

MESORA

JewishTimes

RETROSPECTIVE 1997-2005

VOLUME I: GOD & EGYPT



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

MESORA

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1997-2005

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Founder: www.Mesora.org

*“God created
one human race.
He gave a religion
to mankind
only once.”*

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim
Rosh Chodesh Av 5765
August 6, 2005*

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Part I

GOD

Judaism's FUNDAMENTALS I

In an age where the differences between Jewish sects and communities are enough to render each a different religion, one wonders what identifies us all as “Jewish”? What are the ties that bind, the fundamentals that across the spectrum are the unifying truths that define each of us as “Jews”?

Having recently addressed many distinctions among our varying practices, I wish to express this qualification: all our studies must – over all else – be targeted at the strengthening of Judaism’s fundamentals, insuring that we and future generations are not confused by our differences, but conversely, that we all understand and uphold the primary ideals that separate Judaism from every other religion. We must shift the focus from our dividing distinctions, to our unifying fundamentals. We focus on such ideational goals, not to isolate ourselves from all of God’s other peoples, but the opposite: to understand and transmit His one religion to both Jew and Gentile.

Judaism was never ‘matched’. All other religions lack proof of divine origin: God’s Revelation at Sinai was the only event of God giving a religion, witnessed by two million Jews whose miraculous Egyptian redemption by God, His unparalleled Exodus, and our travels via pillars of cloud and fire, and fed by manna, are historically undisputed, and even confirmed by other religions. The question is, with the plethora of Jews and Jewish denominations, how do we ensure that Judaism maintains its originally given identity? What is this identity? Compound this with the variety of causes supported by Jews such as anti-Semitism, Israel, anti-terrorism, Zionism, settlement, education, conversion, poverty, and the list is endless. However, each one of these issues must finally be viewed as a “means” not an end. Meaning, you cannot fight against anti-Semitism as your ultimate goal in Jewish life, because once that is resolved, is this truly the objective? Is there nothing else obligatory on us all? Of course not. The objective of eliminating hatred is the backdrop of the harmony, essential for us all to live as Jews, to follow the brilliant system of Torah granted by God to each one of us. You see, we come back to the ultimate question: what defines Judaism and how do we live as a true Jew once we have addressed all other issues? The removal of a negative of any kind is only a ‘means’. What goal are we trying so desperately to arrive at after we have vanquished all negative forces?

From the most irreligious Jew living in Israel, to the most pious anywhere else, all agree that the Land of Israel is distinguished as the “Land of the Jews”. And all agree that Israel attained and maintains this status due exclusively to God’s Biblical oath to Abraham. The Torah is our source for our claim to Israel. Therefore, one is puzzled at those who seize this Biblically-based right to Israel, while dismissing the rest of God’s words. This position is with no rhyme or reason. Furthermore, the land was given to us conditionally: we must adhere to the Torah. Again, all denominations cherish the fundamental Shema blessing; we start our toddlers on these words as we gently tuck them in each night once they can talk. No Jew is ignorant of the Shema. But as remarkable as it is, many are ignorant of the Shema’s message: Israel is “conditional” on our

adherence to God's laws, His mitzvos. If we observe God's Torah, the land is ours. If we deviate, God abandons us. The Talmud states that the Shema is so essential to our daily prayers, as it contains the fundamentals of Judaism.

This week, we start a series of articles addressing what are Judaism's tenets, regardless of our denomination. Uniting under our fundamentals, studying the words of our greatest teachers, we will insure that we truly adhere to one Judaism: retaining its identity and tenets for our children.

PROOF IS MANDATORY

The most primary concept in Jewish life, which forms the basis of everything else we learn in life, is a true and accurate idea of God, as far as man's feeble mind can understand. For if our idea of God is corrupted and false, then all that we attribute as "God's" creation, is in fact, attributed not to the true God, but to an imaginary and false god. So we must take great care to dismiss all false notions of God, and learn what are the truths concerning Him.

We must also be mindful that all of our studies must be governed by intelligence, where we strive to prove our ideas using analysis and rational proof. Without such rigid criteria, we may come away believing in something imaginary and not real, since we failed to prove its validity. Certainly, in this most fundamental area, we must use reason to arrive at our convictions.

This approach and these truths may be seen in our great Rabbis' analysis of a Torah verse: "And you shall know them today, and you shall place them on your heart; for God is the Governor in heaven above, and on Earth below, there is no other." (Deut. 4:39) This was Moses' command to the Jews after he recounted the event of Revelation at Sinai, which transpired 40 years earlier. He reminded the Jews that Jewish history is unparalleled; 1) no other people heard God's voice emanating from fire; 2) God never selected a nation with miracles as displayed in the Exodus, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the journeys in the dessert; 3) and that the Jews were proven that God exists, and nothing compares to God. Moses then told them that verse above.

Rabbi Bachya author of Duties of the Heart says that one lesson from this verse, is to prove things to our minds, and not live based on simple acceptance of authority. Thus, the verse first says, "And you shall know today" which Rabbi Bachya explains as "know through the teachings of the Rabbis". But Rabbi Bachya continues, "and you shall place it on your heart" means that you shall then, after hearing ideas from the Rabbis, think into them until you can prove them to your heart through proofs. What is Rabbi Bachya's lesson?

He is teaching us this fundamental: as beings gifted with intelligence (the faculty for proof) we are mandated to engage this intelligence, and not remain relying on authority. We must fulfill our role as human beings created with reason and use our minds to the utmost, which is when we arrive at proof for our views, surpassing and abandoning faith. Proof is available, and we are to use this ability in the greatest of areas: knowing what God is. For when we realize any matter by way of proof, we are then living with an indisputable conviction, and such conviction is our mission in life. Conviction also affords us the greatest satisfaction in life, for belief without proof leaves us dissatisfied, and wondering. But when something is clearly proven, our minds and emotions find the greatest happiness, all conflict is gone, and we actually enjoy such knowledge made this absolutely clear. So the first lesson in this verse is to engage our intelligence, for through it, all else depends.

GOD EXISTS: HE IS THE CREATOR

What are the next few fundamentals taught by our verse? “God is the Governor in heaven above, and on Earth below.” What may we derive from here? What do the Rabbis teach? Sforno, (1470-1550, Italy) writes the following: “God is the eternal Creator [arranger] witnessed in the heavens above and on Earth below. For God’s mastery is demonstrated by their order and relation, which cannot be known without them [the planets and stars].” This means that God created the universe to display His role as Creator. For without creation, how will man come to know there is a Creator? It is a subtle, yet primary idea, that creation exists not for itself, but to point to a Creator. God wishes that man use his mind to uncover great things, and to do so, God gave us this universe to study. Maimonides too says this very idea, that we come to a love of God through studying the physical universe. (Mishneh Torah: Laws of the Torah Fundamentals, 2:2) Sforno continues, “It becomes known that there exists a Existence who directs [the cosmos] Who created all this for a specific purpose, which comes from Him.”

GOD HAS A PLAN FOR MANKIND

We now learn from the fact that God created everything with such wisdom, that this is His desire for man, that we study this wisdom. We don’t simply marvel at creation, but comprehend that there is a “will” behind the creation of all we see. God has a plan for mankind. We must take this realization seriously; we must look at ourselves as “created beings”, created “for” a purpose. We must know this purpose, as Sforno underscores here: to study creation and come to know what we can about God. Unfortunately today, and even in Sforno’s times as he writes, man is more absorbed in the amassing of wealth which does not travel with him to the next world, than he is with what is our real purpose and what is truly eternal: Torah and virtues.

GOD: THE ONLY CAUSE FOR EVERYTHING

Moses words also teach us that God is the “exclusive” Source of all creation: “in the heaven above and on earth below” includes everything. Our concept of God must include this idea, as the verse ends, “there is no other”. God is not in need of any other being; He created the entire universe from nothing, by Himself. This is truly the greatest Being: One Who independently created the universe.

GOD IS ONE: NO OTHER GODS

The Rabbis and philosophers agree: God must be One. For if there were two gods necessary for the creation of the universe, it implies limitation on both: neither one could create ALL of creation, without help from the other. And if this were the case, then who imposed the limitation on each of the gods, so that they could not create the universe independent of the other god? Again, we would arrive at another more powerful, singular god responsible for the limitation on these first two.

GOD IS NOT COMPARABLE TO ANYTHING

God is also One from another perspective: “number” exists in the physical world, as one body is distinguished from a second body its properties and by location. But these physical features do not exist with that which is not physical, so number cannot apply to God. But someone may ask: “Do we not count the “laws” of the world, and these laws are many? So if number applies to non physical laws, why can’t I suggest that number also applies to God, and therefore, there are many Gods?” The answer is as follows: the reason we may accurately count various laws, is precisely because they are various, and different in the function. We say the law of gravity is #1, the law of moisture #2, the law of weight #3, etc. They may be counted as their differences may be counted, even though these laws, which govern the universe, are truly non-physical. But to suggest there is “A God Who created the universe” and “There is also another God Who created the universe”...one is not describing two Gods, but the same God. If there is no difference in two non-physical things, then there is no way in which to distinguish them. This is unlike two identical water droplets, or two identical metal cubes. Here, although identical, their place distinguishes them: one cube is on the left and the other, on the right. So in the physical world, “number” truly exists for identical things. But number cannot exist in the non-physical world, unless what we count varies one from the other somehow. Hence, there cannot be two, identical “Gods”.

GOD IS UNKNOWABLE

One final idea for now: as all physical matter did not always exist, and requires creation, and cannot create itself, that which created everything is Himself, not physical, or governed by the very physical law he created. God, the Creator of all matter, therefore is not subject to following the laws of matter that He created. All worldly features such as aging, division, separation, ignorance, place, weight, visibility, weariness, etc. do not apply and cannot apply to God. For this reason, we say that God is not “in” the universe; He is not “on” Earth or “in” heaven. God told Moses that he could not know Him...certainly lesser minds as we are, cannot fathom God.

We will continue next week to discuss more fundamentals essential to Judaism and Jewish life. All our great prophets, Sages, Talmudic Rabbis, and leaders from Moses through Maimonides echo these fundamentals. These leaders define Judaism. It is of the utmost importance that we know what makes Judaism, “Judaism”, so as to insure we are living a true Jewish life, in line with reality, not fantasy. And once we apprehend these tenets, it is our obligation to teach them, and then see what we may derive from them.♣

Judaism's FUNDAMENTALS II

Many times when studying Torah, we notice parallels between our currently studied topic, and another we learned previously. At times, these parallels are not central to the compared areas. However, when studying the laws of the Jewish court system – Bais Din – we come across an idea, which seems quite central to its laws, and to other areas. I will list the areas, which seem to contain this parallel, but will allow you the reader to try and detect this parallel I am hinting to, and think into the underlying concept.

1) Maimonides writes in his Laws of the Chosen House as follows:

Law 2:2: “And the transmission is in the hands of all, the place where David and Solomon built the Altar in the threshing floor of Arnan, it is the (same) place that Abraham built the altar and bound on it Isaac. And it is the (same) place that Noah built (his altar) when he exited the Ark. And it is the (same) Altar that Cain and Ebel sacrificed upon. And on it Adam the First sacrificed a sacrifice when he was created, and from there, was he created. The Rabbis stated, ‘Adam, from the place of his atonement was he created.’”

2) Bais Din (Jewish courts) cannot rule on capital punishment cases unless they are convened in Lishchas Hagazis. This is where the great Sanhedrin sat in judgment. In Talmud Avodah Zara 8b, Tosfos explains that this location was “next to God’s presence” in the Temple area. In other words, capital punishment cases cannot be ruled upon unless the Great Sanhedrin is in session. This also applies to other courts: they too cannot rule on such matters unless the Great Sanhedrin is in session in Lishchas Hagazis. This seems odd, as what difference does it make to other, outlying areas courts, whether Bais Din is in session in the Temple near God’s presence? This would seem to be an issue for only the Great Sanhedrin. However, as Tosfos state, “the place is causative”. Meaning, this place is indispensable.

3) In Parshas Shoftim (judges) we read as follows (Deut. 17:8-13):

“When a matter will be hidden from you in judgment, [whether in distinguishing] between blood to blood, between judgment to judgment, between plague to plague, words of contention in your gates, and you shall rise and ascend to the place that God your God has chosen. And you shall come to the priests, the Levites and unto the judge who will be in your days, and he will discern and will tell you the matter of the judgment. And you shall do in accord with the word that they from that place which God has chosen, and you shall guard to do as all they instruct you. In accord with the Torah that they instruct you and [in accord with] the judgment they say to you, do. Do not veer from the matter they tell you, [to turn] right or left. And the man who acts wickedly, not listening to the priest who stands to minister before God, your God, or unto the judge, and you shall kill that man and vanquish the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and fear and not act anymore wickedly.”

4) God states that He will instruct man from between the two cherubs upon the ark (Exod. 25:22):

“And I will appoint My word to you there, and I will speak to you from above the Kapores

(Ark cover) from between the two cherubs that are on the Ark of testimony, all that I command you to the Children of Israel.”

5) Moses received his prophecies from between the two cherubs mounted on the Ark's cover (Numbers 7:89):

“And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, and he heard the voice speaking to him from above the Kapores (Ark cover) that was on the Ark of Testimony, from between the two cherubs, and it spoke to him.”

6) The cherubs themselves were structured as looking downwards towards the Ark. (Exod. 25:20, Exod. 37:40)

7) Isaiah 2:3: “...for from Zion comes forth Torah, and God's word from Jerusalem.”

8) When praying, we face the direction of the Temple.

9) Prophecy was given only in the land of Israel.

10) Ethics of the Fathers (3:6) states that when people study Torah, God's presence is with them.

Are you starting to see any parallel? Think into these areas for a bit before continuing, and then proceed to read our questions and answers below.

Questions: In his Laws of the Chosen House, Maimonides stresses the significance of the Temple mount. For what reason did all of these great individuals value this location?

Why is the Bais Din's proximity to God's shechina – His presence – essential for rendering judgments? Why, in Parshas Shoftim, is the phrase “the place that God has chosen” repeated? What is its significance? Why is it necessary that God deliver His address, and that Moses hears his prophecy from between the cherubs? What is the idea behind the cherubs looking at the Ark? What about the Ark is capturing the cherub's attention? What is the necessity for Jerusalem - the “seat of Torah” - to exist as stated by Isaiah, and that our prayer must be directed there?

WISDOM, PROPHECY & PRAYER

In Torah study, or any area for that matter, our method of analysis is crucial to our results. Therefore, it is wise to take small steps, positing only those ideas which we are confident are well supported. We need not answer the ‘big question’ immediately. Rather, as we proceed in our analysis, we hope each step paves the path to the next. We never know what the outcome will be, but we can be sure that if our gradual observations are solid truths, our final discoveries have a better chance of being true. But if we build on unsupported premises, we may veer completely off track.

What is the first step we may take here? The parallel in all of these cases is one thing: a precise location. Why is “place” so essential in all of these cases, and can we distinguish between these cases?

We note three, distinct institutions: 1) judgment, 2) prophecy and 3) prayer. What these three institutions share can be summed up in one word: wisdom. In all three, man either approaches wisdom, or is approached by it.

When man studies Torah to render a judgment, he is the one who approaches the world of knowledge, or wisdom. This is also true when one prays or sacrifices to God: he approaches the concepts contained in prayer and sacrifice, reviewing his own values as they compare to what is truly correct and good. Making such a comparison, man must weigh his values and realign

himself with God's Torah system. However, prophecy is the institution where God approaches man. It is the reverse of study and prayer. But in all three cases, man is "interacting with knowledge". In all three cases, we are directed by God's precisely formulated laws to recognize a "place": be it Jerusalem as the seat of prophecy, prayer and in Bais Din's judgments; the cherubim during prophecy; the Temple Mount in sacrifice; or the Ark which the cherubs focus upon.

THE FIRST FUNDAMENTAL

It appears that the idea permeating all these areas of knowledge is man's need to be cognizant of a "source": God. We learn this first fundamental: Nothing in creation is responsible for knowledge - God is the exclusive Source.

Although highly elevated existences, over and above man, angels too are part of creation, and recognize God as the source of all knowledge and wisdom, displayed by the cherubim facing downwards at the Ark which contains God's knowledge, i.e., the Torah contained therein. In all of our cases, we are directed to a location, which is identified exclusively with God. Be it Jerusalem, the Ark, or the cherubim on the Ark...these all refer to God's selected city, His Torah, or His presence.

But we must ask: why is it essential that man be cognizant that nothing in creation is responsible for knowledge? Meaning, knowledge is not embedded in creation, rather, creation merely "displays" God's knowledge and wisdom.

Man's perfection and fulfillment are achieved when he arrives at a love of God. This appreciation functions in two spheres: 1) to promote man's interest in study and propelling his curiosity, and 2) to result in man's renewed and advanced love for his Creator.

The two commands, which underscore all others, are the Love and Fear of God. Fear of God is the prerequisite for man's initiation into study of the universe. It is only when man possesses the fear and awe of God, that his studies will be driven by this conviction. He knows there is immense and immeasurable knowledge awaiting his discovery. This causes man to greatly anticipate his studies, seeking what he knows must be brilliant and highly pleasurable concepts. This realization does not allow the Torah student to be satisfied with inconsequential findings, but he seeks profound ideas, new categories of thought, and new vaults of wisdom. He knows the Creator of the universe works with majestic ideas, and this is what he seeks. This fear and awe of God promotes our study.

