, discern what the person's flaw is, and communicate his error to him. This newly gained knowledge about himself, and subsequent repentance, can raise those that are sick to the level where G-d will intercede to remove the illness. This will be his remedy. As the gemora states, "it is not the snake who kills, but the sin". Additionally, the chacham's request for mercy from G-d is more likely to be heeded, as now, the chacham has communicated the error to the invalid, and bases his prayer on this knowledge. According to Maimonides, the higher the level of one's perfection, the more G-d is involved with one's life. According one Rabbi, Job was suffering his trials due to his incorrect opinion of G-d's justice. As he became aware of his mistake, and admitted it, G-d came back into his life and healed him, giving him greater success. This shows that when a person reaches a higher level, G-d is more related to him, and intercedes on his behalf. Maimonides spells this out clearly in the "Guide for the Perplexed". G-d will respond with what is good for a person based on the person's level. But I believe that the person must do the act of prayer him/herself. He must formally request his needs, and by doing so, perhaps he will discover during his prayer (which means to

"judge" one's self) what he requests is not correct, and he will abandon his prayer for that which is against the Torah's philosophy. He may then pray for that which is proper.

The Rabbis said, "Why were the Matriarchs all barren? Because G-d desires the prayer of the righteous." What this means is that G-d desires the perfection of those who want perfection - the righteous. He doesn't need their prayer, as G-d is perfect, and is unaffected by His creations. G-d desires their prayer, as this will help them reflect upon their desire to search within, and find a reason for why they might not have been answered as of yet. By G-d refraining from giving the matriarchs children, perhaps He was allowing them time to perfect themselves, as their desire for children might not have been for the proper reasons at first. Through years of reflection, they may have been allowed by G-d to perfect themselves. In all cases where one is sick or deprived, the Torah teaches that self reflection and teshuva - repentance - is the cure.

We pray for Israel's sick three times each day, and have specific individuals in mind. But this cannot be the sole approach. We must follow the Talmud's lessons.

Reader: Do you think that prayer on behalf on another does not help this person?

Mesora: Moshe Rabbeinu prayed on behalf of many others, his sister, B'nei Yisrael, Joshua,...so Moshe did feel prayer for others is appropriate. The question is, HOW?

A Rabbi once taught that Moshe's prayer on behalf of the Jews saved them (during the Egel - the Golden Calf) in that he raised HIMSELF to a higher level, which thereby removed G-d's need to destroy the Jews. So prayer on behalf of another must have a remedy, but, FOR THOSE WE PRAY.

In Moshe's case during the sin of the Egel, his prayer effectuated a change, but that was specifically because his raising of himself to a higher level addressed the problem of the Jews. His new state could address the Jew's sin. Annihilation became unnecessary. But how can this apply to one who is sick? When Moshe prayed for his leprous sister Miriam, G-d responded, (Numbers 12:14) "if her father spat before her, would she not be disgraced for seven days?" So Miriam's punishment was not lifted. In this case with the sick woman about whom you have emailed me, the Talmudic source quoted (Baba Basra) teaches our correct response: seek a chacham so he may determine with wisdom what flaws exist in the sick person. In this manner, she may repent with this new knowledge. G-d will then lift her illness, as this illness now fulfilled its task, and is no longer needed.

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PRAYER VS TEHILLIM

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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Yes, pray for her, but this is not what the Talmud suggested. We must act as our Sages taught, not invent new devices. I wonder, did the author of Psalm's himself recite them to save himself, or to contemplate true ideas when in distress? The right approach taught by the Sages is to pray when sick. Tehillim was not specified as the proper response.

A Rabbi once taught that one may and should pray for another person insofar as one has sincere concern about their well-being. It is nevertheless the prayer of the sick person himself which is of the greatest value. This is stated in the Torah, Genesis 21:17, "And God listened to the voice of the lad..." Even though Ishmael's mother Hagar prayed for him, God listened to Ishmael's prayer over that of his mother's. Rashi comments: "From here we derive that the prayer of the sick person himself is superior to the prayer of others, and it is prior in terms of being accepted by God."

