



*"Would it be that My people listen to me, if Israel would go in My ways,
I would subdue their enemies in a instant, and turn My hand against their foes."*

King David, Psalm 81

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*Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification
of Jewish Beliefs and Practices*

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Appearing Before God

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

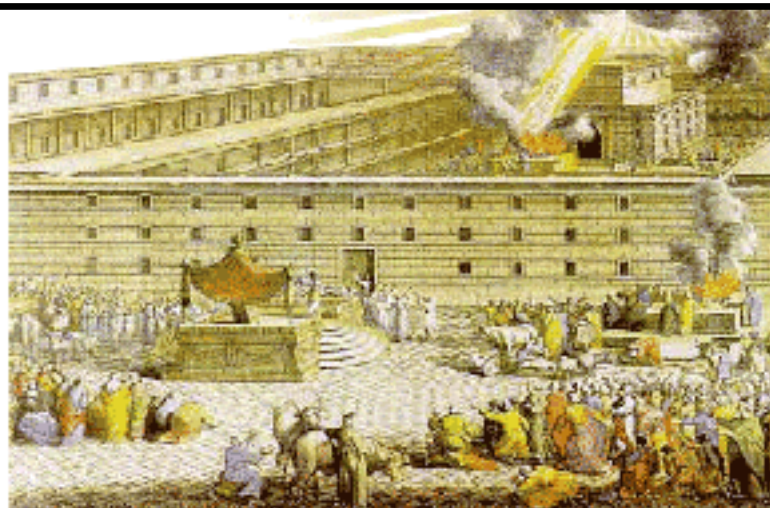
In Deuteronomy, 16:16, we find the command for males to appear before God (in front of the Temple) three times a year; on Passover, Tabernacles and on the Festival of Weeks. The passage reads thus:

"Three times yearly, there shall appear all males - to the face of God your God - in the chosen place; on the holiday of Unleavened Bread, the holiday of Weeks, and the on the holiday of Tabernacles, and you shall not see the face of God empty handed."

The Amoraim - those who succeeded the authors of the Mishna (Oral law) - argued regarding to who we refer with the term "appear". The Hebrew word "yay-ra-eh" means to appear. This can apply to God appearing to man, and visa versa, man appearing before God. Rabbi Yochanan b. Dahavai explained it as referring to God, meaning, man must place himself in the situation where God appears to him. Rabbeinu Tam explained it referring to man appearing before God.

Rabbeinu Tam explains his reasoning as follows: There are two versions of the structure of the word; There is "yay-ra-eh", meaning "to appear" before someone. And there is "yi-ra-eh", meaning "to look". The former is the actual written form located in the Torah script, while the latter is only the accepted pronunciation. We have this many times in the Torah, we call it the "ksiv" and the "kri", the written and the spoken forms, respectively. These dual word forms are Masoretic (Traditional) vehicles for passing down additional teachings, unavailable without the additional word form.

Rabbi Yochanan b. Dahavai held that we use the orally transmitted forms of words as starting points in Biblical exegesis. This means that the



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Avraham Learning God's Justice

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

How did Avraham know what G-d's justice was prior to G-d's communication with him?

As he had no Torah, nor communication with God as of yet, by what means did Avraham arrive at a true understanding of God's will? God said "hamichaseh ani mayAvraham...", "will I keep hidden from Avraham". What knowledge was Avraham bereft of, why couldn't he acquire this knowledge on his own, and what was it in G-d's words which introduced Avraham to this new concept?

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Every Day

RIVKA OLENICK

"And these words that I command you today shall be upon your heart." Va'eschanan (Deuteronomy 6:6) What does this mean: "These words that I command you today These words" are the commandments that God has given to us. The commandments are based on truths that help a person live a moral, ethical and virtuous life. The commandments help us live our lives in the most beneficial way by freeing our mind of illusions and fantasies. Instead, we do the commands and train ourselves to live and think according to the ways of justice, kindness and truth.

This is what God demands of us "through" the commands. And so we must follow the commands every "today" in the present, so that our passions do not become the main focus of life. The commands were given thousands of years ago, and it is easy to regard them as ancient obligations that no longer apply to our life today. However, we read this same statement in the Shema every day, which means the commandments are relevant and timely and are for "today." Toras Chaim says: "What this verse is telling us is that a person should always reflect upon his way of life and be sure that he is doing the will of God as it expresses itself at the present time, "today."