How does Love of God fit in? Love of God is the 'result' of our study. When we arrive at new knowledge, we are fascinated by this knowledge. However, we must not stop there. We must realize and be drawn to the Source of this knowledge. This attachment to the source of all knowledge is what the "Love of God" means. So both fear and love of God, serve to drive our learning, and act as the focus of our love, respectively.

What obscures this Fear and Love of God? If man were to assume a source exists other than God that is responsible for wisdom, our appreciation that God is the exclusive source, would no longer be. Our life's objective would be lost. Therefore, in all areas where man either approaches or is approached by God's wisdom, we must have something on which to focus. And this focal point must be exclusively identified with God. Therefore, "place" is essential. In our discussed areas, each one makes use of a location tied to God's existence: Jerusalem is His chosen city, His Ark houses His Torah, and the cherubs recognize God.

But it is interesting, even with regards to Jerusalem and the Ark, these have a center, and function not of themselves. These locations or objects have the Torah as their underlying distinction. “For from Zion comes forth Torah, and God’s word from Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is distinct only because of its seat of Torah. The Ark too is merely a housing for the Tablets and the Torah.

THE SECOND FUNDAMENTAL

Torah is proof of God’s revelation at Sinai. We have the Torah only because God demonstrated His incontrovertible existence to millions, and gave us His Torah at that event. We then arrive at the next fundamental: our relationship to God (judgment/prayer) and Him to us (prophecy) must never be divorced from the proof of His existence. The absolute truth of His existence must be constantly reiterated in these specific institutions. The Ark’s contents – Torah – point to Sinai, from where we received Torah. Revelation at Sinai was the single event proving God’s existence.

Unlike other religions, Judaism demands mankind live by proven truths, not accepted beliefs. And the most essential truth is God’s very existence: the Sole Cause for all that exists. Being mindful of this primary tenet, we understand that all the answers in life lie with God. We turn to Him alone through His Torah.

CREATION VS CREATOR

We live in a physical, sensual world. We are subject to attachments to beauty, wealth, approval, insecurity and numerous earth-bound drives and emotions. We may become more physically oriented, than spiritual. We easily forget that which is not visible. The Temple – a physical location associated exclusively with God’s existence – keeps us mindful of our goal: to strive for truth and recognize there is a Creator.

We learn according to Sforno, the Temple exists only as a response to the sin of the Golden Calf. In that sin, man demonstrated his inability to relate to God abstractly. Therefore, God created the institution of Temple so man may have a location through which he may satisfy his need for physical worship. Temple strives to redirect man to the truth, although conceding to his needs as a sensual being.

Man may erroneously assume knowledge is derived from something other than God. Man may be astounded at creation, to the point, that creation completely obscures the Creator. Many scientists arrive at theories like evolution, with no God. The world to them takes on a life of its own, and they are satisfied that it exists and even came into being...without a Creator. But those with intelligence conclude that the very universe we witness, and all of its precise laws, could not have created itself. In our relationship to wisdom, we are constantly reminded to focus on this idea, that God is the only source of wisdom. Wisdom is not “in us” or “in creation.” Wisdom is God’s alone. We simply perceive it. Rashi on Exodus 25:22 states that when Moses heard his prophecies, a voice first emanated from heaven, and then descended in between the two cherubs. Rashi enunciates this idea. Knowledge is from God “in heaven”. This idea is compounded with the realization we too are “created”.

What about mankind pre-Sinai? Before Revelation at Sinai, rare individuals like Abraham realized God from His created universe. Nothing more was required. Maimonides actually states that if one wishes to fulfill the command to Love God, he should study the physical universe.

Creation alone affords the intelligent man all that is needed to recognize God as the sole Source of all the wisdom that exists.

One may ask whether the pre-Sinai life afforded those generations the same opportunities we have been gifted through Torah. However, the patriarchs too arrived at a knowledge of the Torah's fundamentals, although not via a written Torah. Similarly, as Genesis commences with creation, we too possess both directives: to study Torah, and understand creation as the indisputable evidence of the Creator. Both, pre-Sinai and now, knowledge of Torah truths and the physical universe have been available.

THE THIRD FUNDAMENTAL

We have posited that, 1) Nothing in creation is responsible for "knowledge". God is the source of all knowledge. 2) Regarding institutions wherein man relates to wisdom and God is the 'subject' of that institution (prayer, prophecy and study) it is crucial that we are absolutely convinced by proof of God's existence. This is why these institutions refer back to Sinai: the one event precisely orchestrated to serve as proof of God. For if God is not a reality to our minds, our approach to Him cannot take place. The very act of "relating to God" demands that we possess the accurate idea of God, and that idea is the absolute need for His very existence: all that exists requires a Creator. If we don't view God's existence as essential, our idea of God is false. Therefore, all of our cases listed at the outset contain references to Sinai. But this is not the end of the line.

As I reviewed these ideas, I felt unsatisfied. I am certain of these first two fundamentals, but felt there was more to be discovered. I felt some idea was still concealed. Then this morning, a profound thought occurred to me. In all of our cases, there is yet another more primary idea.

The essence of prayer culminates in the "Atah Kadosh" blessing, which means that God is removed from our minds - we cannot know Him. "Kodesh" or "holy" means removed or separated. As a Rabbi once taught, we commence prayer (Shmoneh Esray) describing God's relationship to our forefathers, the patriarchs. We then move to the blessing where we praise God for His future miracle of resurrecting the dead. While in this blessing we still refer to God as relating to man, the personalities of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not mentioned. So we have moved from the first blessing, which is more identifiable with known individuals, to a less personal relationship with God. We culminate these primary blessings with our third blessing, "You are removed from all we know". There is a clear progression: we are moving away from a familiar view of God, to an admission of complete ignorance. This idea is also found in the Temple's central focus: the Holy of Holies. It is forbidden to enter this room. This demonstrates that man cannot approach God. It is not that God can be "in" a room, but it displays this idea of our ignorance of God's nature. And again with regards to prophecy, Rashi states that the voice emanated from heaven: an unreachable location. We arrive at the third fundamental: man is ignorant of God's true nature.

Man must be humble enough to admit his ignorance. We must also know that we cannot fathom the extent of God's knowledge: since we do not know what God is, we cannot know other aspects, like His knowledge. God is beyond human comprehension. God told Moses, the greatest prophet, "Man cannot know me while alive."

THE TEMPLE MOUNT'S SIGNIFICANCE

Returning to our initial idea, “location”, can we add to what we have established? We understand that man requires a location to relate to. This is a concession. But is there another idea here? I believe so. Let us ask why “this” location was selected. We learned that all of the patriarchs and kings maintained this location’s significance...but when was this location initially “given” its significance? We learned that it was the place where God created Adam. This was the initial event, imbuing this place with its significance. What is the significance of Adam’s creation, and Creation in general?

The Torah teaches that God created the universe “yashe m’ayin”, “out of nothing”. Prior to the physical, by definition, there was nothing physical. Therefore, God’s very Creation of the universe was “matter made from nothing.” We do not know, nor will we ever know how this was achieved. This is God’s knowledge. This very point is our third fundamental in this paper.

Now, in order to demonstrate this ignorance, what does man do? By retaining this location for all future prayers, sacrifices, prophecy and the Temple’s site, the patriarchs demonstrated an important idea: we mimic God’s selection of this location, thereby admitting that we cannot choose a “better” location. This means to say that we subjugate our knowledge to His. We cannot know better than the Creator. So this act of “copying” His designated place is the Torah’s method of admitting our inferiority to God and His knowledge. As King Solomon said, “Do not be excited on your mouth, and (on) your heart do not hurry to bring forth a matter before God, because God is in heaven, and you are on Earth, therefore let your words be few.” (Proverbs, 5:1)

This now explains another point. We do not claim, “God is there” at this site. Although we build His Temple there, we know He takes up no space - He is not physical. So it is not said that we relate to Him in that sense. In what sense do we relate to Him through a location? It is as we are saying: we relate to God with our demonstration of our complete admission of His unfathomable nature. Subjugating all of our decisions to His Torah demonstrates our conviction that His knowledge far surpasses that of man. As a Rabbi once taught, this act of aligning ourselves with this most fundamental truth, makes us a reality before God, and He then relates to us.

SUMMARY

We conclude: 1) Nothing in creation is responsible for knowledge - God is the exclusive Source. 2) Our relationship to God (judgment/prayer) and Him to us (prophecy) must never be divorced from the proof of His existence. 3) Man is ignorant of God’s true nature.

Remaining firm in daily Torah study, we will ever more appreciate God’s knowledge, how it is perfectly in line with our nature, to strive towards the most enjoyable and rewarding life. With honesty and continued Torah study, with every new idea, we step closer to appreciating the Source of all wisdom, although never scratching the surface.

And as we progress, we must reach out to those unaffiliated with Torah knowledge. The Torah demands that we must learn, do, and teach. We must recognize that all people – Jew and Gentile alike – are God’s creations, and as such, deserve our attention and education. We do a great harm when we remain silent, not taking a concern in humanity’s primary objective: to study Torah and love God. We are to be a light to our own, and to the other nations. Do not let your fear of rejection prevent you from educating others. For in time, the truth can change a person. And

then, you will have given a person the greatest gift: the eternal life of his soul.

To many, the mere idea of a life pursuing wisdom does not register. They are confident in their life's decision over God's instructions. Many people are trapped by the allure of physical pleasures. They are further convinced of their decision's correctness by the pristine fantasies they create. To them, the life of the physical is the only life perceived. However, as we continue to study, we will again see more parallels throughout Torah. These parallels will imbue us with the realization that they are truly the work of a Designer. Man could not have created such a system. We must share our knowledge, and our humility towards God.

Let today be the first day of many, where you start a Torah class, take a friend out to dinner, invite a family to your home, email someone, or simply call another person; enabling those unaffiliated or with incorrect ideas to benefit from your knowledge. ♣

the Tablets, the Torah & MOUNT SINAI

Certain facts or events, basic to our beliefs, are sometimes so quickly embraced, that our questions are overlooked, or not even detected. Children often ask us about our accepted foundations. Their questions are undiluted by social pressures, so they see the large holes in our beliefs, and not being repressed, they verbalize them. We hear their questions and wonder why we never realized such problems. Of course, our ignorance is the source of these problems. But if we didn't ponder the questions that children ask - and certainly if we have no answers - we are missing some basic principles of Judaism.

Such is the case with Sinai. Recently, I was reviewing Deuteronomy 10:1, where God instructed Moses to quarry a new set of stones for God's engraving of the second set of Ten Commandments. (God wrote the Ten Commandments on both sets, but God quarried only set #1, Moses was commanded to quarry set #2.) The first set of tablets, you recall, Moses broke in the sight of the people. A Rabbi explained this was done so the people would not worship the stone tablets as they did the Golden Calf. A new set of tablets was then required. Subsequently, I pondered, "Why do we needed the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets at all? If we need commands, we can receive them orally from God, or from Moses, so why are tablets needed? Also, why was there miraculous writing on the tablets? If Moses felt the people might err by deifying the first set, why was a second set created?" I also wondered why a box was required for the second set, but not for the first?

I then started thinking more into the purpose of the tablets, "Was this the only thing Moses descended with from Sinai? Was there a Torah scroll? What about the Oral Law? What did Moses receive, and when?" I also questioned what exactly comprised the content of the Written

Torah and the Oral Law. Events subsequent to Sinai, such as the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy had not yet occurred, so it did not make sense to me that these were given at Sinai. I looked for references in the Torah and Talmud. What did Moses receive at Sinai?

I wish at this point to make it clear, that I am not questioning the veracity of our Written Torah and our Oral Law as we have it today. Our Five Books of Moses, Prophets, Writings, Mishna, Medrash, and Talmud are all authentic, and comprise authentic, Written and Oral Law. What I am questioning, is how and what was received, by whom, and when. I am doing so, as this is part of God's design of our receipt of Torah. If He gave it over in a specific fashion, then there is much knowledge to be derived from such a transmission. Certainly, the Ten Commandments must be unique in some way, as God created separate stones revealing only these ten. What is their significance?

The answers begin to reveal themselves by studying these areas in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Exodus 19, and 24 recount the arrival of the Jews at Sinai and the events which transpired:

Exodus, 24:1-4, "1. And to Moses (God) said, ascend to God, you, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy from the elders of Israel, and prostrate from afar. 2. And Moses alone, draw near to God, but the others, don't approach, and the people, do not ascend with him. 3. And Moses came and told over to the people all the words of God, and all the statutes, and the entire people answered as one, and they said, 'all the matters that God has said we will do.' 4. And Moses wrote all the the words of God..."

Verse 24:12 continues: "And God said to Moses, 'ascend to Me to the mountain, and remain there, and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the Torah and the Mitzvah (commands) that I have written, that you should instruct them.'"

"And Moses wrote all the the words of God..." teaches that prior to the giving of the tablets of stone, Moses ascended Mount Sinai, learned ideas from God, descended, taught the people what he learned, and wrote "the words of God." (This was the order of events prior to Moses' second ascension to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.) What were these "words"? Ibn Ezra says this comprised the section of our Torah from Exod. 20:19 - 23:33. This is the end of Parshas Yisro through most of Parshas Mishpatim. This was told to the Jews before the event of Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The Jews accepted these laws, and Moses wrote them down. This is referred to as the "Book of the Treaty." Moses entered them into a treaty with God, that they accept God based on the section mentioned. Only afterwards was that famous, historical giving of the Ten Commandments from the fiery Mount Sinai. The Jews were offered to hear the Torah's commands.

Earlier in Exodus, 19:8, we learn of this same account, but with some more information. When Moses told the Jews the commandments verbally, prior to the reception of the tablets, the Jews said as one, "all that God said, we will do, and Moses returned the word of the people to God." Moses returned to God and told Him the Jews' favorable response. Now, Moses knew that God is aware of all man's thoughts, deeds and speech. What need was there for Moses to "return the word"? Then God responds, "Behold, I come to you in thick cloud so that the people shall hear when I speak with you, and also in you will they believe forever..." What was Moses intent on reporting the Jews' acceptance of these commands, and what was God's response? Was Moses' intent to say, "there is no need for the event of Sinai, as the people already believe in You?" I am not certain. The Rabbis offer a few explanations why Revelation at Sinai was necessary. Ibn Ezra felt there were some members of the nation who subscribed to Egypt's beliefs (inherited from the

Hodus) that God does not speak with man. God therefore wished to uproot this fallacy through Revelation. Ibn Ezra then, is of the opinion that Revelation was not performed for the Jews' acceptance of God, which they already had accepted, "and the entire people answered as one, and they said, 'all the matters that God has said we will do.'"

According to Ibn Ezra, God teaches the purpose of the miracles at Sinai: "Yes, the people believe in Me, but there is yet something missing: a proof for ALL generations", as God said, "...and also in you will they believe forever." It ends up that the Sinaic event of God giving the Ten Commands from a fiery mountain had one purpose; to stand as a proof for all generations. This is something many of us are already familiar with: Such a massively attended event at which an Intelligence related knowledge to man, from amidst flames, was and is undeniable proof of the existence of a Metaphysical Being in complete control of all creation. Sinai serves as our eternal proof of God's existence. We now learn from a closer look, that the Jews had already accepted God's commands prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. That event was to serve as a proof of God's existence, but the Jews' agreement to those ideas was earlier.

WHAT EXACTLY DID GOD GIVE TO MOSES AT SINAI?

The Torah tells us God communicated many commands without writing, and He also gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Ibn Ezra says the "Torah and the Mitzvah" referred to in Exod. 24:12 is as follows: "The 'Torah' is the first and fifth commands (of the Ten) and the 'Mitzvah' refers to the other eight." This implies that all, which God gave physically, was the Ten Commandments on stone. Further proof is found openly, Deuteronomy 9:10, "And it was at the end of forty days and forty nights, God gave me the two tablets of stone, tablets of the treaty." We find no mention of any other object, such as a Torah scroll, given to Moses. We therefore learn that Moses wrote the Torah, and God wrote the Ten Commandments. (Saadia Gaon views the Ten Commandments as the head categories for the remaining 603 commands.)

The Torah was written by Moses, not God, Who wrote the Ten Commandments. What was God's plan, that there should be a Divinely engraved "Ten Commandments" in stone, and that Moses would record the Torah? And we see the necessity for the Ten Commandments, as God instructed Moses to quarry new tablets subsequent to his destruction of the first set. These stones were necessary, even though they are recorded in Moses' Torah! What is so important about these stone tablets? Not only that, but additionally, the Ten Commandments were uttered by God. Why? If He gave them to us in an engraved form, we have them! Why is God's created "speech" required? Was it to awe the masses, as we see they asked Moses to intercede, as they feared for their lives at the sound of this created voice?

According to Maimonides, at Sinai, the Jews did not hear intelligible words. All they heard was an awesome sound. Maimonides explains the use of the second person singular throughout the ten Commandments - God addressed Moses alone. Why would God wish that Moses' alone find the sound intelligible, but not the people? Again, Maimonides is of the opinion that the people didn't hear intelligible words during God's "oral" transmission of the Ten Commandments. This requires an explanation, as this too is by God's will. We now come to the core issue of this article...

MOSES PERCEIVED SINAI DIFFERENTLY THAN THE PEOPLE

We must take note of Maimonides' distinction between the perceptions of Moses and the Jews at Sinai. It appears to me, God desired we understand that reaching Him is only through knowledge. God teaches this by communicating with the Jews at Sinai, but as Maimonides teaches, Moses' alone understood this prophecy on his level, Aaron on a lower level, Nadav and Avihu on a lower level, and the seventy elders still lower. The people did not understand the sound. This teaches that knowledge of God depends on one's own level. It is not something equally available to all members of mankind. God desires we excel at our learning, sharpening our minds, thinking into matters, and using reason to uncover the infinite world of ideas created by God. The fact that knowledge is an endless sea, is the driving force behind a Torah student's conviction that his or her studies will eventuate in deep, profound, and "continued" insights. This excites the Torah scholar, which each one of us has the ability to be. It's not the amount of study, but the quality of it. "Echad hamarbeh, v'echad ha'mimat, uvilvad sheh-yikavane libo laShamayim."