Reader: I heard once the following explanation: Why should Hashem listen to the prayer of a third person? Because though Hashem decided that the best for a person is to be sick at this moment, Hashem did not want that a third person should be in distress. Thus, If a (third) person really feels the pain of another person and davens for him, Hashem might decide that the sick person should become healthy.

Mesora: The Talmud's explanation makes sense. Your explanation does not: What perfection comes about for the sick person through the distress of a third party, that G-d would remove this sick person's suffering? Was not the victim's suffering due to his imperfection? Does he not still remain with his imperfection? Additionally, we see from G-d's response to Moses' prayer for Miriam, that G-d does not remove illness due to stress on a third party (i.e., Moses).

Again, the Rabbis designed the Shemoneh Esray (prayer) for the purpose that man reflect on primary ideas of perfection. This precise series of praises, requests and thanks to G-d, is the Torah's formula for our engagement of G-d, when in need. This is not the purpose of Tehillim (Psalms), nor was Tehillim selected by the Rabbis as our approach.

Maimonides Laws of Idolatry, 11:12:

"One who makes utterances over a wound and one who reads a verse of the Torah, and similarly one who reads a verse on an infant so it should not be frightened, and one who places a Torah scroll or Tefilin on a child so he should sleep, it is not enough for them that they are in the category of horoscopists and enchanters (idolatry), but they are in the group of those who deny the Torah. For they make the words of Torah into physical remedies, when they are only remedies for the soul, as it is stated, "and they shall be life for your soul."

A Rabbi commented on this law of Maimonides. He stated that one who seeks physical protection from the words of the Torah, degrades the Torah (as in this case of reciting Tehillim to heal someone). Had one resorted to engaging idolatrous objects such as crystal balls, black cats, etc., instead of Torah (Tehillim) verses, he would not be as corrupt, as the Torah would not have been degraded. A Tehillim practitioner violates reason, and Maimonides' law. The Rabbi also made the salient point that by reciting Torah verses for physical gain, such a person denies G-d's system of Providence: that G-d could step in to save this sick person by Himself. He also denies G-d's system of Reward and Punishment: that illness befalls a person due to sin, and it is a just punishment. With the recital of Torah verses, one foolishly feels he can circumvent G-d's system. Tragically, this person denies G-d's role as "Dayan Emes", a "True Judge", Who acts with perfect fairness. The nonsense of reciting Tehillim as a cure (however wrongfully construed it may work) undermines G-d's system which is based on rational principles and with perfect design. Conversely, a Tehillim practitioner has no explanation for his actions. According to him, a wicked person should be healed if Tehillim is said for him. One foolishness follows another. The Rabbi concluded by stating that such practices cause a person to move away from following G-d.

We learn that a person's good intent to save a sick friend, may justify any foolish notion. He feels convinced that if he partakes in reciting Torah verses, then he is fully in line with the Torah. He feels he is being 'religious', if the objects of his destructive practice are Torah objects. Similarly, many people check Mezuzas when enduring bad times. Their fallacy is this: objects of Torah commands, may also be used for personal agendas. Here, one deviates from G-d's words, as G-d never commanded such practices.

When G-d's laws of not adding to, or subtracting from the Torah are disobeyed in favor of idolatry, it is clear that what needs to be checked is not the Mezuzah, but rather, man. □



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(continued from page 1)

Parashas Vayishlach

RABBI BERNARD FOX

cannot overcome Yaakov. He strikes Yaakov and dislodges his hip. The man asks Yaakov to release him. Yaakov insists that the angel first bless him. Yaakov then asks the angel to reveal his name. The angel responds that Yaakov has no need for this information. The man blesses Yaakov and is released.

Sefer HaChinuch explains that this encounter communicated a prophetic message. Yaakov's descendants will experience exile. They will be persecuted by the descendants of Esav. Esav's descendants will at times hurt the Jewish people. This is represented by the dislocating of Yaakov's hip. However, they will not overcome Bnai Yisrael. Ultimately Yaakov's descendants will triumph, just as Yaakov overcame Esav's angle.[1]

Nachmanides agrees with Sefer HaChinuch's interpretation of this encounter. He also explains additional elements of the incident. One issue Nachmanides discusses is the dialogue in our passage. What was Yaakov's objective in seeking the angel's name? Why did the angel withhold this information?