What does this mean "shall be upon your heart"? The great gift of intelligence that God gave each of us is to be used to uncover the profound teachings contained in each commandment. These teachings assist us in living an upright existence, a life of emes truth, which promotes peace and unity between people. The heart relates to the kindness one uses in bringing "emes" to others. Any person with knowledge is obligated to share it not only by transmitting the knowledge to ones children, but to bring others "near to Torah." The Sifre says: "We should regard the commands with great enthusiasm and freshness, not out of habit." So this means that we should "approach" all the commands with eagerness and joy and look forward to fulfilling each one with the "desire" of doing God's will. We should also understand that "be upon your heart" means to remember with intelligence and common sense. This is all in the "how" we do the commands. Nothing is worse than taking the commandments for granted as if they have no life, as if they are stagnant or boring and no longer hold our interest - as if they've become our "enemy."

The Ramban says: "Observe God's commands out of love, and out of fear. Observe it out of love, for a lover does not despise, and observe it out of fear for if you come to reject God's authority you will not do it." Samson Raphael Hirsch says: "Accordingly the demand here is that the words spoken here as being our duty are to be kept "present" in our minds and exert a permanent influence on our hearts under the weight of these words, allow our thoughts and feelings to be mastered by them. One must bind one's inner inclinations by oath to duty." And the Sforno adds: "The expression "upon your heart" means to commit something to memory. Israel is urged to take heed of God's words and to remember them ever for the purpose of translating them into action."

Every "today" should give each of us a renewed feeling of "eagerness" to do the commands better "today" than yesterday, which brings us closer to the Will of God. □

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Avraham Learning God's Justice

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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Without the Torah, Avraham first posited that there is a Cause for all existences.

The sciences which relentlessly guide matter were all too well organized - catering precisely to the world's daily needs - that it should exist without a Designer. There is a God. One initial Cause. Monotheism.

Avraham saw man as part of creation. He concluded that man is not merely to live his life without self guidance, drifting aimlessly with no goal. The existence of man's mark of distinction - his mind - taught Avraham that the Creator desired man to engage this faculty. It was given only to man, and thus, it must be God's will that the mind is to be used by man above all other faculties. Avraham therefore thought into all matters. Essentially, Avraham thought, "how does this Creator desire I live my life?"

Avraham understood that the primary acknowledgement of man's thinking must be his acceptance of monotheism. To this end, Avraham debated with many individuals and proved through rational arguments that dualism and atheism are false notions.

Once Avraham saw the involvement in wisdom as God's desired goal for man, Avraham pondered many aspects of the world. They included natural law, and laws of government. Avraham thought, as God desires many men to populate the world, and all men have the goal of learning, man must work together with others so as to ensure a safe haven geared towards that goal of obtaining wisdom. Therefore, moral codes must be followed, i.e., man must not interfere with another's pursuit of the good.

As Avraham proceeded to teach his neighbors, God desired that Avraham have the correct ideas. Avraham was able to understand a great amount on his own, but evidently he could not grasp everything without Divine intervention.

This brings us to God's statement, "will I keep hidden from Avraham..." God therefore introduced some new idea to Avraham. But what was it? God spoke very few words. He said, (Gen. 18:20):

"The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I (God) will go down and see if in accordance with their cry they do, and I will destroy them, or not, I will know."

In these words alone was the lesson to Avraham about a new concept. (It is essential when learning to isolate wherein lies the answer.) Upon hearing this prophecy from God, Avraham thought, "God knows whether they deserve to be destroyed, He knows all, so he knows their sin. However, God is saying that there are two possibilities here, destroying Sodom, or sparing

them. Avraham then responded:

"will you wipe out these cities if there are 50 righteous souls there? It is mundane that You should kill a righteous person with a wicked, and the righteous will suffer the same as the wicked, the Judge of the entire world won't do justice?!" God then responds, "If find 50 righteous in the midst of the city, I will spare the entire place for their sake!"

What did Avraham ask, and what did God respond?