Sinai was orchestrated in a precise fashion. Maimonides uncovers the concept, which Sinai taught: In proportion to our knowledge is our ability to see new truths. Moses was on the highest level of knowledge, and therefore understood this prophecy at Sinai to the highest level of human clarity. He then taught this knowledge to the people, but they could not perceive it directly when it was revealed. God desired the people to require Moses' repetition. Why? This established the system of Torah as a constant reiteration of the event at Sinai! A clever method. Sinai taught us that perception of God's knowledge is proportional to our intelligence. Thus, Moses alone perceived the meaning of the sounds. You remember that earlier in this article we learned that the people were taught certain Torah commands prior to the event at Sinai. Why was this done? Perhaps it served as a basis for the following Sinai event which God knew they would not comprehend. God wished that when Moses explained to them what he heard, that the Jews would see that it was perfectly in line with what Moses taught many days earlier. There would be no chance that the people would assume Moses was fabricating something God did not speak.

God does not wish this lesson of Sinai to vanish. This is where Moses' writing of the Torah comes in. God could have equally given Moses a Torah scroll along with the tablets, but He didn't. Why? I believe Moses' authority - as displayed in his writing of the Torah - reiterates the Sinai system that knowledge can only be found when sought from the wise. It is not open to everyone as the Conservatives and Reformed Jews haughtily claim. The system of authority was established at Sinai, and reiterated through Moses' writing of the Torah. Subsequent to Moses, this concept continues, as it forms part of Torah commands, "In accordance with the Torah that they teach you..." (Deut. 17:11) God commands us to adhere to the Rabbis. God wishes us to realize that knowledge can only be reached with our increased study, and our continually, refined intelligence and reason. Words alone - even in Torah - cannot contain God's wisdom. The words point to greater ideas, they are doors to larger vaults, and they, to even larger ones. Perhaps this is the idea that the Jews did not hear words. As the verse says, "a sound of words did you hear". Maimonides deduces that no words were heard, otherwise, the verse would read "words did you hear", not "a sound of words". The Jews heard sounds with no words.

A PURPOSE OF THE TABLETS

We now understand why Moses taught the Jews commands before Sinai's miracles. We understand why Moses wrote the Torah - not God. We understand why God created the miraculous event at Sinai, as well as the system of transmission of knowledge. But we are left with one question. Why did God create the Ten Commandments of stone? Why was the second set alone, housed in a box?

Let us think; they were made of stone, both sets - the broken and the second set - were housed in the ark, there was miraculous writing on these tablets (Rabbeinu Yona: Ethics, 5:6), they contained the ten head categories for all the remaining 603 commands (Saadia Gaon), and they were to remain with the people always.

Why did the tablets have only ten of the 613 commands? We see elsewhere (Deut. 27:3) that the entire Torah was written three times on three sets of 12 stones, according to Ramban. Even Ibn Ezra states that all the commands were written on these stones. So why didn't the tablets given to Moses at Sinai contain all the commands?

Perhaps the answer is consistent with the purpose of Sinai: That is, that the system of knowledge of God is one of 'derivation' - all knowledge cannot be contained in writing. God gave us intelligence for the sole purpose of using it. With the tablets of only ten commands, I believe God created a permanent lesson: "All is not here", you must study continually to arrive at new ideas in My infinite sea of knowledge. So the head categories are engraved on these two stones. This teaches that very same lesson conveyed through Moses' exclusive understanding of God's "verbal" recital of these very Ten Commands on Sinai: Knowledge is arrived at only through thinking. Knowledge is not the written word, so few words are engraved on the tablets. But since we require a starting point, God inscribed the head categories which would lead the thinker to all other commands, which may be derived from these ten. God taught us that our knowledge of Him is proportional to our intelligence. This is why Moses alone perceived the "orally" transmitted Ten Commandments. Others below him in intelligence, i.e., Aaron, his sons, and the elders, received far less.

This theory is consistent with Saadia Gaon's position that the Ten Commandments are the head categories of all remaining 603 commands. Saadia Gaon too, was teaching that God gave us the necessary "Ten Keys" which unlock greater knowledge. Saadia Gaon saw knowledge not as a reading of facts, but as it truly is: a system where our thought alone can discover new ideas, and that new knowledge, opens new doors, ad infinitum. All truth is complimentary, so the more we grasp, the more we CAN grasp.

The tablets mirror the event of God's revelation, and the nature by which man may arrive at new ideas. Just as Moses alone understood the sounds at Sinai, and all others could not readily comprehend the sounds, so too the tablets. All is not revealed, but can be uncovered through earnest investigation. Moses possessed the greatest intellect, so he was able to comprehend Sinai more than any other person. Just as Sinai taught us that refined intelligence open doors to those possessing it, via Moses' exclusive comprehension, the tablets too were a necessary lesson for future generations. They were commanded to be made of stone as stone endures throughout all generations. (Placing the second set of tablets in a box may have been to indicate that the Jews were now further removed from knowledge, in contrast to the first set. They removed themselves via the Golden Calf event.)

Why was a “miraculous” writing essential to these tablets? Perhaps this “Divine” element continually reminds us that the Source of all knowledge is God. Only One Who created the world could create miracles within a substance, such as these miraculous letters. We recognize thereby, that Torah is knowledge of God, and given by God. These tablets are a testament to the Divine Source of Torah, and all knowledge.

We learn a lesson vital to our purpose here on Earth to learn: Learning is not absorbing facts. Learning is the act of thinking, deriving, and reasoning. “Knowledge” is not all written down, very little is. Thus, the Oral Law. Our Torah is merely the starting point. God’s knowledge may only be reached through intense thought. We must strive to remove ourselves from mundane activities, distractions, and from seeking satisfaction of our emotions. We must make a serious effort to secure time, and isolate ourselves with a friend and alone, and delve into Torah study. Jacob was a “yoshave ohallim”, “a tent dweller”. He spent years in thought. Only through this approach will we merit greater knowledge, and see the depths of wisdom, with much enjoyment. ♣

Learning is the GREATEST THING?

Ron: I’m having trouble understanding the concept of learning Torah. We know that learning Torah is the greatest thing a person can do – it’s “Knegged Kulam” – “greater than all of them” (Mitzvos). But I don’t understand that. How can my sitting down reading a Chumash, without any understanding of it whatsoever, give me the greatest pleasure and grant me Olam Haba?! It’s reading, not so difficult! I understand if you want to say “Lifum Tzar Agra” (in accord with the toil is the reward), but technically speaking, I can open up Tanach, and read and read, and it’s the “greatest”? Why? How? Shouldn’t helping an old lady across the street, or saving a life be greater?

Thank you in advance, –Ron

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Let’s first understand your value system, and then we can determine what is “greater.”

What is the barometer you use to estimate the value of something? Saving and protecting life are the cases you mentioned. And you are correct...life is to be preserved, even to the point, that we even violate Sabbath to save someone’s life. So then I would ask you, “Why is life so important?” You would say “so a person might live and be happy and enjoy the best life”. But keep in mind, that you admit that helping an old lady across the street, or saving a life, themselves, are not the ultimate good. Because you would admit that these are only a good, provided the saved person uses their life positively, in accord with your measure of what is truly positive.

As we continue, I ask you, “How does a person become happiest?” What is “happy?” If we answer it is when a person is not hungry, not in pain, or not poor at all, what we have described is called “removal of pain”. These are not positive things. It is true, we need not to be hungry, in pain or poor, but these too are “for something else”. As removing pain, hunger and poverty do not make a person happy. We ask, “Why not?” The answer is because a person is made up of more than a physical body, which needs food, comfort, and money to have a home and clothes. We also possess many emotions, and also, an intellect. And if these are not satisfied, then a person is not happy. For example, a person has a strong social component, and needs friends. Without friends, a person becomes unhappy. So “friends” gets added to our list of things that make us happy. But is “any” friend good enough? Well, we need friends who have good values. We won’t be happy if our friends tease us, or take advantage of us. We also need recognition in a positive manner. We have a self-image, and we need to feel good about ourselves. But aside from all these needs that we can mention, which make us feel good in an emotional way, we also need to be involved in what we feel is “important”.

We each have a value system and intelligence, and we sense when our lives are not serving any higher purpose. Many people work many years, build beautiful homes, and have many possessions; yet, they wake up one day and sense a feeling of emptiness. Their life is not “going anywhere” they say. This feeling comes about because each of us has intelligence, and we understand on some level, that this is our highest element. (A proof that we value intelligence over all else is that the worst insult is being called stupid.) We realize that repetitive labor, the accumulation of wealth, and entertainment, simply do not satisfy us, novelty wears off. But most people simply don’t know why. They foolishly feel their lifestyles must be right, since everyone else is also living this way! They finally arrive at the wrong conclusion, “I know what would make me happy: MORE!” Since these individuals never examined human nature as a study, like anything else they have studied, they have little or no knowledge about what man truly needs to be happy and live a fulfilled life.

But at some point, most people do wake up to the realization that all the wealth, possessions, vacations, and prestige...simply wear off. People are searching for something, because God designed us to be happy with something else, and not the physical as an end in itself. And there is no way to escape His design of us, and we should not want to escape, but conversely, we should want to learn what His plan is. Well, His plan is as you said at the very outset: He desires that we engage in Torah study. This activity more than all others will enlighten our minds, provide us with absolutely proper morals, and will engage our thought and curiosity to the point, that we forget everything else. Certain scientists at times became so engrossed in studying God’s universe that they forgot to eat! This example illustrates how satisfying the search for knowledge is. As we study, we uncover new ideas that are very appealing, and satisfy us deeply.

Why is the life of wisdom the happiest life? It is because it satisfies in all of us, the most primary feature of our being: our intellect, our soul. When man’s most primary component is satisfied, he will be satisfied. But when man is not pursuing God’s plan for us, seeking wisdom and answers, then he can immerse himself in as much as he wants: buying the fanciest car, and building the most luxurious home. But he will eventually tire from these, and realize they don’t afford happiness, simply because they do nothing for his soul, this central component which affords us happiness.

Additionally, as a Rabbi once taught, physical desires require proper conditions, such as good

weather and energy for vacations or sports, and hunger so as to enjoy a meal. But once we have eaten, eating becomes painful, and when weather is poor or we are tired, vacations drag and sports are not enjoyed. But the life of wisdom is not dependent on any condition: all we require, we have with us day in, and day out! All we need is our minds. So the element of pain is not present in this one pursuit, in the life of wisdom. For this reason too, this life of Torah study affords us an additional pleasure, as no pain is associated with it.

Now regarding your statement, since you have no real understanding of Torah, by your own admission, you truly cannot suggest anything compares to learning. It is equivalent to saying “What is behind the first curtain is of less value than this dollar.” Since you are ignorant of what is behind the curtain, your statement is meaningless. What you experience when reading unintelligible words is not learning...since, you are not “learning” anything! Reading is not “learning.” Certainly, any reading wherein you are oblivious to the meaning contains no merit at all.

In conclusion, we realize the best life is one where man’s central component is engaged, where he realizes new truths, and where this realization affords him a satisfaction not only in the ideas themselves, but also in knowing what is important, and what he is to value. He realizes he is following what his Creator designed him for, and he senses less need to engage in the material world, as he realizes it cannot make him happy. It is a slow but enjoyable process to learn and to apply in our lives what we learn, but it works, if we are honest, and patient.

We also realize that actions which we at first assume to be of greater value, like escorting the elderly, under further examination, will reveal a more primary objective: as you said, “Talmud Torah Kinneged Kulam”, “Torah study surpasses all other commands.”♣

Interfaith DIALOGUE?

When we see the multitudes embracing interfaith dialogue, Jewish leaders clamoring to be granted visits with the Pope, and the pervasive, positive sentiments expressed by both Jews and Christians, it seems ‘sacrilegious’ to argue the sustained dialogue of two former adversaries speaking peaceably. But as students of truth and reality, popularity is not our barometer of what is God’s will; rather, God determines that.

THE TORAH’S POSITION ON “INTERFAITH DIALOGUE”

Let me first clarify matters: in no way should anyone presume that I mean to create a rift between any peoples, or that I maintain any ill feelings towards any group. We are discussing “religions” not adherents. People come and go, so what we wish to address are the ideas

themselves, the principles behind religions. Life is about searching for truth, even if it opposes common beliefs. Additionally, as God created all men and women, we must duplicate God's kindness to all peoples. The greatest kindness is educating another person, and the greatest harm, is to conceal the truth.

That being said, let us first determine our term "Interfaith Dialogue." It refers to a forum in which Jews and Christians seek to solidify friendships and remove strife; mutually accepting each other's practices and beliefs. However, we must ask, "Are their views accurate? Are Jews accurately presenting Judaism to the Christians? Is the very presence of a Jew at such a dialogue contradictory to Judaism? Is such a forum God's will? Did God's appointed Hebrew forefather Abraham, engage in such dialogue, or did he in fact debate with other religions? Did not God actually appoint Abraham as a leader 'because' of his very opposition to religions and idolatry, creating a people who would follow Abraham's way? This is expressly stated in Genesis, 18:19:

"For I know (him) that he will command his children and his household after him and they will keep the way of God to do charity and justice."

It is clear: Abraham led a distinct lifestyle, precisely defined as opposing idolatry, and teaching against it. This is exactly why God chose Abraham and created a nation from him, "For they will keep the way of God." This means that Abraham partook of God's way, while no one else did. God approved of Abraham's opposition to idolatry, and education of monotheism, as He says, "For I know (him) that he will command his children and his household after him".

INTERFAITH 'DEBATE'

Abraham spent many years pondering the universe, arriving at profound ideas of philosophy, science, monotheism, morality and justice. Since Abraham followed what God's original plan was for man, a life in pursuit of truth, God desired that the rest of the world benefit from Abraham's findings, and Abraham's method of using reason to determine which religious ideas are true, which are false, and to teach others of their error for their ultimate good. Therefore, God selected Abraham to become a leader of a nation, a nation that would be provided with a system (the Torah) for guiding man towards these truths. This Torah is not just for Jews, but all mankind. In other words, God selected Abraham to establish and proliferate the Judaic system - one of monotheism, which denounces idolatry, for the goodness of all humanity. Abraham did not engage in interfaith dialogue, but in interfaith debate and education. Furthermore, Christianity plagiarizes Judaism. We have no need for misinterpretations of the book, which we possess in its uncorrupted, original form.

ONE MAN CREATED – ONE RELIGION GIVEN

Deuteronomy 5:19 states that Revelation at Sinai was never duplicated, and God Himself says His Torah will never be lost, (Isaiah, 59:20-21) against the Christian view of a "new covenant". Thus, God's will is to give mankind only one religion. Since man's design never changes, God provides all humanity for all generations with a system God knows will never expire. There is no purpose in God duplicating Sinai and offering a different religion, and He never did: Sinai remains the only event containing proof of God giving a religion - mass revelation never occurred in any other religion. Man does not change; therefore, the original religion maintains in its

validity for all time. God also says not to add to or subtract from His Torah system. (Deut. 4:2) We learn that the Torah system is for all mankind, for all generations, with no justifiable cause for any alteration. And any such change violates God's will.

ONE PEOPLE SELECTED

God never selected one people, before or after Sinai:

"Has God ever come to take one nation from another with signs, miracles, wonders and with war and with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with awesome sights, as God performed for you in Egypt in front of your eyes?" (Deut. 4:24)

Abraham embodied a monotheistic life. God desired that idolatry and all such foolishness be abrogated. Therefore He selected Abraham's seed to continue, making truth available for all generations. Abraham and his children would be those who transmitted God's truths to all mankind, forever. God never selected any other nation, and the Christians contradict God's words when they argue on this verse. Therefore, the Jew is the one to whom we refer, when seeking Torah elucidation. It is foolish and harmful to seek a Christian understanding of God's will, when God did not give the system to Christians, but to Jews. The Jew alone remains the sole Torah authority; those who maintain God's will who continue to preserve His system, not corrupting His Torah into a man-god religion, as did Christianity. The Jews are the possessors of the Written and Oral traditions back to Sinai, and those duly trained in the methods of Torah exegesis. This is fact, not haughtiness.

There are many proofs of Christianity's deviation from God's words; deification of man of just one example. Deuteronomy 4:16 and numerous other verses prohibit the deification of man, what Christianity violates: "Do not make any image, male or female." This theme permeates the entire Torah. We are not to deify a human. Christianity violates this at every turn. A religion, which grossly ignores God's word, cannot be God's word. Deuteronomy 24:16 says, "There will not be killed fathers for sons (sins, nor) are sons killed for father's (sins). Each man in his own sin will be killed." This verse teaches that the theory of the death of Jesus on behalf of others' sins is contrary to God's own words. God's system is just; only the one who sins pays the price, not another. God teaches us intellectually sound ideas that are reasonable and conform to justice.

NATIONS WILL PRAISE THE TORAH

An amazingly clear argument is this statement of Moses (Deut. 4:6-8):

"And guard the commands and do them, for they are your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all of these statutes, and will say, 'certainly a wise and understanding people is this great nation'. For what great nation has God close to them, like God our God, whenever we call Him? And what great nation has righteous statutes and laws as this entire Torah that I give to you today?"