He explains that the angel told Yaakov that he had no use for this knowledge. Only Hashem can provide salvation to Yaakov and his children. If they call to this angel for help, he will not respond.[2]

Nachmanides comments are enigmatic. What help did Yaakov hope to secure from the angel? Did Yaakov actually believe that there is a refuge other than the Almighty?

Based on Sefer HaChinuch and Nachmanides' interpretation of this event, we can understand these comments. Yaakov received a prophecy describing the future



suffering of his descendants at the hand of Esav. He asked this angel to reveal his name. What is the meaning of this request? What does the name of the angel represent? In the Torah names are sometimes more than mere appellations. In some instances, an entity's name describes its nature.[3] In our case, the name denotes the nature of the angel. Yaakov was asking the angel to reveal its nature. Yaakov wanted to understand the reasons and causes for Esav's persecution of the Jewish people. What are the reasons for this hatred? How can Bnai Yisrael manipulate events to protect itself? These were the secrets Yaakov sought.

The angel understood Yaakov's intention. He realized that Yaakov hoped to rescue his descendants from suffering. The angel responded that Yaakov's plan cannot succeed. The fate of Bnai Yisrael solely rests in the hands of the Almighty. Esav is merely

Hashem's tool. His descendants can only turn to Hashem for salvation. They will not succeed in saving themselves through diplomacy or other manipulations.

This interpretation of Nachmanides' position explains another odd comment. In the beginning of the parasha, Nachmanides explains that Yaakov's encounter with Esav provides a model for future dealings with Esav's descendants. We should study Yaakov's strategy and apply it in our own times.[4] Latter, Nachmanides comments that Yaakov made one error in his dealings with Esav. He should not have alerted Esav to his approach. Instead, he should have quietly returned to his father's home. He should not have contacted Esav. Through sending messengers to Esav, Yaakov awoke his brother's jealousy and hatred. Nachmanides further comments that the same error was repeated by the second Jewish commonwealth.

Through entering into diplomatic relations with the Roman Empire, the nation embarked on the road leading to Roman conquest.[5]

Nachmanides comments may be true in retrospect. Perhaps, looking back in history we can identify the beginning of the fall of the second commonwealth. However, it seems unfair to criticize the leaders of that time for their decision to develop relations with the Roman Empire. Similarly, it seems overly critical to fault Yaakov for contacting Esav. Perhaps, Yaakov precipitated the confrontation with Esav. However, he could not know this! Based on the facts available he made the best decision!

We can answer these questions based upon Nachmanides' interpretation of the dialogue between Yaakov and the angel. In that dialogue the angel explained to Yaakov that even the most well-considered plans would not save the Jewish nation from persecution. Only the Almighty can provide salvation. Nachmanides' analysis of Yaakov's error in greeting Esav and the fall of the second commonwealth illustrate this concept. In both cases sound judgment dictated initiating contact with a potential enemy. In both cases this sound judgment did not produce the desired outcome. Yaakov awoke Esav's jealousy. The second commonwealth entered into a disastrous relationship. Nachmanides is not criticizing. He is illustrating the limits of our abilities to control our fate.

“And Esav ran to greet him. And he hugged him. And he fell upon his neck and he kissed him. And they cried.” (Beresheit 33:4)

Yaakov and Esav finally meet.

(continued on next page)

(continued from page 5)

Parashas Vayishlach

RABBI BERNARD FOX

Yaakov succeeds in appeasing Esav. Our pasuk describes Esav's response to Yaakov. Esav hugs and kisses his brother.

In the actual text a series of dots appear over the term "and he kissed him." It is generally agreed that these points indicate a secondary meaning within the phrase. There is a controversy as to the secondary meaning of the pasuk. Rashi offers two explanations. He comments that some Sages suggest that the notation indicates that the kiss was not completely sincere. Other Sages argue that Esav was genuine. However, the notation tells us that this behavior was exceptional and temporary. In general, Esav's hatred of Yaakov remained undiminished.[6]

It seems that both opinions agree that the dots alert us to a need to qualify the overt message of the passage. They only differ on the specific qualification intended. But how do the points transmit the message that a qualification is needed? Gershonides provides a fascinating response to this question. He explains that dots were traditionally used by scribes to identify words to be erased. For example, if a scribe would find a mistake in a document, he would indicate the error with a series of dots. Latter the scribe would erase the mistake. Now the message of the dots is clearer. The term associated with the dots must be understood as in the passage and not in the passage. In other words, we must qualify the meaning of the term.[7]

The example of our pasuk serves to illustrate Gershonides' interpretation. The term "and he kissed him" is accompanied by dots. This means that the Esav did not kiss Yaakov in the fullest sense. Something was lacking from Esav's expression of love. It remains for the Sages only to

determine the specific quality that was lacking.