These words of Moses were condoned by God to be included in God's accurate Torah. God endorses Moses' statements that no other nation possesses such righteous laws, and that the other nations will marvel at the wisdom encased in the Torah's commands.

What does this mean? It means that we Jews must perform the Torah, and present it as the only system given by God, in order that the other nations witness God's will for them. If we

engage in interfaith dialogue where we seek common ground, concealing Judaism's true intolerance of other religions, then, instead of teaching the other religions about Judaism, then we fail to act as Jews, and we fail to uphold God's very words. God desires the accolades for Torah cited above from other nations. He created all humankind, and desires that each and every person have the opportunity to arrive at His will. It is the Jew's obligation – not to conceal Torah and seek alien adoration – but to advise the false religions as to their deviations. God knows all and He said the other nations would say, "Certainly a wise and understanding people is this great nation".

MOVING FORWARD

If we do not make Judaism and true Torah ideas available, we are not kind, but in fact quite cruel, as we hide from others what is perhaps, the one opportunity they may have to learn what God desires of them. We are the ones who inherited the codes and values from Sinai – there are no others. If we do not speak up, we allow others to walk in the dark. We must not be concerned more with fostering "better relationships" or losing friendships through our Torah education. That will happen. Rather, concern yourself and be greatly satisfied that there will be those who do hear the truth, and regain their lives. A truly noble person will forfeit his relationships and esteemed status, for he knows that these are meaningless if it means allowing another human being to forfeit his life. And that's just what one does when his ideas of God are the Christian kind.

We do not preach proselytism, but simply to make the Torah's ideas available, and educate other nations away from their errors, guiding them – as we are commanded – towards truth. Once we fulfill our obligation, to embody truth through our Torah performance and education, it is then the Gentiles' decisions to learn more, or remain idolatrous. We cannot be concerned with our fellow Jews alone. That is not God's way, nor what Abraham exemplified. But if we continue interfaith dialogue in its current fashion, and it does not move past mutual pats on the back, excluding an honest representation of God's intolerance of idolatrous practices and heretical views, then we send a message that other religions are acceptable, deceiving them that God accepts heresy and idolatry. It also teaches our fellow Jews the same corruption.

Learn all of the fundamentals of Judaism so they are 100% clear to your mind. Be honest with others. Do not seek relationships in place of exposing the truth. And don't view interfaith dialogue as the final frontier. Education of the fallacies of other religions is sorely missing from our schools and Yeshivas, and this disregard is allowing missionaries to convert more Jewish youths. If we educate our children on the corruptions of all other religions, they will have the best defense against missionaries: they will be able to think for themselves, and answer those who seek to convert them. Ask your school, Yeshiva, or college to plan a curriculum, which proves how Judaism is the only religion that God gave mankind, the rationality of the fundamentals, and the basic deviations and historical fabrications of the other, major religions.

Interfaith dialogue is only a good, when it does not conclude in harmony between religious adherents, but when it reaches its true, essential goal, of exposing the flaws of other religions. This is the greatest kindness we may show other people. But if our objective is simply to foster peace, allowing other religions to believe Judaism recognizes Christianity and others, then we go against God's desire that one mankind have one religion.

There is only one "human race". There can be only one religion.♣

Prayer & SACRIFICE

The Talmud (Brachos 26b) records a dispute between Rabbi Yossi son of Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Joshua. Rabbi Yossi claimed that our prayers today (Shmoneh Esray) were established based on the prayers of our three forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rabbi Joshua claims that prayer was established based on sacrifice. Each Rabbi explained his reasoning: Rabbi Yossi cited three verses:

“Abraham established morning prayers, as it says, ‘And Abraham arose in the morning to the place where he stood’, and ‘standing’ refers only to the act of prayer. Isaac established afternoon prayers as it says, ‘And Isaac went out to converse in the field, at evening’, and ‘speaking’ refers only to prayer. Jacob established evening prayer, as it says, ‘And he reached the place, and he slept there’, and ‘reaching’ only refers to prayer.

It was also taught in accordance with Rabbi Joshua; ‘for what reason is the morning prayer said only until midday? It is because the morning sacrifice was offered only until then. For what reason is the afternoon prayer said only until evening? It is because the afternoon sacrifice was brought only until the evening. Why does the evening prayer have no limit? It is because the (sacrificial) limbs were brought throughout the entire night.”

We must understand what these two rabbis were disputing. On the surface, it appears obvious that we pray based on the identical activity performed by the forefathers. Is it not a stretch according to Rabbi Joshua, to suggest that one activity, prayer, is derived from a completely different activity, sacrifice? Our forefathers offered sacrifice in addition to praying. Is Rabbi Joshua saying that our act of prayer today, is not a repetition of our forefather’s prayers? Is this truly what Rabbi Joshua holds, that were it not for sacrifice, we would not pray, as our forefathers?

There are a few other questions that occurred to me as I pondered this Talmudic section. I wish you to also have the opportunity to detect additional issues, so pause here. Think about the quotes above, or better yet, study this page in the Talmud itself. See what questions arise in your mind, and then continue. To advance in learning, simply reading what someone else writes eliminates your act of analysis, and removes another opportunity to train your mind.

I will now continue with my questions.

1) Why did Abraham not establish all three prayers? Why did he - apparently - pray just once each day, in the morning? And do we say that Jacob most certainly observed his father and grandfather, praying all three prayers...or, did Jacob pray only once, i.e., the nighttime prayer, which he instituted? In this case, why would he omit what his father and grandfather instituted?

2) What is significant about the fact that each of our forefathers established a new, succeeding prayer? May we derive anything from the opening words in our prayer, “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob”?

3) How does Rabbi Joshua claim that prayer is modeled after sacrifice, when he knew Jewish

history quite well, and he knew these verses quoted above teaching of the prayer of the patriarchs?

4) Furthermore, what may we derive from each of the verses above in connection with each patriarch's blessing? Are three, distinct ideas in prayer being conveyed in each of these verses?

5) And why did the forefathers stop at three blessings a day? Why no more than three: simply because there were only three forefathers? That seems quite arbitrary.

6) Why did our forefathers both pray, and sacrifice? What does each not accomplish, in that the other is required as an additional and essential act of perfection?

SACRIFICE DEFINED

To commence, we must first define our terms: sacrifice and prayer. We learn that the very first sacrifice was Adam's, offered immediately upon his creation. Thereby Adam taught that our existence – Creation – demands recognition of the Creator. And this recognition is in terms of our "life". Meaning, we recognize that our very lives are due to God. We therefore sacrifice "life", so as to underline this sentiment. Such an act of kindness by God, to create us, demands not simple acknowledgement, but real action. Activity is the barometer through which man's convictions and perfection are measured. This is our nature, to act out what we are convinced of. And if one does not act, then he displays a lack of conviction in whatever the matter is which he refrains from performing. If Adam had not sacrificed, he would have displayed a disregard for his very life. If man does not recognize the good bestowed upon him by another, then he lacks a true recognition of that good, or, he has a severe character flaw where he does not show his thanks to that other person.

PRAYER DEFINED

What is prayer? This is the act of praising God for His works, His kindness, His marvels and wisdom, and all the good we see emanating from His will. Part of this praise is that act of beseeching Him alone for our needs. For as we recognize and praise Him as the sole source of everything, it follows that it is to Him alone that we make requests, and before Whom we judge ourselves and arrive at what we need.

We may then state that sacrifice is offered to recognize that our very "existence" is due to God, whereas prayer addresses what comes subsequent to our existence, i.e., our "continued life", as we approach God to praise Him, having acknowledged His magnificence. And we continue to reach out to Him for the assistance which only He can provide. Sacrifice recognized God's creation of our beings, and prayer is our initiation of a continued relationship subsequent to our creation.

According to Rabbi Yossi, we pray today as the forefathers had shown this act to be a perfection. Rabbi Joshua does not deny history. He too acknowledges the forefathers' prayers. But he says our prayer today also borrows from sacrifice. In truth, there is no argument: Rabbi Joshua states that our "timeframe" for prayer is derived from sacrifices in the Temple. He does not suggest that prayer is originated in sacrifice. That makes no sense. Prayer is taken from prayer, of the patriarchs. So Rabbi Joshua is not arguing on Rabbi Yossi. These two Rabbis are addressing two separate points in prayer: Rabbi Yossi says prayer is "derived" from the prayer of the forefathers, while Rabbi Joshua only addresses prayer's "timeframe" as restricted to the same parameters as were the Temple's sacrifices.

COMBINING SACRIFICE WITH PRAYER

We must now ask why Rabbi Joshua felt sacrifice had to be incorporated into our performance of prayer. Why must our prayers embody the timeframe of Temple sacrifice, according to Rabbi Joshua? We are forced to say that prayer and sacrifice have a common quality. Otherwise, it makes no sense to mix two separate actions. This quality is man's "approach to God." In these two actions alone, man is either offering something "before God", or man is "addressing God". A dialogue of sorts exists also in sacrifice. Prayer is not the only action possessing a "verbal" character. My friend Rabbi Howard Burstein reminded me of the verse in Hosea (14:3), "...and we shall repay sacrifices [with] our lips." This means that sacrifice is somewhat replaced by verbal prayers. There is a relationship. Perhaps the Men of the Great Assembly who made this institution desired that as Temple sacrifice was no longer, and since sacrifice is essential to man's existence, that we should have some representation of sacrifice. Thus, the timeframe of the sacrifices now guides our prayers. This translates as prayer having sacrifice as its "guide". Prayer is to be guided towards the objective of sacrifice: recognition of God as our Creator. While it is true that we have needs, and prayer addresses them, these needs serve a higher goal: to enable us the life where we may remove our attention from needs, and ponder God and His works. The greatest mitzvah – command – is Torah study. The greatest objective in our lives is to be involved in recognizing new truths. Thus, Rabbi Joshua wished that prayer be not bereft of this ultimate objective. Let us now return to our questions.

THE PATRIARCHS

Why did Abraham not establish all three prayers? Perhaps Abraham's perfection included his idea that prayer, as an institution, should form part of man's day. This is achieved with a single, daily prayer. Abraham made prayer the first part of his day, the morning, as it states, "And Abraham arose in the morning to the place where he stood". This verse teaches that prayer was on his mind as soon as he awoke. Perhaps, it even teaches that Abraham's purpose in awaking was to come close to God, as is expressed with prayer.

Isaac and Jacob were also unique individuals in their own rights. They did not simply follow the God of Abraham because they were taught to do so, but because they both arrived at the truth of God's existence and reign independent of Abraham. This is what the Rabbis mean with their formulation: "The God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob." The Rabbis could have simply written in our opening prayer, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." But they did not, to display that God was the God of "each" of the patriarchs: each patriarch made God his God through their own efforts in their study of reality, and finally realized with their own minds that God is God. And as they came to this realization independently, each one used this independent thought to arrive at new truths. Thus, Isaac saw that afternoon time deserved a prayer, and Jacob saw something about nighttime, which too deserved prayer.

I would suggest that there are in fact only three parts of the day to which man relates: its beginning, its end, and the psychological phenomenon experienced as the day ebbs away into night. Abraham instituted the morning prayer, teaching that man's first thoughts should be those about God. Jacob prayed at night, teaching that again, the last thing on our minds is God. Both Abraham and Jacob demonstrated the central focus God had in their lives, as the first and last

things on our minds are representative of what matters to us most. Why did Isaac pray towards the evening? Perhaps this indicates another phenomena in our psyches. As we turn from our daily activities, we remove our thoughts from the day's sufficient accomplishments. But when we remove our thoughts from one area, to where do we redirect them: to another involvement, or to God? Perhaps Isaac's afternoon prayer teaches that whenever man removes his energies from an area, if he turns back to God, he is living properly. But if he turns from one involvement to another, this means God is not in the back of his mind throughout the day. For Isaac to have prayed in the afternoon, we learn that when he removed his energies from herding for example, his energies went right back to pondering God. There are, therefore, only three main prayers, as there are only three relationships to reality: when man reenters waking life in the morning, when he leaves it just prior to sleep, and when during waking life, man's thoughts turn from one area to another. If man is cognizant of God in all three phases of the day, then man has achieved a certain perfection.

I cannot answer why Abraham or any of the patriarchs did not pray at all three intervals. It may simply be that Abraham did not see the idea that Jacob saw, and therefore did not pray at evening. No one man sees all of God's knowledge. However, as Rabbi Reuven Mann stated, we learn from Maimonides Laws of Kings 1:1, that each succeeding patriarch added to the previous one. Therefore, Isaac prayed twice, and Jacob did in fact pray three times.

We end up with a deep appreciation for the structure of the Talmud. Through patient and an unabashed analysis, we may be fortunate to uncover new ideas in Talmudic thought, Jewish law, Scripture, and Torah philosophy. It is not a study to be sped through with the goal of amassing facts, but of realizing new truths, however few they may be. As Rava said, "The reward [objective] of study is the concepts". Rashi says on this, "One should weary, labor, think, and understand the reasons for a matter." (Talmud Brachos 6b)✿

ANTI-SEMITISM

What generates anti-Semitism? Is it any different than hatred towards any religion and its people? Is it caused by the Jews' poor actions? Or does anti-Semitism exist regardless of how Jews act? Aside from attacking Jews verbally or physically, is it justifiable? If not, how may it be eliminated?

A Rabbi once explained: "When Jacob was strategizing how to escape from the clutches of his approaching twin Eisav, he told Eisav, "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, and the rejecter of Torah values, care if Jacob kept the 613 commandments while he lived with Lavan? Furthermore, it seems this message could only antagonize Eisav.

Chazal (the Rabbis) 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 Jacob 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?

The Rabbi also expounded: "The Talmud (Pesachim 49b) 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."

In both instances the cause is the same: Eisav resented his twin Jacob for the blessings Isaac their father gave to Jacob exclusively. And the Talmud teaches that Gentiles hate the Jew for their reception of the Torah at Sinai. Both Eisav and the Gentiles are resentful of God's favoritism for the Jew. (Jacob's blessing from Isaac were bestowed with God's will.) When the Talmud compares the ignorant Jew's hatred of the Torah scholar exceeds the Gentiles' hatred of the Jews, our idea finds additional support: the ignorant Jew is more aware of the Torah than the Gentile. As such, he senses more accurately what he lacks, and acts out this disdain for his own shortcomings, by hating he that has the good, i.e., the Torah. However, since a gentile is less informed about the Torah truths than a typical Jew, his disdain is on a lesser level.

We come to understand the root of anti-Semitism as jealousy over religion. One, who is anti-Semitic, is so as he is deeply disturbed by his knowledge that he is not favored by God. This is an area where man's emotions are most aroused. Man's primary barometer of self-estimation is tied to what he knows truthfully is the "self", i.e., his values and religious beliefs. It is therefore no surprise that it is religion that is the root of so many wars throughout history.

When other nations are confronted with the indisputable truth of God's Sinaic selection of the Jew as His emissaries to the world, there is a sibling rivalry of sorts. But the Jew is at fault if he boasts this role, while simultaneously abandoning his observance of the Torah. Even the Torah observer too cannot boast that which was bestowed on "Abraham's descendants", and not due to his own merit. Personal merit is not why we are the chosen people. This is a denial of God's own words:

Deuteronomy, 10:15: "Only in your fathers did God desire and did He love them, and He chose their seed after them from all other peoples, as this day."

Jews are selected due to their descent from Abraham, and Abraham was selected based on his absolute, undiluted adherence to truth. All peoples should take a lesson from God's word. God "chooses" only those who adhere to truth, as exemplified by Abraham. One who adheres to truth must come to the realization that "multiple religions" must contradict each other by definition. All must be false - except one. The goal is to arrive at an honest acceptance of what reality determines is the true, God-given religion. But until such a time when religions will embrace truth, in place of the current "defend-at-all-cost" approach, anti-Semitism will be alive and well, seeking opportunities to attack God's chosen, as a means of self justification.

The Rabbi who I quoted earlier taught that Jacob's response to Eisav was for good reason. We might think that telling a wicked Eisav that he has not veered from the Torah has no meaning to him. But in fact, it does. Jacob understood that in order for one to hate the Jew, he must have justifiable cause to vent his aggression. The cause in Jacob's case would be Jacob's abandonment of the monotheistic system received from Isaac, and learned on his own. Only in this case would Eisav feel justified in killing Jacob. The Rabbi said:

“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."

With no fault, Eisav could not harm Jacob. For this reason, Jacob told Eisav that he did not veer from the Torah. A person requires justification for all his actions, unconditionally. The Rabbi also quoted the Koran, where it penalizes the Jew for veering from his laws, and thus, deserving of attack by the Koran. We see the same principle at work.

In contrast, when the Jews uphold God's Torah, they are admired, as the Torah says:

"And you shall watch them and keep them as they (the commands) are your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these statutes and declare 'what a wise and understanding people is this great nation. Because what great nation has God close to them like God, whenever (they) call to Him? And what great nation has statutes and laws as righteous as this entire Torah'..." (Deuteronomy 4:6-8)

One example of when this took place, was during King Solomon's reign, when Queen Sheba came to hear his wisdom, bringing his lavish gifts:

Kings I, 10:1-10: "And Queen Sheba heard the tidings of Solomon in the name of God, and she came to test him with riddles. And she came to Jerusalem with an exceedingly great entourage, camels carrying spices, and very much gold, and fine stones, and she came to Solomon and spoke to him, all that she had on her heart. And Solomon told her all her words, there was no matter hidden from the king that he did not tell (respond) to her. And Queen Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon, and the house (Temple) that he built. And the food of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the standing of his officers, and their clothing and their drinks, and his sacrifices that he brought up to the house of God, and she had no spirit left in her. And she said to the king, "The matter that I heard in my land was true regarding your matters and your wisdom. And I did not believe the matters until I came, and my eyes saw, and not even half the matter was told to me, there is more wisdom and good than the matter I heard. It should be that God is blessed, in that he desired you, to place you onto the throne of Israel in God's eternal love for Israel, and He has placed you as king to do justice and righteousness." And she gave to the king 120 kikal of gold, and very much spices, and fine stones, there never came again the quantity of spices that Queen Sheba gave to King Solomon."

Queen Sheba – who our Rabbis describe as a greatly intelligent person – received answers to every one of her riddles. The verse says she "heard the tidings of Solomon in the name of God". This means her inquiries were about true, deep wisdom, God's knowledge. She was so impressed by King Solomon's wisdom that she said "It should be that God is blessed." What is significant is that her response was praise for God. She did not come to King Solomon with any agenda to find fault with him, supporting her culture. Queen Sheba, who searched for truth and found it in abundance in King Solomon, was awed by the Creator – not anti-Semitic towards His chosen ones.

Anti-Semitism can be dealt with. If Jews study Torah and live in accord with the perfect ideas created by God, other nations will have an opportunity to see God's wisdom. This is our obligation. And when the nations are afforded knowledge of God's Torah through contact with

learned Jews, they will see a different life. They will be imbued with the perfection of Judaism, and will desire to learn more. They will appreciate the wisdom God desires all mankind to possess. The nations will no longer focus on “people”, or Jews, but they will focus on God. This is exactly what happened with Queen Sheba. She came to King Solomon to verify his knowledge, and she ended with a love for God’s wisdom, displayed in the king’s answers. Her unmatched gifts prove her sincerity. As any scientist is awed by the cosmos, any person will be awed by the wisdom that is encapsulated in the Torah. But if as Jews, we do not study, and perform the Torah’s laws, by what means will other nations have a chance at seeing Torah wisdom? By what means will other nations realize the true distinction of the Jew, and abandon anti-Semitism?

Jews continue to act with an ignorant, destructive, and disgusting arrogance, instead of a learned concern for other nations. This is seen in Yeshivas who scorn Gentiles with the term “Goy”, with overly religious parents who won’t allow their children to marry converts, and with Jews in general who feel “above” others. Wake up. Didn’t God create the Gentile nations as well? Doesn’t He desire their perfection too?

Jews are not making an effort to conclude whether Judaism is truth, whether Sinai actually proves God’s existence, and His will that we adhere to the Torah. This is laziness, and it is self-destructive. Would you be astonished to know that the greatest minds found Sinai as a clear proof of God’s existence? Perhaps you are afraid of the obligations that follow such a realization. How can a person ignore the fact that he or she is “created”, and there must be a Creator? How can one ignore clear proof that God exists, gave us a Torah, and that it is for our good, and is the most pleasurable life?

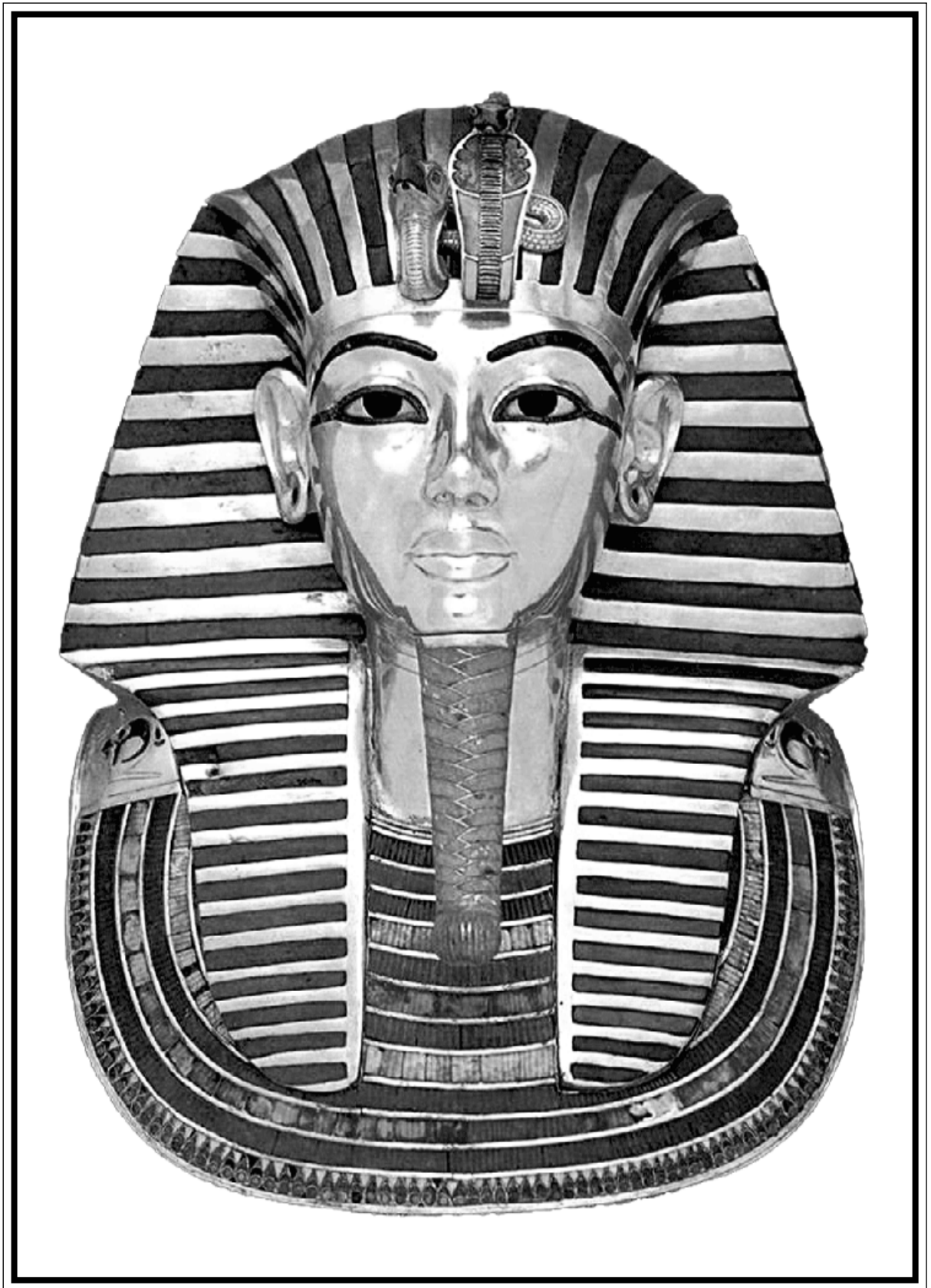
Jews attempt to assimilate to a lifestyle not desired by God. Inter-marriage and adoption of alien, cultural habits are the primary symptoms of a Jew’s corruption. Torah was given to oppose alien lifestyles, and Jews do just the opposite, they gravitate to heathen practices, and anti-Semitic peoples. Jews wish to gain approval in the eyes of those who did not receive the Torah. It is sadly backwards. The Jew is to be a teacher, not a student.

Ironically, the very abandoning of our concern for approval by other nations, and rather, adhering to our heritage, displaying God’s truth and knowledge through performing His commands, is the very solution to the anti-Semitic problem. Studying and applying Judaism, the only true religion, (plagiarized by others) not only instills truths and appreciation for reality in our minds, but in the hearts and minds of every other nation.

Placating other nations with foolish tactics of freeing homicide bombers, curtailing revenge on murders, and talking peace with assassins and butchers, is the problem, not the solution. These decisions are not the result of studying God’s wisdom, but are gravely, ignorant errors, and therefore will continue to fail.

God knows what creates peace. He commanded us in the Torah for our own good, and for the good of all peoples. Follow God’s absolute, true ideas, not man’s invented politics.

Anti-Semitism will end when the nations see the beauty in God’s Torah. Until then, Jews show them nothing but desperation, and a people who abandoned their God. As Jacob taught us, this justifies their attacks.♣



Part II

EGYPT

the SHIMA

I thank my friend Yaakove for learning with me. Our daily studies produced many interesting insights in the Shima and its blessings.

We are commanded to recite the Shima and its blessings twice daily. Thus, they must contain concepts indispensable to our daily thoughts, and by that token, our very existence. Unfortunately, many commands, when repeatedly performed, carry the danger of becoming rote activities. This loss is compounded if we rush through our prayers, rendering them into a burden, which the Talmud teaches is not a sincere supplication to God. If we would stop for a moment and recognize the opportunity afforded us by these prayers, we would take our time, and even look forward to their recital.

In general, we look to prayer as an opportunity to formulate our requests before God, with the true conviction that He responds. By thinking into our lives, we can construct a plan with the goal of our perfection as outlined in the Torah, presenting this plan to God in our requests, even adding our own words. God will most assuredly assist us in such a plan, as is derived from His providence over the patriarchs and matriarchs.

Prayer offers man this great opportunity where the Creator of the universe responds to our needs. When God responds positively, we learn that our requests are in line with His Torah. And conversely, when our requests go unanswered, we learn that our requests do not form part of God's plan, or perhaps, not yet. We are thereby forced to reflect on our wants and needs (our values) studying them carefully, and detecting our deviation from God. In this case, God's silence is a great blessing. For we learn through such silence that we are corrupt in one area or more. We are then driven to realign ourselves with God's Torah system – that which is for our ultimate good. The Hebrew word for prayer is "Tefilah", which means to "judge", as in judging our values. Thereby, prayer perfects our values. From this opportunity, to request our needs and then judge our values according to the response, we are directed to the second and more primary focus of our daily blessings and prayers: God's knowledge.

Aside from moral and ethical perfection, man partakes of the world of intelligence. Knowledge of God's truths is not only the driving force behind the aforementioned perfections, but a world unto itself. Although man lives in societies, his knowledge of the good, and of all truths, need not be exercised in action, for man to appreciate the Source of this knowledge. This in no way means that we are absolved from Torah obligations. Such an idea denies God's commands. Maimonides taught that the commands are to preoccupy ourselves when we are not engaged in the highest pursuit: Torah study.

The Shima and its blessings are not requests, but formulations of central Torah concepts. It is true, these very ideas teach us most important truths, and guide us in both spheres: concepts and moral behavior. But as the Shima contains no requests, they act to inculcate truths. It is these truths discussed in Talmud Brachos (11a – 12b) that I would like to highlight.

THE SHIMA YISRAEL

The Shima Yisrael must be recited twice daily, as it is written:

“Listen Israel, God is our God, God is one. And you shall love your God, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your possessions. And it will be that these words which I command you today shall be upon your hearts, and you shall teach them to your sons, and you shall speak them when you sit in your house, and when you go on your way, when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your arm, and they shall be Tefillin between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and your gates.” (Deut. 6:4-9)

We learn that the Shima is actually a reference to the entire corpus of Torah, as this command to recite “these words” refers to that which is “commanded”, i.e., the commandments. If so, how does the imperative to recite “them” when we lie down and rise, refer to the Shima? The answer must be this: the Torah’s commands to recite “them”, means that the Shima recital fulfills the obligation to discuss the commands. We learn that the Shima contains central Torah themes.

The Talmud states that originally, the Ten Commandments formed part of the morning prayers. But according to Rashi, due to the slandering of the idolatrous nations, rumoring that all that exists are the Ten Commands, the Rabbis on at least four occasions denied many communities the right to include the Ten Commandments. They feared the Jews would fall prey to the distorted counsel of those nations, assuming no more than the Ten Commands were uttered by God.

Rabbi Simone and Rabbi Levi disputed the reason for reading the Shima. Is it recited because it contains the reference of lying down and rising, or because it contains references to the Ten Commandments? What is their disagreement?

INTERNAL VS EXTERNAL WORLDS

The Talmud teaches, one should relieve himself at night, as he does during the day. The book of Joshua also teaches, “This book of the Torah shall not be removed from your mouth, and you shall engage it day and night, in order that you shall guard to do as all that is written in it, for then your way will be successful, and then will you understand.” (Joshua, 1:8) The Shima as well says we must recite it when lying down and rising. What concept do all of these cases point to?

Regarding man relieving himself, we learn that man has an inclination to be less modest at night, thus, relieving himself in a less modest fashion. Joshua’s command also addresses the night, as does the Shima. In all of these cases, we learn that man tends to act at nighttime, in a different manner than he does during the day. Nighttime carries with it darkness, something which effects man’s mood. He feels less stress as the workday is over: it’s relaxation time. He also feels more isolated, not in a negative sense, but in a sense of being “alone”. Thus, we are warned by the Talmud that modesty has nothing to do with who is watching, but with one’s perfection. One must not be less modest at night, for this means his modesty is not true modesty – he is in fact only fearful of onlookers – not of adhering to Torah modesty. One who is truly modest is this way at all times, as it is an expression of his inner values. As far as relaxing goes, Joshua teaches that one should not satisfy the desire to remove himself from his Torah obligations at night, due to an emotion of relaxation. This does not mean man does not require relaxing, but that night should not be man’s excuse not to learn. In fact, Maimonides teaches that one who wishes to earn the “Crown of Torah” (become truly wise) will not forfeit any of his evenings in sleep. The Talmud also

teaches that any house in which the sound of Torah is not heard at night, will be destroyed. Joshua said, "...for then your way will be successful, and then will you understand." This means that if someone looks to a certain time frame as "recreation time", it reflects his true value not to engage in Torah study. If one earnestly toils in his study, he will find it quite enjoyable. He will not look for other pleasures. His free time will be spent in study. Only then will he become wise, as all of his energies are absorbed by study. One can truly come to a stage where he anticipates learning as an adventure: he excitedly awaits what new ideas he will discover today!

We may answer one side, that the Shema is recited due to its mention of lying down and rising. It reminds us of our much-needed perfection, to align our emotions with the Torah prescription not to seek fantasy and pleasures, when those emotions are aroused in the evenings. Therefore, this side of the argument suggests that the Shema is recited for the purpose of correcting man's "internal world."

How may we explain the Rabbi who says that the Shema is recited because it refers to the Ten Commandments? I believe his view is that we must reiterate and be mindful of the Torah system - as a whole. According to Saadia Gaon, the Ten Commandments are the head categories for the remaining 603 commands. As such, the Shema, which refers to the Ten, in fact, makes us mindful each day of the entire body of Torah. This Rabbi understands the Shema as addressing man's need to be cognizant of the entire Torah system on a daily basis. Man must recognize the "external world" of wisdom. According to this Rabbi, the Shema is not so much to correct his emotional weaknesses and digressions, as it is to remind him of a complete Torah system. Accordingly, it is insufficient that man performs only those commands required each day, even if he learns all day, while not acknowledging the greater, complete Torah system. So the argument may be defined as whether Shema addresses our "internal world", perfecting our values, or the "external world" reminding us of a complete system of wisdom.

But I wonder, according to this latter view, why must we be Torah-cognizant to such a degree? What do we lack by not recognizing the system of Torah as a whole, each day? It would appear that by viewing the daily commands as isolated from the rest of the Torah, and certainly, by not acknowledging Judaism's tenets daily, such individual performances will be compromised. But in what manner?

Maimonides outlines certain fundamentals in his 13 Principles, which perhaps shed some light on this question.

PRINCIPLE VIII. THAT THE TORAH IS FROM HEAVEN

"...And on this our sages of blessed memory said, "he who believes that the Torah is from heaven, except this verse, that God did not say it, but rather Moshe himself did [he is a denier of all the Torah]."

PRINCIPLE IX. THE COMPLETENESS OF THE TORAH

"And this is that the Torah is from God and is not lacking. That to it you cannot add or take away from - not from the Written Torah or from the Oral Torah. As it says "Do not add to it and do not take away from it."

Perhaps we learn from here, that to obtain a true appreciation of each command, we must be

cognizant of its place in the complete, Torah system. To lack conviction in a part of the Torah being divine, one denies the entire Torah. Exactitude is demanded in this area. Similarly, if one does not realize that individual laws form part of a greater whole, he too errs, although his error is nowhere as grave.

What is the loss if we do not realize that specific laws form part of the whole? One commonly found corruption are those individuals who are vigilant in a few commands, forfeiting the perfection that can only come through fulfillment of the whole Torah system. These individuals may go so far as to assume a singular command is some kind of panacea – a command or a non-commanded practice takes on a life of its own. An example would be Tehillim groups, who believe that by their recital, some good comes to others. The group recites Tehillim diligently, however, the Torah demands a different approach: those in need must reflect, repent, pray to God, and give charity. Isolating singular activities, and certainly new practices not commanded by the Torah, carries with it such a danger: one forfeits the philosophy of Torah, only afforded by accepting and being mindful of all the commands, and only that which is commanded. And even if one were to perform something actually commanded, with the thought that it affords some good of its own, this in no way improves the situation. Commands are indispensable, but not an end unto themselves. The Torah prescription is to follow God, not commands, and follow His entire word, not creating new activities, or favor one command over the other. For this reason, the Torah does not disclose the rewards of the commands. We must be vigilant in each one, as this is truly the way to follow God, and not our emotions.

This flaw is generated out of man's nature to attach himself to particulars, for this is how the emotions operate. We notice in general that people get excited about "specific things", like cars, homes, clothing, etc. Emotions latch onto individual objects. Surprisingly, this emotional flaw also extends to the commands, and must be corrected. The Talmud states that when a command comes to your hand, you may not pass it up, even for the sake of an even greater command. There is one condition that would allow one to pass up a lesser command: when another person is available to perform the lesser command. In this case, one may wait for the greater command. How do we reckon this with our view? The answer is that in the latter case, one does not discount the entire Torah system. He admits to all of the commands. However, when one dismisses other commands, he has erred.