"And Yaakov said to Shimon and Leyve,

"You have stained me through making me despicable to the people of the land – the Canaanites and the Prezites. And my people are few in number. And they will gather against me and strike me and destroy me and my household." (Beresheit 34:30)

The prince Shechem kidnaps Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov. He loves Dinah and wishes to make her his wife. Yaakov's sons devise a plan to rescue Dinah. They tell Shechem and his father Chamor that they cannot allow Dinah to marry an uncircumcised man. However if Shechem, Chamor and their people will agree to circumcise then they can join with the children of Yaakov as a single people.

Shechem, Chamor and their people accept this arrangement. The people circumcise. While they are recovering from the procedure, Shimon and Leyve enter the town, kill all of the men and rescue Dinah.

In our pasuk, Yaakov condemns the actions of his sons. He sons defend their behavior. They argue that they could not allow their sister to be treated as a prostitute. This dispute is difficult to understand. Yaakov was present when the brothers presented their proposal of circumcision. He certainly knew that circumcision would not change the moral character of Shechem, Chamor and their people. He must have suspected that the brothers had some hidden plan. Yet, when this plan was executed Yaakov protested! What was his dispute between Yaakov and his sons?

Sforno explains that Yaakov and his sons never assumed that the Shechem and Chamor would agree to circumcision. They also assumed that even should they accept this condition, they would never

convince their people to undergo circumcision. They hoped that Shechem and Chamor would recognize that they could not meet the condition. They would return Dinah.[8]

Shechem, Chamor and their people surprised Yaakov and his sons. They accepted circumcision. Now, Yaakov and his sons were confronted with a dilemma. They were faced with two options. They could allow Dinah to stay with Shechem. This was an outcome they had not anticipated. Alternatively, they could attempt to rescue Dinah.

We can now begin to understand Yaakov's reaction to the behavior of Shimon and Leyve. Yaakov and his sons felt that it would be tragic to give Dinah to Shechem. They had never expected this outcome. However, at this point Yaakov and his sons were faced with the consequences of the bargain. Yaakov maintained that they must accept these unfortunate results and give Dinah to Shechem in marriage.

We can now understand the dispute between Yaakov and his sons. According to Sforno Yaakov made two points. He argued that Shimon and Leyve had endangered all of Bnai Yisrael. They were a minority group in the land of Canaan. The other people of the land would identify with the Shechem, Chamor and their people. They would seek to avenge this wrong committed by Bnai Yisrael. Yaakov and his children could not defend themselves from such an attack.

However, this was not Yaakov's whole argument. Yaakov and his sons had violated their bargain. This disturbed Yaakov. The people of Canaan would conclude that Yaakov and his sons were dishonest. This would reflect poorly on their morality and ultimately on Hashem.

What was the response of Shimon and Leyve? According to Sforno, they disputed both of Yaakov's arguments. They maintained that the

people of Canaan were not so immoral as to condone the behavior of Shechem. They would recognize the right of Yaakov and his sons to rescue Dinah. Finally, they would understand the necessity of using subterfuge. Shechem, Chamor and their people outnumbered Yaakov and his sons. They could not rescue their sister without first disabling her captors. Bnai Yisrael would not be condemned for acting unethically. Neither were they in danger of retribution.[9] □

[1] Rav Ahron HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 3.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 32:30.

[3] See Sefer Shemot 3:13 and 6:3.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, Introduction to Parshat VaYishlach.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 32:4.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 33:4.

[7] Rabbaynu Leyve ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), pp. 126 and 200.

[8] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 34:13.

[9] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 34:30-31.

TORAH / SINAIC AUTHENTICITY

and 'Acceptable' Religions

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(Reader's response to Judaism's position that the Torah is true, and Revelation at Sinai is proven fact.)

Reader: You could write a history of Washington only because many others, alive during Washington's time, wrote about him. Documents from his time exist and can serve as sources for current-day historians. Also, Washington himself left behind a record of much of what he did. Contrast this with the Torah, which was written centuries after the last alleged eyewitness died. There is no evidence that records of the Sinai events written during their occurrence ever existed. No other historical sources exist to verify the Torah's account. The writers of the Torah themselves do not claim to be eyewitnesses.

Mesora: *(I preempt my response by stating that the reasoning used herein is based primarily on a class by a Rabbi, who explained the rationale underlying the proof of G-d's Revelation at Sinai, and history in general.)*

The date an account is written plays no role in the veracity of the story documented. We confirm historical truths based on the presence of two elements; 1) simple phenomena, and 2) masses of eye witnesses. I will explain. Simple phenomena remove ignorance on the part of the witnesses, as their is no room for error in what they perceived. At Sinai, the Jews saw a mountain on fire and heard words emanating from the fire. People clearly recognize these three things, i.e., fire, mountains and words. We don't suggest they erred about their perception. And masses attesting unanimously to one event removes all possibility of fabrication. Mass conspiracy is impossible, as masses cannot share a common motive to lie. Therefore, ignorance and fabrication are the only two means by which history may be transmitted in a corrupt form: Ignorance is a "careless" error, while fabrication is a "purposeful" error. There are no other possibilities. In all of his activities, man functions either

carelessly, or purposefully. Once we demonstrate that in any event, the phenomena are easily apprehended, and that there were masses, the story must be true. We have removed the only two possibilities that this story may be false. We use this method to prove and disprove all historical records.

If I were to write down George Washington's presidency accurately, today, my delay in documenting his existence and position does not compromise the truths of which I write. The only way any historical account is transmitted identically by masses, is if it truly happened.

Your primary error is in your assumption that the Torah was not written until years later. The Rabbis - the recipients of the Torah - unanimously agree to have it as a transmitted truth that the Torah was written by Moses himself, and at the precise time of the events. The Torah's authorship, its writing by Moses, and the miraculous revelation at Sinai, was accepted and attended by 2.5 million people respectively. Additional "sources" as you refer, are unnecessary. In fact, additional sources are impossible, as the event was witnessed by ONE source - the Jews at Sinai. When one has absolute "proof", already based on unanimous corroboration, additional corroboration is of no use. Once an event is proven true 100%, you cannot increase that 100%! Understand how corroboration functions: in the absence of absolute proof, (i.e. 100% corroboration) partial corroboration removes a 'quantity' of doubt. When in conflict with an opposing story, events under examination carry doubt to their veracity. But 100% corroboration equates to absolute proof.

Another point: You say, "Washington left behind a record." You accept this fact, with no qualification. You have not proven that these records are Washington's. Don't you need to prove this before using it as part of another argument? By what method do you "prove" such claims? You must admit

to the reasoning quoted.

Reader: You mentioned in other articles that we accept as truth such things as the existence of Caesar without a great deal of corroboration. Well, there is, in fact, much to corroborate Caesar's existence, not just one, biased, source. Even if there weren't, believing in Caesar's existence is no great stretch; it was very typical in history for empires to exist, and for these empires to have emperors. It is not typical for a supernatural being to present Himself to humans and give them the Truth of existence.

Mesora: This is not true. Caesar's existence and reign are verified in the same way.

You make two errors: 1) that one large group of Jews is "biased". Our method discounts your argument; 2) accepting natural law is no "easier" than accepting miracles, once you understand the truth of G-d, proven by Sinai, and you understand His abilities. Miracles are no more of a problem to prove than natural laws. Both, miracles, and natural laws must have a Designer. Before Creation, there were no natural laws, as there was yet no thing called "nature". The Designer of the universe is not bound by the natural laws that He creates, and hence, His abilities include His creation of both. "Miracles" are nothing other than the suspension of natural laws. If G-d can create natural law, this means that He determined these laws to exist, and also determined when and where they are applied. Both miracles and natural law are creations of the Creator. The proof of Sinai teaches that there is a Creator of the universe. Only the Creator can be responsible for intelligent words emanating from fire. All created life would perish in fire, let alone retain the ability to speak intelligently when engulfed in flames.