This idea, that we must be mindful of the entire system of Torah, is the very concern expressed by the Rabbis who prohibited the Ten Commandments from being continued in the morning service. The idolaters wished to impose their view that Torah is simply the Ten Commandments, and nothing more. Conversely, the Shima's recital counters this problem, by calling to mind the entire system of Torah. Perhaps for this very reason, we are informed of the idolater's mischief in this same section of the Talmud: it contributes to the primary focus of the Shima.

It is interesting that unlike the Shima, which is a Torah law, the blessings of the Shima are based on the words of King David, "Seven by day I have praised You for Your righteous statutes." (Psalms, 119:164) The Talmud teaches that this verse obligates us to recite the seven blessings over the Shima. King David teaches that it is insufficient to simply "respond", and merely fulfill the commands. King David formulates an additional obligation that we praise God for giving us the Torah's statutes. Man must feel a great sense of appreciation for God, as He bestowed upon us such a kindness, in designing and granting mankind a means for appreciating His existence, where we may learn wonderful truths that perfect us. It is befitting that praising God for the system received

by man, is based on a man's (King David) appreciation. The very philosophy of this command is embodied in its source.

King David teaches that one fulfills "praising God for His righteous statutes" by reciting blessings over the Shema. We thereby learn that the Shema satisfies the role of "His righteous statutes". The Shema, then, is a concentrated formulation of the Torah's primary statutes and philosophies.

In addition to commands, the Shema includes the fundamentals of God's existence, His unity, the Exodus, and Reward and Punishment, seen in the promises of agricultural prosperity and drought - for our Torah adherence and idolatrous offenses, respectively. So vital are these ideas, we are also commanded in the Shema to post its words on our doorposts as Mezuzas, and to wear them as Tefillin. Tzitzis are also included as its own paragraph in the Shema, as it states therein, "and you will see them (Tzitzis) and you shall remember all the commands of God, and you shall do them, and you shall not go astray after your hearts and after your eyes..." Tzitzis too points to the entire body of Torah.

The Rabbis teach, he who wears Tzitzis, dons Tefillin and posts Mezuzas, will not sin. Why is this? It is due to what these three items address: man's securities. Tzitzis reminds one that his garb improves him in no way, despite society's glorified fashions. One's body cannot shield him from God's punishments, as Tefillin remind him, as they are worn on the body. And Mezuzah belittles our greatest feeling of security: the home. In all three areas, body, clothing, and home, man is reminded not to project his baseless feelings of security, but to be mindful of God's ultimate security stated in the Shema and contained in the Mezuzah and Tefillin.

But how do these items prevent sin? Sin is generated from egotistical emotions. The person feels he is far more correct than God's commands, and therefore feels secure enough to violate them. What attacks such a disease is man's recognition of God's security. Man is now faced with the realization that God ultimately defines his fate. With this knowledge, man will not sin.

Tangentially, why may the form of Tzitzis - strings - be the appropriate method of "remembering"? Perhaps their hair-like design, which moves when we walk, catches our attention. Something rigid does not stand out, and we pass it by. But for something to alert us, it must be distinguished, and the Tzitzis' motion is distinguished from our rigid body. A woman's hair is also the one feature, which catches a man's eye due to its motion. Therefore, this is the precise feature that women are commanded to conceal, demonstrating that gaining attention from others after marriage is not appropriate, or modest behavior.

THE SHEMA'S BLESSINGS

For what exactly do we praise God with these seven blessings?

CREATION

The first blessing praises God for His creation. We describe His constant guidance over the luminaries, and describe both day and night, in both our morning and evening Shema blessings. The Talmud states this is done so no one would erroneously assume that God controls only one half of the day, as was assumed by idolatrous peoples who had both, sun and moon gods. Praising God in both parts of the day, for both aspects of the day, prevents this error. Also, in both evening

and morning prayers, we refer to God as “King”. This teaches us that even prior to man’s creation, God’s role is the One King. “King” is thereby defined as Creator, and this role does not rely on man’s proclamation of His greatness. Man was created after the luminaries and stars, and in our blessings of the luminaries we refer to God as King, teaching that God’s Kingship is independent of God’s reign over mankind. Without man, God is still King. This makes sense. For a human king has conditional kingship: if his subjects abandon him, he loses his role. Not so with regard to God. His Kingship is unconditional, based on His role as Creator. He who grants man’s very existence is the ultimate King. But he whose kingship is limited to ruling others, and did not create his subjects, is a far lesser king by comparison.

“Creator” is the most defining role of God. It is for this reason that we commence with this praise.

But God did not only create the physical world, He also created that which is not physical, which includes angels. These angels are intelligences that praise God, as stated in our blessings. To omit part of God’s creation in our praises would be a grave error. When praising God, the praise must be as complete as humanly possible. Now if this was so, why don’t we simply refer to angels, and nothing more? But we do find much more discussed, such as the angels’ praising God. Why is this included? We may also ask why there is no reference to the angels in our evening blessings.

I would suggest that angels praising” God teaches an important lesson: even the greatest of all creations, and those which partake of the greatest realization (intelligence) of God, are completely involved in one thing: realizing God’s greatness, and praising Him. In contrast to us mortals, we should be humbled that if those greater intelligences recognize God, so too must we.

Another important feature of this first blessing is that these angels are occupied with a specific praise: God is unknowable. The angels recite “Holy, Holy, Holy, God of hosts, the entire universe is filled with His honor”, and “Blessed is God from His place”. “Holy” is better translated as “distinct” as in “distinct from what the angels know”. In other words, the angels witness creation (“the entire universe is filled with His honor”) and praise God, simultaneously admitting that they are completely ignorant of what God is. Other angels then say, “God is blessed from His place”, declaring His unknowable nature.

Also stated in this praise is, “they all accept the yoke of Heaven (God’s greatness) from each other”. What does this mean? I believe it teaches that although not commanded in Torah, of their own accord, the angels are completely preoccupied in praising God. This embellishes the concept we stated, that the greatest created intelligences see God as their sole focus. Recognizing and praising God is the ultimate purpose of all creation. Perhaps, the fact that our blessing records the angels blessing God on two occasions, teaches that this is not a one-time activity, but the entire existence of all angles is unanimously and eternally involved in, and awed by, God’s creation.

How may we answer our last question, why there is no reference to the angels in our evening blessings? If we are careful with our analysis, we will find the answer. What is the distinction between creation, stated in the morning Shema blessing, versus the evening? The morning blessing alone refers to creation, as that which God “made”, or “formed”. In contrast, the evening does not mention these words. Instead, it describes God as “changing” the times (of day), “arranging” the stars, and that He “brings” day and night. The distinction is clear: the morning blessing discusses God’s creation of “objects”, while the evening blessing describes the “behavior”, or rather, the “laws” of creation. We thereby learn that God created two creations: 1) existences, and 2) properties. Therefore, when describing the existences, angels are included, as they form part of the creation. However, as we know nothing of “how” angels exist, or what they are, we cannot include them in the

evening blessing, as this blessing describes what man may know about creations' "behavior." Compare Genesis chapter I to Genesis chapter II, and you will discover this very same distinction.

LOVE: GOD FOR MAN / MAN FOR GOD

The next blessing refers to man - another aspect of creation. In this blessing, we do not simply refer to man as a creation, but to his purpose: Torah study and love of God. God desired our good, displayed through His love, by His favoring of the patriarchs, and His gift of the Torah system to Israel. We ask God to imbue us with a love of Torah, and to teach us. And in the evening we again make mention of our previously stated idea, that Torah study must be embraced in all parts of the day: nighttime and daytime. This is properly mentioned in the nighttime blessing, for as we said, it is the night, which carries the danger of man's emotions overcoming him.

This blessing of God's love for us by giving us the Torah, and our love for Him and Torah, immediately precedes the Shima's recital, as the Shima refers to the Torah's tenets. This blessing is an introduction to Shima.

REDEMPTION: PAST CONVICTION & FUTURE TRUST

The next blessing comes after the Shima, and is referred to as "Geula", or redemption. We describe God's Exodus, the destruction of Egypt and their firstborns, the parting of the Red Sea, and the triumph at its shores where the Jews unanimously proclaimed God's great, unmatched salvation. God is our one and only Savior. In the evening version, we add our request that he saves us regularly and the future. We thereby demonstrate our conviction in God's past salvation, and trust in His future redemption. (Rashi and Tosfos, Brachos 12a) This is based on another verse, "To speak of His kindness in the mornings, and His trust at night." (Psalms, 92:3) The Hashkivenu blessing continues this theme.

The Talmud states that anyone who does not mention these two versions of the Geula, does not fulfill his requirement of the Shima blessings. Why is this statement reserved for the Geula blessings alone? Perhaps, it is "conviction in God" that demonstrates man's perfection, where man lives in accord with Torah truths. This is the ultimate goal for man, and without express conviction, man falls short of his perfection, and does not fulfill his Shima blessings.

SUMMARY

We conclude, that these blessings are initially generated out of King David's intense appreciation for the Torah, as is embodied in the Shima. It is this receipt of Torah and our appreciation that demands our additional praises. God created man with the ability to arrive at true knowledge through Torah. This demands our praise. These praises center on praising God in the best possible way: creation is the ultimate expression of God's greatness, including luminaries, angels and mankind. We enunciate the great gift of Torah and God's love for us, and our love for God as our purpose. We then culminate in describing our praise for His Egyptian salvation, and our complete trust in His continued providence over Israel. Not only is Torah what we praise God for, but it is only through Torah, that we merit His salvation, and let it be soon, when the Torah will be fulfilled completely.✿

the Ten PLAGUES

Exodus, 8:12, Ibn Ezra directs our attention to the performers of the Ten Plagues: “Know, that by the hand of Aaron were the first three plagues and these signs were in the lower matter as I explained earlier, because two (of them) were in water, and the third was in the dust of the earth. And the plagues performed by Moses with the staff were in the higher elements, just as his (Moses) status was higher than Aaron’s status. For example, the plague of hail and locusts were brought by the wind, and (so too) the darkness, it was in the air; also the plague of boils was through him (Moses). Only three (plagues) were without the staff; the wild animals, the disease of the animals, and the death of the firstborns. And one (plague) with no staff was through Moses, with a little connection with Aaron, and it was the plague of boils.”

Ibn Ezra focuses our attention on his first word, “Know”, which urges the reader to think into this specific commentary. He intimates that there is more here than meets the eye. He does not simply list each plague with its performer, or describe the involvement of the staff. We are not interested in dry statistics when studying God’s wisdom. Here, Ibn Ezra is teaching important principles. Beginning with the word “Know”, Ibn Ezra is teaching an important lesson.

Each of the Ten Plagues was used as a tool to teach Egypt and the world the following: 1) Aaron and Moses were each assigned specific plagues, in the lower and higher realms respectively, and they performed a similar number of plagues independently, 2) The staff was present in only certain miracles, 3) Moses joined with Aaron in a single plague of boils, 4) God distinguished between Egypt and the Jews through two plagues, in which no staff was used, and which was placed in the center of the series of plagues.

In his Laws of Idolatry, 1:1, Maimonides teaches that early man already began projecting greatness onto the heavenly bodies. Man thought, since the planets, stars and spheres minister before God, they too are worthy of man’s honor. Eventually, man’s sin increased as he replaced simple honor of stars with his worship of them as deities, until God was no longer recognized. Star worship reveals man’s false estimation that the heavens deserve to be worshiped. Man feared not only the spheres, but also the heavens. Jeremiah 10:2-3 reads, “So says God, “To the ways of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of the heavens do not fear, because from them the nations fear. Because the statutes of the peoples are false, because a tree from the forest they cut, fashioned by an artisan with an adze.” Jeremiah teaches that man did in fact fear the heavens. But their fear stemmed from a false projection - not based in reality. Jeremiah’s lesson is insightful: he equates the fear of heavens with the idolatrous practice of prostrating to wooden idols. He wished to teach that the heavens do not hold any greater powers than wooden sculptures. Man’s idolatrous emotions project the same imagined authority onto both, the heaven and the trees.

The primitive view of the heavens determining man’s fate, was not alien to the Egyptians. God corrected this error with one aspect of His plagues. Commanding Aaron to perform the plagues limited to the earthly realm, and for Moses to perform those of the “higher”, heavenly realm, God discounted the dangerous esteem man held towards the heavens. God showed that the only

difference between the heavens and Earth is the level of understanding required to comprehend their natures, as the wiser man - Moses - addressed the heavenly plagues, and Aaron addressed the earthly plagues. Laws controlled both realms, and both could be understood. Understanding a phenomenon removes one's false, mystical estimations. Realizing they are 'guided' means they are subordinate to something greater. These realms did not "control", but were "controlled", teaching the Egyptians that their views were false. The Egyptians erred by assuming that the heavens were a governing and mystical realm. Earth, to Egypt, was not divine. God corrected this disproportionately high, heavenly grandeur. God did so in two ways: 1) by showing the heavens' subordination to a Higher will, God demoted heaven's status from the divine to the mundane, and, 2) by aligning the plagues with Moses' and Aaron's participation, Egypt would understand that not only are the heavens not divine, but they are in equal realms, just as Moses and Aaron are of somewhat equal status. Additionally, Moses and Aaron each performed three miracles independently to equate heaven and earth, dispelling a false supremacy of heaven and meteorological phenomena. Hopefully, the Egyptians would comprehend that both heaven and Earth are equally under God's control, and that neither one is significantly greater. Egypt would then realize that Something higher was responsible for all creation. God wanted the good for the Egyptians. The 'good' means knowledge of what is true. As it says in the Torah (Exod. 9:16) with regards to these plagues, "...in order that they tell of My name in the whole world."

Interestingly, the three plagues designed in the heavens were hail, locusts and darkness. Why these three? Perhaps to address three errors of the Egyptians. Egypt assumed meteorological phenomena to be divine, so God responded with a hail/fire plague to display His exclusive control in this area. Wind was also a heavenly phenomena, but now they experienced an unnatural wind blowing the entire day, the entire night, until the next morning when it delivered the terror of locusts destroying all vegetation remaining of the hail's previous destruction (Exod 10:13). Finally, with the plague of darkness, God displayed control over the primary focus in heaven - the sun. Weather, the atmosphere and outer space were all shown as false deities and under the exclusive control of Israel's God. Additionally, the plague of "darkness" had one other facet - it was palpable, perhaps to show that it was not a simple solar eclipse.

Ibn Ezra also made specific note of two plagues where no staff was used. These two also included the lesson of national distinction: Exod. 8:18, "And I will distinguish on that day the land of Goshen that My people stand on it, to prevent from being there the wild beasts..." Exod. 9:4, "And God will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nothing will die of the Israelites." Why were both of these plagues designed to distinguish Egypt from Israel? I believe the answer is that by designing not just one plague - which could be viewed as a freak incident, but two plagues which differentiated "Egyptians" and "Jews" - the goal was to teach that God works differently than Egypt's view of the 'divine'. The Egyptians thought that to please their gods was man's correct obligation, and precisely how gods operated - a natural outgrowth of a child/parent relationship. How would such an infantile idea be corrected in order to teach God's true system? By Egypt witnessing punitive measures only on their 'side of the river', they were awakened to a new idea: objective morality. They were held accountable. They also realized something even more essential: their relationship to their gods was one where their gods benefited from man's actions. Egypt felt that their gods need man to serve their needs, which were projections of man's own needs. But Judaism teaches that relating to God is not for God, but really only for man. God does not need man. Man must do that which is proper for

himself, and if he does not, he will not only be punished, but he will lose the true good for himself. The Egyptian's exclusive receipt of these two plagues - a system of "reward and punishment" - awoke them to a realization that service of God means not catering to a god's needs, but rather, an alignment with proper ideals and morality. This is a drastic difference from Egypt's primitive notion of worship.

Simultaneously, these two plagues attacked the very core of Egyptian gods; animals. Their own animals died, and then, wild animals attacked them. It was a devastating blow to their esteemed deities. Their deification of animal gods was destroyed. Pharaoh's response (Exod. 8:21), "sacrifice to your God" confirms his lowered estimation of animals, to the point that he encourages Moses to slaughter them, and to do so to his God. In other cases, Pharaoh does gesture to free the Jews, but only here in connection with the animal plagues does Pharaoh say "sacrifice to your God." I believe the Torah includes these words of Pharaoh to inform us that the plague had the desired effect on Pharaoh. God understands what will affect man, and so it does. The Egyptians were all the more confused when they saw that Israel was not affected, even though they did not serve animals. In Exod. 9:7, Pharaoh himself sends messengers to see if Israel was harmed. This plague of the animal's death concerned him greatly.

Why were these two animal plagues bereft of the staff? Perhaps the staff carried with it some element of cause and effect; man would hit something, and only then would the plague commence. Perhaps, God wished to teach that He is in no way bound by the physical. A plague may occur with no prior cause. Removing the staff might effectively teach this lesson, as nothing was smitten to bring on the plague.

I heard another explanation for the use of the staff: Although God did not need it (He needs nothing) for Moses and Aaron to initiate the plagues, its presence was to remove any divinity projected by Egypt onto Moses and Aaron, lest onlookers falsely believe these two mortals possessed some powers. By seeing the staff incorporated into the miracles, Moses' and Aaron's significance was diluted in Egypt's eyes. But wouldn't people then believe the staff to have those powers? I believe for fear of this erroneous notion, God created a miracle where the staff itself turned into a snake. This was to show that it too was under the control of God.