Reader: You may have heard the expression "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof." If I claimed to be an American citizen and a practicing attorney, I would not need a great deal of proof to substantiate

this, since Americans and lawyers are very common in our experience and the claim to be one is "ordinary". However, if I claimed to be the ambassador of the Beta Reticular Radish People with an urgent message for humanity, you may want more proof to substantiate my claim than my statement that that is who I am because my claim would be "extraordinary." This is not to trivialize what happened at Sinai but it also is an "extraordinary" claim and must, therefore, require extraordinary proof, even more than my example, because, as you have pointed out, accepting this "claim" would require one to change his life! The "saying it is so" of a document first written centuries after the events' alleged occurrence and after the last alleged eyewitnesses died cannot serve as such required proof. Is this not why most experts on the Bible doubt the literal occurrence of the Sinai events and some go so far as to say that it is legend?

Mesora: There is no such thing as "extraordinary proof" as you suggest. An event is either proven or not, and there is one litmus test; the reasoning we have already described above. The affect a proof may have on my life (i.e., my acceptance of a Torah lifestyle) plays no role in the veracity of the event. That which eventuates as a result of my belief, cannot mitigate the process used in proving the belief. For example, if mixing two chemicals produces a new color in the compound, a color I dislike, I cannot deny that this mixture produced this color, due to my subsequent dislike of the color. So too is our case. If Sinai is proven - regardless of how I must now live in light of its proof - then Sinai is proven. Period. Personal considerations cannot compromise an accurate method of proving events.

Regarding Bible critics, I suggest that just as you would refrain from accepting a child's theories on astrophysics, refrain from critics who also have no comprehension of what they discuss. The Torah is not a book to be 'read', but a deep and precisely

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TORAH / SINAIC AUTHENTICITY

and 'Acceptable' Religions

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from previous page)

designed system which may only be understood by one trained in its method of thought, using the principles of derivation received by Moses from G-d at Sinai. Without instruction and these interpretive tools, Bible critics know as much about Torah as the child knows about astrophysics.

Reader: If G-d's purpose for Judaism is to be the one and only revelation of Truth, then He has failed because so few people are following it, unless you have a better explanation for why so few people are following the Truth. Do you think it is important to G-d to have at least the majority of people knowing the Truth, or do you think He doesn't care at all for His creatures except for those few of us lucky enough to be born Jewish? I suppose it's possible that G-d could actually care only about Jews, but, if that's so, then He is nothing more than a tribal G-d, not the G-d of the Universe and all humanity.

I agree that no matter how well the Truth is presented, there will always be some people so perverse or ignorant that they will refuse to accept it, just like you will still find some people who seriously believe that the Earth is flat and criminals will exist in even the most just and prosperous of societies. But such people are a tiny minority. If Judaism were the only true religion, then most human beings would be Jews. Since they are not, it must mean either that Truth is contained in more than one religion or that G-d doesn't care that most of His creatures are following falsehood.

Mesora: You make quite a leap here, and with no reason. You haughtily claim G-d has failed. You are not careful to talk about G-d, the Creator of the universe (yourself included) with the awe due him? Do you not even fear His ability to punish one who opens his mouth in such a way?

Even if only a handful of people are following the right life, we do not say that the majority of wrongdoers are no longer wrong, as they outnumber others. We do not say Judaism is false,

if it is followed by a minority of Earth's population. Would you say Einstein's theories are false, since the majority cannot fathom his words? Is it at all possible that the One who created Einstein's mind, is of a higher intelligence? Additionally, does not "free will" demand that each individual select his path in life? that many will choose corruption? that this alone explains why many fail to observe Judaism?

But think about your words, "He has failed because so few people are following it." Let's consider a scenario: 99% of the Earth follows Judaism. In this case, you would say G-d has not failed and Judaism is the singular truth. But what if that 99% declined to 1%...how does this affect the truth of Judaism, or of G-d's desire that man follow Judaism? It is the same Judaism that was followed by 99% of the world's population! Judaism, in this case (and always) did not change. The number of adherents plays no role in Judaism's truth as the one religion given by G-d.