Why did the plague of boils require Moses and Aaron to work together? My friend Jessie made a sharp observation. She said that just as Moses and Aaron addressed both the higher and lower forms of matter in their respective plagues, the plague of boils executed by both Moses and Aaron included the higher and lower matter - ashes are from Earth, and they were commanded to be thrown towards the heavens (Exod. 9:8). Her parallel revealed another facet of the boils, as God's plagues contain many strata of insights. I believe the boils' combination of realms was to teach that heaven and Earth do not operate in two separate, encapsulated systems. The very act of throwing ashes towards the heavens teaches that both Earth and heaven work together. This was a necessary lesson in the reduction of the heavens' exaggerated status. By showing this further idea that the heavens participate in earthly phenomena, the heavens' false, divine status was stripped that much further. Just as his subjects will view a king who spends time with commoners in a less regal light, so too the heavens now lost their reputation by participating in Earthly matters. Moses could have collected the ashes himself, but by working with Aaron, together, they underlined this point.

One question remains: Why are the two animal-related plagues placed in the middle of the series of the Ten Plagues?♣

a Mountain ABLAZE

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 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 at some essential feature of the Sinaic 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 breathe 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 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 your life”, meaning, an error in connection with what God is, is the greatest error, and one’s life loses its 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. ♣

Death of the FIRSTBORNS

Immediately prior to Moses’ descent to Egypt to address Pharaoh for the first time, we read the following: “And Moses took his wife and his sons and rode them on the donkey and returned towards the land of Egypt, and Moses took the staff of God in his hand. And God said to Moses, ‘When you go to return to Egypt, see all the wonders that I have placed in your hand and do them before Pharaoh, and I will harden his heart and he will not send the people’. And you will say to Pharaoh, ‘So says God, ‘Israel is My firstborn’. And I say to you, ‘send My people and they

will serve Me, and if you refuse to send, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons.’” (Exod. 4:20-23)

We wonder what God’s message is here, “Israel is My firstborn”. What does this mean, and what is the objective in Moses telling this to Pharaoh? Another central question is why God saw it necessary to plague the Egyptians by killing their firstborns. What is the reason for this plague? It is difficult to understand this seemingly “tit for tat” response: since the Egyptians abused the Jews (God’s “firstborn”) so God kills ‘their’ firstborns? It smacks if an incomprehensible sense of justice. For God’s firstborn Jews, are only “firstborns” in a metaphoric sense, while God is attacking the very real firstborns of the Egyptians.

What is also interesting is that there is no mention here of the intervening nine plagues. In this warning, God outlines His response to Pharaoh’s refusal, with the Plague of Firstborns – jumping to the last plague with no mention of all He planned to do prior to that final blow. Why then is the Plague of the Firstborns the only plague mentioned here, if God was going to also plague Egypt with nine others? To compound this question, we notice the Torah’s prescribed response to our sons, that we only mention this Plague of Firstborns: “And it will be when your son asks you tomorrow saying, ‘What is this?’ and you shall say to him, ‘With a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery...And it was when Pharaoh hardened his heart from sending us, that God killed the firstborns of the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man until the firstborn of beast, therefore, I sacrifice to God all male firstborn [animals], and all firstborn sons I redeem’. And it shall be a sign on your hand and frontlets between your eyes that with a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt.” (Exod. 13:14-16)

It is clear that there is a special significance of the Plague of Firstborns: this plague alone is included in our address to our children. Additionally, of the Tefillin’s four sections, two sections deal with the firstborn. The significance of firstborns is also evident in the Torah command of redeeming our firstborn sons. So we see that this is a theme in Torah, and not a one-time occurrence.

We also wonder at the reason why God killed not only the firstborn humans, but also the animals. (ibid, 11:5, 12:12) We must note that in this latter verse 12:12, God includes therein that He will not only kill the firstborns from man to beast, but also the Egyptian gods: “And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will smite all firstborns in the land of Egypt – from man to beast – and in all the gods of Egypt I will do justice, I am God.”

What is the connection between killing firstborns and God’s act of defaming the god’s of Egypt (the idols) that God joins these two themes in one single verse?

IBN EZRA: WRONG PRIORITIZATION

Ibn Ezra states: “The reason behind ‘My firstborn son’- this is the nation which their forefathers served Me in the beginning, and I have mercy on them, as a father has mercy over his son who serves him. And you (Egypt) desire to take them as eternal slaves?! Therefore, I will kill your firstborn sons.” (Exod. 4:22) Ibn Ezra points to the core issue: the Egyptians did not recognize the Jews as observing the proper life for man. This is expressed in their enslavement of this people. Ibn Ezra is elaborating on God’s sentiment that He will kill the firstborns. For some just reason, God must kill the Egyptian firstborns as the correct response. But what is correct about this response? As we mentioned, it seems tit for tat, with no apparent relationship between a metaphoric firstborn Jewish nation, and the real, Egyptian firstborn sons. What is correlative

between a metaphor and a reality? But in fact, God does go so far as to engage the very institution of firstborns, recognized by the Egyptians. Let me explain.

To threaten anyone, the object of a threat must target something of value. To “threaten”, means to make one feel he will lose something valued. God is thereby teaching us that the Egyptians cared quite much for their firstborns. But why did they? Is there anything in the Torah’s verses, which may teach us about this value placed on their firstborns?

We notice that God did not only threaten the human sons, but God also said He will kill firstborn animals. We also noticed, this was stated in a single Torah verse together with God’s plan to destroy the Egyptian idols. There must be a relationship between firstborn sons, firstborn animals, and idolatry. What is it?

FIRSTBORN’S PREEMINENCE: EGYPT’S IDOLATRY

I believe this flaw of the Egyptian culture was the overestimation of anything firstborn – even beasts. For some reason, they imagined a firstborn to possess a superadded quality, which all other living beings were denied. The proof that this value was unreal, and was manufactured from their imagination is their overt expression that firstborn beasts too possessed preeminence. With that, their idolatrous emotions are exposed: they equated man to animal.

God’s very response of destroying firstborn beasts, addresses the precise flaw: God addresses that which is corrupt, i.e., their notion that “firstborns are of elevated status”, and animals share prominence with man. The very equation the Egyptians made between animals to man, in that even firstborn beasts were celebrated, was idolatrous in nature. God underlines this idolatrous current by joining to the firstborns, His plan to abolish the idols...and in the very same verse. God equated the preeminence placed on firstborns with idols. “Idolatry” is not limited to idol worship, nor is it limited to man’s approach to a deity - but to any expression not based in reality, and projected from man’s fantasy. Therefore, idolatry will include acts such as tossing pennies to a well for success; assuming black cats cause bad “luck”; believing that ‘luck’ exists; that Hebrew prayer books will protect our cars; that Mezuzas protect us; that keys in Challas are protective; or that red bendels affect reality. All these and unfortunately more acts are idolatrous.

Regarding Egypt’s idolatry in this case, reality bears no evidence of greatness in that which leaves the womb first. The Egyptians’ only imagined there to be some greatness in firstborns. Living life based on imagination is idolatrous in nature. Death played a major role in Egyptian culture (pyramids are their eternal resting places) so life too - as the other pole of this highlighted spectrum - shared their primary focus. That which was first in receiving life from a parent was imagined to be special. We see a close tie between the fear of mortality, and the elevated status Egypt placed on firstborns. Thus, life and death were central focus in Egypt. [1] And he who was firstborn, they felt, possessed a greater distinction in that his “life” was even more prized.

GOD’S JUSTICE

Now we understand from where came this firstborn status. We also understand why God would seek to remove a wrong idea maintained by the Egyptians. But why was God going to kill the firstborns, in response to their enslavement of the Jews? For this, we refer back to the original quote, “Israel is My firstborn”. And I say to you, ‘send My people and they will serve Me, and if

you refuse to send, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons’.” If firstborns in truth possessed no real difference in status, why does God call Israel HIS firstborn? I believe this had to be, as God wished to talk “in their language”. God wished to express to the Egyptian culture who was truly the prized personality. And since this designation was the firstborns in Egyptian culture, God used their jargon, calling Israel the real firstborn of nations.

God wished to correct the Egyptians’ opinion of who is truly the most celebrated individual, or who would truly be called a “firstborn” metaphorically in God’s eyes. Ibn Ezra assists us here. As he stated, God was reprimanding the Egyptians for having enslaved the people whose forefathers worshiped God. These righteous people, God said, are the true “firstborns” or the people who live life properly. But at this point, Egypt maintained that even a firstborn animal was more celebrated than a Jew, so much, that the Jew could be enslaved, while a firstborn animal was free. This is intolerable in God’s system: he who follows God is the most celebrated individual. And to point this out to Egypt, to dispel this foolish notion that a firstborn carries any significance, God warned the Egyptians to recognize the Hebraic, monotheistic life and free these Hebrews to practice, or suffer the consequence of realizing how little import your firstborns are...they will be killed.

This is God’s ultimatum to Pharaoh: “Recognize whose life is truly valued most, or you will lose your purpose for living. Projecting fantasy onto reality, assuming firstborns – even animals – possess greater status, while Abraham’s descendants are imprisoned, is a worthless life, and My destruction of your firstborns will teach this to you Pharaoh”. This is the sense of God’s message. We may also answer why God killed any firstborn Jew who did not kill the Paschal lamb: this lack of adherence to God, displays a stronger bond to Egypt, than to God. Hence, these Jews also partook of the idolatrous way of life, and did not deserve salvation. In fact, Rashi teaches that four fifths of the Jewish population was destroyed in Egypt.

Why was God’s initial warning to Pharaoh bereft of any mention of the other nine plagues? Why does our response to our children’s question on Passover include the statement, “And it was when Pharaoh hardened his heart from sending us, that God killed the firstborns of the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man until the firstborn of beast”? Sforno answers. (Exod 4:22) Sforno says that only the Plague of Firstborns was intended as a “punishment” while all others were intended to display God’s control of the Earth. Only the Plague of Firstborns was an act of “measure for measure” says Sforno. Therefore, it makes sense why God tells Moses upon his initial address to Pharaoh to say, “Let the Jews go, or your firstborns will be killed.” Herein is an act of punishment, not so with regards to the other plagues. (It makes sense, that God will threaten Pharaoh with that, intended as punishment) And when we answer our children on Passover, we remind them of how God punished the Egyptians. Perhaps this is to also instill in them an appreciation that God defends us, and saved us. The central theme of Passover is that God is our Savior.

SUMMARY

From our study, we learn that the Exodus has an additional facet: God’s deliverance of the Jew from under the hands of those who valued firstborn animals over intelligent man, was a lesson in “who is the most celebrated personality”: it is not he who projects imagined status onto senseless beasts, but he who adheres to the reasoned lifestyle. He who adheres to Abraham’s model follows God’s choicest lifestyle – extricating himself as did Abraham, from idolatry with reason alone,

and finding God.

Ultimately, the Plague of Firstborns teaches us that a reasoned life is God's desire, and he, who lacks reason, and projects imagination onto reality, is against God.♣

[1] History shows that the Egyptians painted idealized scenes from daily life on the walls of their pyramid tombs which included agricultural work, tending cattle and fishing, artisans at their work, including gold workers and boat-builders, and domestic scenes of banquets with musicians, dancers and guests. The scenes in the tomb represented the hoped for after-life, in which there were fertile fields and harmony and happiness at home. Representing it in the tomb was thought to 'ensure' an ideal existence in the next world: the tomb-owner would continue after death the occupations of this life. Therefore, everything required was packed in the tomb, along with the corpse. Writing materials were often supplied along with clothing, wigs, hairdressing supplies and assorted tools, depending on the occupation of the deceased. Often, model tools rather than full size ones, would be placed in the tomb; models were cheaper and took up less space and in the after-life would be magically transformed into the real thing.

Moses' THREE SIGNS

Exodus, 4:1-9: 1) "And Moses answered and said, 'They (the Jews) will not believe in me and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, 'God did not appear to you.' 2) And God said to him, 'What is in your hand?' and he said, 'A staff.' 3) And He said, 'Throw it to the ground', and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent. And Moses fled from before it. 4) And God said to Moses, 'Send forth your hand and grasp it by its tail'. And he sent forth his hand and he seized it, and it was a staff in his palm. 5) 'In order that they believe you, that God appeared to you, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' 6) And God said to him, 'Further, bring now your hand into your chest', and he brought his hand into his chest, and he took it out, and behold his hand was leprous as snow. 7) And He said, 'Return your hand to your chest', and he returned his hand to his chest, and he took it out, and behold, it returned to its flesh. 8) 'And it will be if they do not believe you, and they do not listen to the voice of the first sign, then they will listen to the voice of the second sign. 9) And it will be if they do not listen to also these two signs, and they do not listen to your voice, and you will take from the waters of the Nile, and you will spill it onto the dry land, and it will be that the water that you take from the Nile, and it will be blood on the dry land."

God instructs Moses on his mission to free the Jews. God then responds to Moses' doubt of the Jews' conviction in his divine appointment, by giving him three signs. These signs will prove God's appearance to him. A number of questions arise. Before reading further, take time to review the verses above, and discuss them with others. Simply reading on will remove your opportunity to engage in the process of learning and the use of your own thought. This process is how we become better Torah students, thereby refining our own thinking for future study. It is also an enjoyable activity. The Torah was purposefully written in a cryptic style so as to engage the

mind in this most prized activity of analysis, induction, deduction and thought - our true purpose whose rewards are unmatched, both here, and in the next world. Once you have spent due time reviewing the issues, feel free to read the questions enumerated below, and our possible answers.

Questions: 1. The sign of blood is said to be the ultimate proof of God's directive. How does this sign surpass the others? 2. If blood is more convincing than a staff turning into a serpent, or leprosy, why not instruct Moses to perform the blood sign first? Three signs would then not be necessary! 3. What are the ideas conveyed through each specific sign? Why were these three selected? 4. Why does God give Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the magicians? 5. What is meant by the "voice" of each sign? 6. In both cases, the transformation of a staff into a serpent, and Nile water into blood, does not take place until both objects reach the ground, as it says, "and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent", and "it will be blood on the dry land." What is the reason for this "miracle at a distance"? 7. Why do the first two signs "return" to their original objects? What need does this serve? 8. Why is Moses requested to "conceal" his hand in order for it to become leprous? God could certainly make him leprous without him concealing it. 9. In contrast to the sign of blood where God tells Moses what will happen to the Nile's waters before the sign's performance, why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? 10. What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as "the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"?

We must say the following: The reason for three signs is twofold; 1) God wished the viewer to be convinced of His appointment of Moses with minimal, emotional amazement; and 2) God wished this from everyone, as additional signs of less deniability accompany the first. God knows what the most convincing sign is, i.e., blood, but He desired it come last in the sequence. A Rabbi Mann teaches in this weeks JewishTimes issue, God desires we use our minds.

ACTION AT A DISTANCE

It is for this very reason that additional features are found in these signs. I refer here to the fact that both the staff, and the Nile's waters transformed only once on the ground. It is not the ground that is essential here, but the "distance" between Moses' hand and the transformation. All magicians require tactile control of their manipulated objects. Without physical contact, they cannot create illusions through sleight of hand. However, Moses' objects did not transform, while in his hand, but only once distanced from his control. "Distance" teaches that this was not sleight of hand - his hand was nowhere near the transformation! These signs could only be explained as true miracles, as God's actions.

MAGIC DOES NOT EXIST

Sforno on Exod. 4:3 cites Talmud Sanhedrin 67b: (Responding to the plague of lice, and their inability to mimic it) "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'this is the finger of God.' This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size. [Strengthening this first position] Rav Pappa said, 'By God, he cannot produce something even as large as a camel! [So what does it mean that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn?] [It means] these that are larger than a barley corn, he can collect, and produce the illusion that he has

magically created them.” This Talmudic portion teaches that the human hand cannot control that which is too small.

Sleight of hand was known in the times of the Talmud, and in Egypt’s times. All magic is illusory. What these Egyptians performed by hand was quicker than the eye, but only when the object was large enough to manipulate. Our Rabbis did not accept that any powers exist outside natural laws. God is the only One capable of altering natural law – only He created it, only He controls it. Saadia Gaon too stated that the Egyptian’s blood trick was performed by the use of colored dyes, and the frogs leaped out of the Nile by their use of chemicals that frogs repel. Sforno also states that the Egyptian’s snakes had no movement, i.e., they were not real. Moses’ staff transformed into a “nachash”, not the lifeless “tanin” of the Egyptians. The difference in terms indicates to Sforno, a difference in the two performances.

BLOOD

Blood is the source of life. When one sees water transformed into blood, one realizes that life itself is in God’s hands. This strikes at the core of any person’s greatest fear - death. Additionally, its creation from the Nile disputed the Nile’s position of grandeur. But as God wishes we come to know Him by the use of our higher nature - our intellect - He did not order the blood sign first in sequence. God offers a person the chance to rise to a higher level by following his mind. With a minimalist performance, man has the opportunity to exercise his thinking, and derive truths concerning God’s will (His appointment of Moses) and His very existence.

CREATION: ARRIVED AT THROUGH REASON

I digress to focus your attention on a related and essential idea: God’s position as the Creator is the most important concept of human comprehension. Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed”, Book II, end of Chap XXV: “...Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe: and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent, and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it.”

Maimonides teaches, “all depends on this question”. What does he mean? I believe him to mean that by design, God wished that our conviction of this most central idea - God as Creator - must be arrived at through thought, and understanding, not through amazement at marvelous feats. In other words, our recognition of God as the Creator ‘must’ be apprehended through our reasoning. This is the highest form of recognition of God, and the preferred method to knowing Him, and His works. “All depends on this question,” means that proof of Creation was purposefully left to the realm of the “philosophical”, and not to “emotional” via astonishing, miraculous displays. It is easy to witness a miracle, and be convinced, but in such a case, our mind forfeits the exercise of reasoning - THE mark of man’s perfection. It is fitting that man use his crowned capacity in the pursuit of this question, of God as the Creator. I now return to our topic.