You write, "...or do you think He doesn't care at all for His creatures except for those few of us lucky enough to be born Jewish?" One is not "lucky to be born Jewish", if he lives his life poorly. Additionally, Adam, Noah, Shem, Yaphet, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not Jewish, yet G-d loved them.

I agree with your underlying sentiment, that if Torah is the only truth, that it is G-d's will that as many as possible follow it. Eventually, all people will recognize their Creator, and follow Him. Zecharya 14:9 states, "And it will be, G-d will be the King of the entire Earth, on that day, it will be (that) G-d will be one, and His name will be one." This means that acceptance of G-d by the entire world is a goal, but it need not take place throughout history, but only ultimately. This eventuality, and not an eternal acceptance is due to two factors: 1) man's free will to be corrupt, 2) G-d's mercy on man to ultimately bring about undeniable proof to those who

are corrupt.

Why did G-d did not desire the forthcoming Messianic "proof for all nations" to take place earlier? That, we answer, is G-d's knowledge. We cannot know His ways. But we learn that G-d's mercy demands the ultimate removal for all other nations to deny Him, upon Messiah's arrival.

Reader: If we can't prove that only Judaism is true because of what I said in #1, then faith is required to accept it. If faith is the basis of a religion, then it is impossible to know objectively what theological claims are true. The only way to attempt to distinguish truth from falsehood when it comes to religions is to look at their moral and ethical codes to see how the behavior that is commanded of the faithful complies with the religion's ideals. Since the codes of all religions are similar, then some Truth must exist in them. And no, not all religions "plagiarized" from Judaism. Hinduism and Buddhism forbid stealing even though there is no direct connection between them and Judaism. Once again, I ask that you accept these comments as a genuine attempt to discover Truth.- Sincerely, H.F.

Mesora: We have shown that Sinai proves Judaism to be the only G-d given law, but I will address your other concerns. You err gravely in that you feel a distortion of G-d's word ("truth" exists in other religions) to be acceptable. You err when you say there is good in other religions, as they too include moral codes, such as prohibiting stealing. Yes, stealing is corrupt, but Christianity does not include "truth" because it too includes stealing as a prohibition. One is involved in perfection, not because he doesn't steal, but because he realizes this as G-d's word, G-d's Torah word.

How do you understand this phrase, "Abstention from morality is a good"? My approach to dissecting this phrase is to first ask, "what is 'morality'? Who determines morality? Is killing an evil, a good, or at times, can it be either? This can only be determined by the

One who gave life, i.e., G-d. Now that I have learned the proof that G-d gave only one religion, I consult that book alone to determine morality. My next step is to see what else G-d defines as truth. G-d also says not to alter the Torah - at all. Additionally, He said the event of Sinai is a one-time event. A mass revelation will not occur again. I summarize this information and realize that the Torah is the only religion, that it can not be altered, and that G-d will never give another religion. This makes perfect sense, as G-d knew the future, and all of man's eventual corruption, and nonetheless, He is 'content' that His Torah is the perfect and complete system, never to be altered. Thereby, I know all other religions are false. And even if they contain prohibitions which are identical to those in the Torah, the truth is - they are not identical. What do I mean?

As I said a few sentences back, one is involved in perfection, not because he doesn't steal, but because he realizes this as G-d's word...G-d's Torah word. Abstention from stealing, when performed not as a Torah law, fails to bring one closer to G-d. This person now becomes closer to Jesus, if he performs it as Jesus' word. Hence, his act of not stealing is in fact, pure corruption. He continues in his folly to deify a human, while denying the proof of Sinai. He denies G-d's words, already proven thousands of years ago.

An act is not judged a good, based solely on its physical similarity to the Torah's command. Unless one performs actions, as part of his adherence to Torah, he fails to perfect himself. Man is essentially his mind. His actions are secondary. We must look at one's intent when judging his actions. Following any religion aside from Judaism is a distortion of the single religion given by G-d. It makes no difference if one "physically" mimics Torah laws. As long as one deviates an iota from the Torah, and certainly when he invents new religions, he is not following G-d. ■