THE SERPENT AND LEPROSY

Before resorting to blood, why did the staff transform into a serpent? On the surface, both the staff and a serpent have similar appearances, they are narrow, elongated shapes. Once transformed into a serpent, the viewer might second-guess what he saw, "Was it in fact a staff before hand, or was it a serpent in some stiffened state?" Control of one's emotions and clear thinking are required so as not to dismiss a miracle. Moses was given these signs for the very reason that the Jews were bent on disbelief in God's appointment of Moses. Hence, subsequent to a sign, the Jews might seek to explain away the miracle. To say the very minimum about this specific sign, we may suggest that it teaches that God controls life. He can turn a lifeless staff into a living organism. God's control of life would appear to offer the most impact on the Jews. Therefore God's signs were indications of His control of life. But this was yet animal life. More impressive, was Moses' hand becoming leprous. Here, God sought to teach that He controls human life. He does so in the negative (becoming leprous) as well as the positive (healing of Moses' leprosy). The fact that Moses own hand was smitten, may serve to teach again that it was not Moses who created such a feat, as one would not risk self injury. Similarly, one would not create a dangerous serpent.

Another observation of the serpent and leprosy is that the transformation into a serpent displays God's control over the "matter" of creation, while leprosy displays His control of His "laws" of creation. Transforming a staff into a serpent displays God's control over matter itself. Disease has a natural process. Moses' leprous hand displays that God controls "how" things behave. These two, initial signs bear witness to God control of both aspects of Creation - of matter, and laws governing that matter.

Perhaps, in order to minimize the affect of "astonishment", God instructed Moses to first conceal his hand before it became leprous. For if a hand became leprous in plain sight, it would overwhelm the viewer, prohibiting his mind from fully functioning. This feat would startle him. Therefore, God told Moses to hide his hand. God also gave Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the Egyptians. And as Rabbi Mann taught, this was for our reason that the viewer use intelligence to discern true miracles of God, from man's sleight of hand. We may also suggest that the "voice" of each sign refers to the underlying "concept" derived by the mind, as opposed to the feat per se. God wished the viewer to understand each sign's message - its "voice".

Why did the first two signs return to their original forms? This may also be a practical issue, that Moses may once again perform these signs.

Why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? Mindful that God enabled these signs as a "response" to Moses' concern that he be validated, perhaps God did not inform Moses of the sign until it happened for good reason: God wished that Moses sense the effects of a these signs, just as would the Jews. By experiencing the sign without advance warning, Moses could identify with the perception and emotional impact afforded the Jews through these signs. Thereby, Moses' "first hand" knowledge gave him the security in these signs. God answered his concern in a primary fashion. He now knew how the Jews would react to these signs - that they were impressive. Had God told Moses what was about to happen, his expectation would lessen the emotional impact of these signs.

THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE

Our final question was, "What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as "the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? I believe this may serve to illustrate God's consistent kindness. As Moses was God's emissary for the Redemption, the Jews would be more inclined to accept this news and Moses' role, by recalling how God favored their ancestors, and not just on one occasion, but the lifetimes of many individuals. The Redemption was not a deviation, disbelieved by the Jews, but it was consistent with the manner in which God relates to His people - to His prophets' descendants. We learn from this that God saw it necessary even prior to the act of redemption, the Jews required a psychological conviction in God's forthcoming salvation. This state of mind was necessary, and God reassured the Jews of His unchanging kindness through this statement.♣

the RED SEA

Parshas Bishalach commences with the Jews' journey immediately following their Egyptian exodus, (Exod. 13:17) "God did not guide them via the path of the land of the Philistines, as it was near, lest the people repent when they see war and return to Egypt." As Maimonides teaches in his great work, The Guide for the Perplexed (Book III. Chap. 32), God's initial plan was not to lead the Jews towards the Red Sea, but towards the Philistines. A separate consideration demanded this route be avoided. But I ask, why would the Jews return to the very place they were now fleeing? Nonetheless, we are taught to prevent the Jews' return to Egypt, God circumvented their route.

We then read that God clearly orchestrated events to make the Jews appear as easy prey for Pharaoh, enticing him to recapture his fled slaves. God told Moses to encamp by the sea. What was the purpose? (Exod. 4:3) "And Pharaoh will say about the Children of Israel that they are confused in the land, the desert has closed around them." The purpose of traveling not by way of the Philistines, but towards the Red Sea now appears to have a different objective: to lure Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea, ultimately to be drowned. But it does not appear this was the plan from the outset. Had it been, God would not have taught of His consideration regarding the Philistines. That nation's war would not have entered into the equation.

The ultimate purpose in the death of Pharaoh and his army is stated in Exodus 14:4, "And I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them, and I will gain honor through Pharaoh and his entire army, and Egypt will know that I am God..." God sought to gain honor by leading the Jews to the Red Sea, luring in Pharaoh, and creating the miraculous partition of waters. We are confused; did God lead the Jews to the Red Sea to circumvent the Philistines, or

to lure Egypt to their death and gain honor? Furthermore, why does God seek to “gain honor” for Himself?

Upon their arrival at the Red Sea, the Jews soon see Pharaoh and his army in pursuit. Moses prays to God, and God responds, “Why do you cry unto me?” This is a surprising response. A basic principle in Judaism is the beseeching of God’s help when in need, and the Jews most certainly were. So why does God seem to oppose such a principle at this specific juncture?

Another question apropos of this section is what the goal was of the Ten Plagues, in contrast to the parting of the Red Sea? If the Red Sea parting was merely to save the Jews and kill Pharaoh and his army, God could have easily spared this miracle and wiped out the Egyptians during one of the Ten Plagues. God prefers fewer miracles; this is why there is ‘nature’. Our question suggests that the destruction of Pharaoh and his army had a different objective, other than the simple destruction of the Egyptians. What was that objective?

There is also an interesting Rashi, which states a metaphor taken from Medrash Tanchumah. Rashi cites that when the Jews “lifted their eyes and saw the Egyptian army traveling after them, they saw the ‘officer of Egypt’ traveling from heaven to strengthen Egypt.” (Exod. 14:10) What is the meaning of this metaphor?

Looking deeper into the actual miracle of the Red Sea splitting (Exodus 14:28-29) we read, “And the waters returned and they covered the chariots and the horsemen and the entire army of Pharaoh coming after him in the sea, and there was not left of them even one. And the Children of Israel traveled on dry land in the midst of the sea and the water was to them walls on their right and on their left.” Ibn Ezra states that Pharaoh and his army were being drowned, simultaneously as the Jews crossed through on dry land. This is derived from the Torah first stating that Pharaoh was drowned, followed by a statement that the Jews traveled on dry land. Although one section of the sea turbulently tossed and submerged the Egyptian army, “...and God churned Egypt in the midst of the sea”, the adjoining section contained waters parted into two calm walls on either side of the Jews, bearing the dry seabed. Ibn Ezra calls this a “wonder inside a wonder”.

We must ask why God deemed it essential to combine salvation and destruction in one fell swoop. God could have exited the Jews completely, prior to allowing the Egyptians entrance into the sea. What is learned from God’s planned simultaneity of Jewish salvation with Egyptian destruction?

Now we must ask an unavoidable and basic question which Moses pondered: why were the Jews subjected to Egyptian bondage? To recap, Moses once saved the life of a Jew, beaten by an Egyptian. Moses carefully investigated the scene, he saw no one present, and killed the Egyptian taskmaster and buried him in the sand. The next day, Moses sought to settle an argument between the infamous, rebellious duo, Dathan and Aviram. They responded to Moses, “will you kill us as you killed the Egyptian?” Moses feared the matter was known. But how was this matter made public? The Torah described the scene just before Moses killed the taskmaster (Exod. 2:12), “And he turned this way and that way, and there was no man (present)...” So if there was clearly no one present, who informed on Moses? A Rabbi once taught there is only one possible answer; the Jew who Moses saved was there, he turned in Moses. We are astounded that one, whose life was saved, would inform on his savior. What causes such unappreciative behavior? The Torah’s literal words describing Moses’ astonishment are “(Moses said) therefore the matter is known”, referring to the disclosure of Moses’ murder of the Egyptian. Rashi quotes a Medrash on the

words “the matter was known”, paraphrasing Moses’ own thoughts, (Rashi on Exod. 2:14) “The matter has been made known to me on which I used to ponder; ‘What is the sin of the Jews from all the seventy nations that they should be subjugated to back-breaking labor? But now I see they are fit for this.”

Moses now understood why the Jews were deserving of Egyptian bondage. This ungrateful Jew’s backstabbing act answered Moses’ question. But this ungrateful nature is not its own trait, but a result of another trait: The act of informing on Moses displays an inability to question Egyptian authority; “Even if my brother Jew saves me, Egypt is still the authority who I must respect”. It wasn’t aggression against Moses, but an unconditional allegiance to Egypt. The Jews’ minds were emotionally crippled by their decades as slaves. The famous Patty Hearst case teaches us of the Stockholm Syndrome, where victims sympathize with their captors. Israel too sympathized with Egypt. Such identification would cause one to inform on his own friend, even on his own savior Moses. Moses witnessed this corrupt character trait firsthand and realized that Israel justly received the Egyptian bondage as a response. But how does the punishment fit the crime? (You may ask that this is reverse reasoning, as this ungrateful nature came subsequent to bondage, not before. But I answer that Moses too knew this, yet Moses saw something in this ungrateful act which he knew predated Egyptian bondage, answering Moses’ question why Israel deserved this punishment.) So what was Moses’ understanding of the justice behind Israel’s bondage? Seeing that the Jew informed on him even after saving his life, Moses said, “the matter is known”, meaning, I understand why the Jews deserve bondage.

In approaching an answer, I feel our very first question highlights the central issue - the cause for the splitting of the Red Sea. The two reasons given for God redirecting the Jews’ journey are not mutually exclusive. The latter, drowning of Pharaoh and God’s gaining honor is in fact a response to the former: the Jews’ security in Egypt fostered by their extended stay. I suggest the following answer: God did in fact wish to take the Jews directly to Sinai. This is His response to Moses’ question as to the merit of the Jews’ salvation - “they are to serve Me on this mountain”. Meaning, their merit of this Exodus is their future Torah acceptance at Sinai and their subsequent adherence. But due to a peripheral concern of the Philistines, a new route was required. And not just a route on the ground, but also a route that also addressed the underlying inclination towards an Egyptian return. God initially wanted only to bring Israel to Sinai. But now He sought to address the Jews’ draw towards Egypt. God wanted to drown Pharaoh and his army to respond to the Jews’ current mentality: the Jews preferred Egyptian bondage to warring with the Philistines to maintain freedom. This was unacceptable to God. God enacted the miracle of the Splitting of the Red Sea, for many objectives, but primarily to remove the security Egypt afforded these former slaves. Destruction of the Egyptian empire was a necessary step in Israel’s development.

This answers why God responded to Moses’ prayer when the Egyptian army drew near, “Why do you cry unto Me?” In other words, God was telling Moses that prayer is inappropriate right now. Why? Because the very act of traveling to the Red Sea was in fact the solution for what Moses prayed - the destruction of Egypt. God was informing Moses that what you pray for is already in the works, and therefore your prayer is unnecessary.

Egypt’s destruction was not an end in itself. It had a greater goal - to replace Egypt’s authoritative role with the True Authority - God. This dual ‘motive’ is displayed in a specific

formulation of the Red Sea miracle. Moses tells the Jews “as you see Egypt today, you will never again see them. God will war for you, and you will be silent.” There are two ideas here. The first is the termination of the Egyptians. The Jews had to be rid of the Egyptian ‘crutch’. Seeing them dead on the seashore emancipated them psychologically: there were no more Egyptian taskmasters to direct their lives. The phenomena of a slave can be created by nature, or nurture. In Egypt, the Jews were nurtured into a slave mentality, a dependency on a dominating authority. This mind set actually affords some psychological comfort, despite physical pain. When one prefers slavery, he in other words prefers not to make decisions, and relies heavily on a leader. Perhaps for this reason, the very first laws given (in Parshas Mishpatim) address slavery. They outline this institution as a simple, monetary reality. One has no money, so he pays his debt via servitude. But in no way is human respect compromised when he is a slave. The master must give his slave his only pillow and suffer a loss of comfort himself to accommodate another human. The slave remains equal to the master in all areas and deserves respect as any other man. Slavery is simply an institution under the heading of monetary laws. This teaches the Jews that the slavery they experienced is not a way of life, but a temporarily state. The fact that God does not prefer slavery for man is His statement that “you are servants to Me and not to man.” The Torah law of boring a slave’s ear physically brands him of his corruption in not “listening” to God’s command on Sinai, “servants to Me are you, and not servants to servants (man)”. (Rashi on Exod. 21:6)

The second idea derived from “God will war for you, and you will be silent”, is that God alone delivers salvation. Your “silence” means God alone will bring salvation. There cannot be another cause sharing God’s role as the “Go’ale Yisrael” - the Redeemer of the Jews is God alone. Why is this necessary? This underlines the primary concept of the miracle of the sea. The goal was to instill in the Children of Israel an appreciation for God, and an acceptance of His authority. This authority would remain compromised, had Egypt survived. Respecting God’s exclusive authority is also a prerequisite for the Jews’ impending acceptance of the Torah on Sinai. For this reason, many of God’s commands are “remembrances of the Exodus” for the goal of engendering appreciation for the Creator’s kindness. When man’s relationship with God is based on appreciation for Him - as guided by the commands - man is thereby reminded that God desires the good for him. As man acts to fulfill his Torah obligations, he will not view them as inexplicable burdens, but he will seek to understand God’s intended perfection in each command. Man will then arrive at his true purpose, and find the most fulfillment in his life. Man will be guided in all areas by Divine, rational and pleasing laws which conform perfectly to man’s mind. All conflicts will be removed.

The males and females of the Children of Israel verbalized identical, prophetic responses to God’s triumph, “God is greatly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea”. God’s objective of not only eliminating Egypt’s authority, but gaining honor for Himself was achieved. This identical song of praise (Az Yashir) of both the male and female Jews displayed the newly instilled appreciation for their victorious God. The destruction of the Egyptians and the acceptance of God were the two primary issues that were addressed successfully. This explains why the Jewish salvation and the Egyptian destruction happened simultaneously. They formed one goal. Had God desired simple destruction of the Egyptians as its own ends, He could have done so in Egypt. But it was only in response to the Jew’s overestimation of Egypt, that God destroyed them in the Red Sea, together with the Jewish salvation. The death of the Egyptians was a means for the acceptance of God, not obscured by any other master. Subsequent to the

parting of the sea, the Jews in fact attested to God's success in His plan, as it is said, "and they believed in God and in Moses His servant."

Additionally, God's desire that the Jews glorify Him, is not "for" God. Nothing man can do may benefit God, nor does God share man's nature of "need", as in needing to gain honor for Himself. All that God does is to benefit man. This is most clearly witnessed in the great holiday of Passover, where the Creator of the universe educates man (both Jew and Egyptian) with the hopes of their conformity with reality, with monotheism. Only after the Egyptians displayed disobedience and ignored the fundamentals taught through the Ten Plagues, did God have no recourse but to destroy them. God then continued His acts of mercy on man, and delivered the Jews to freedom so they could accept the Torah.

How do we explain the Medrash regarding the "officer of Egypt"? It now fits precisely with our theory: The Jews felt unconditionally bound to Egypt as inferiors. At the shores, they did not actually see any "officer of Egypt traveling from heaven." This metaphor means they looked at Egypt as invincible, as if some heavenly force defended Egypt over which they could not prevail. This is the meaning of the Medrash. It is a metaphor for Israel's vanquished state of mind.

In summary, the plagues of Egypt served to spread fame of God, "And you will speak of My name throughout the land." The splitting of the Red Sea had a different purpose, "And I will gain honor through Pharaoh and his entire army." The honor God acquired is for the good of Israel, not just Egypt. The Jews will view God, as One who is incomparable, the true Creator, and the One who takes notice of man and manages his affairs. (Ramban, Exod. 13:16) The Red Sea miracle was executed as a response to the crippled mentality of the Jews, as God stated, "...lest they repent when they see war and return to Egypt." The circumvention from Philistine to the Red Sea was to avoid an inevitable return to Egypt, and to also correct that very impulse by the Jews witnessing God's triumph over Egypt, simultaneously instilling tremendous appreciation for God. In one act, the corruption in Israel was removed and a new faith in God was born, "and they believed in God and in Moses His servant." This simultaneous termination of Egypt and salvation for themselves was reiterated twice in the Az Yashir song, "God is greatly exalted, the horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea". This response displayed how effected the Jews were by God's miraculous wonders and salvation.

In all honesty, the Jews do revert to "fond" recollections of Egypt not too long after these events, and in the Book of Numbers. However, we cannot judge any acts of God's as failures, if His subjects subsequently err. God's method - and perfection - is to offer man the best solution at a given time. This is a tremendous kindness of God. Man has free will and can revert back to his primitive state even after God steps in to assist him. This human reversion in no way diminishes from God's perfect actions. Our appreciation of His wisdom and His precision in His divine actions remains firm. All of God's actions displaying His perfection and honor are not for Him, as He does not need a mortal's praises. He does it for us, so we may learn new truths and perfect ourselves in our one chance here on Earth.♣