Avraham made a few statements, but one was not a question. When Avraham said:

"It is mundane that You should kill a righteous person with a wicked, and the righteous will suffer the same as the wicked, the Judge of the entire world won't do justice?!",

He was not asking, but rather he was stating, "this is not how You work". Avraham repeats the concept of justice in that passage, teaching us that he was only talking about justice in the statement. Avraham had no question on this, a righteous person should live, and a wicked person should die. Justice demands this.

What Avraham was asking on was tzedaka, whether God would even save ALL the wicked if enough righteous people were present in the city. And this is precisely what God answered Avraham:

"If find 50 righteous in the midst of the city, I will spare the entire place for their sake!"

The question is, where did Avraham get this idea, that God would not only work with justice, but would engage traits over and above pure justice, something we would call charity, or tzedaka?

Avraham got this idea from God's few words. "I (God) will go down and see if in accordance with their cry they do, and I will destroy them, or not..." God said there was an option here, meaning, although God knew Sodom and Amora were sinful, and He knew the exact measure of their sin, nonetheless, there was an option regarding their fate. Avraham deduced from God's words that there are other criteria than the sinners' own flaws, which God views to evaluate the sinners' fate. This is precisely what God intended Avraham to learn. This is not something a person can determine from his studies. And since Avraham was to be a "mighty nation", and that he was going to "teach his household to keep the ways of God", (Gen. 18:18-19) Avraham needed to be instructed in those ways. (Note: Here we see God teaches man through engaging man's mind, and not simply spelling out the idea. God made Avraham use his reasoning to learn the concept.)

What does this idea represent, that God will spare even the wicked provided righteous people are present? I believe it teaches us that God will tolerate the wicked, provided there are proper influences with the potential to change the wicked. In such a case, the wicked are not doomed to a failed existence, not yet, provided a possible cure is

close by. This teaches us the extent to which God endures sinners. "God does not seek the death of the sinner, but in his return from his ways...."

We even see earlier that God has the consideration that Avraham should know both charity and justice, (Gen. 18:19) "...and he will keep to God's ways to do charity and justice..."

What is the difference between these two, and why is charity-tzedaka so essential, that God had to make sure Avraham had this concept? Justice, we understand, is necessary for any society to operate. Deterrents must exist to prevent people from outletting their aggression and destroying society. Where does tzedaka come in?

I believe tzedaka is necessary for the individual, as opposed to justice, which is for the society. What I mean is that with justice alone, if someone is in the wrong, they must make amends. But what if the person has had a tortured existence up to this point, and now faces penalties from a system which treats him as everyone else? Won't this person have the potential to break at some point? Even commit suicide? Without tzedaka, he feels no one has concern for his specific situation.

It is man's nature when things go bad, to close in on himself, feeling that a streak of misery is upon him. This feeling strips him from all hope. He eventually feels alienated from society at large which seems to be 'doing fine', and the "why me" attitude sets in and he begins a downward spiral. Without another person showing him pity, and a desire to assist, he is doomed.

This is where I feel tzedaka plays a vital role in society. If we are to ensure the well being of society with the aforementioned goal of securing mankind's haven for intellectual pursuits, we need to recognize more than justice, but we must also recognize that man needs individual attention in the form of sympathy, empathy, care, hospitality, generosity, and all other forms. The fortunate among us must also initiate such care, and not wait until the fallen person calls out, for it might be too late, and he never calls out, but ends matters drastically. For this reason, the shulchan aruch teaches that giving tzedaka is not simply giving money, but we are obligated to sit down and commiserate with the unfortunate soul. The uplifting of his countenance is the goal, and money is only one item on the list by which we accomplish this goal.

Maimonides states that the highest level of man is when he is concerned with his fellow man.

Man's nature is that he needs to be recognized as an individual, by another. Without this recognition, man feels no integrity, and will not move on with his life. Therefore, tzedaka is essential to a society's laws.

Justice serves the collective group, tzedaka addresses the individual. Both are essential. ■

Questions on Sinai

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Question: I have a couple of questions regarding your proof of the validity of Judaism, as per the national revelation at Sinai: Is there a book on comparative religion and/or the origin of religions that verifies your claim that Judaism is the only religion that is based on a national revelation? Is this an accepted fact among Professors of religion?

Reply: Not only by them, but by opposing religions themselves. It is quite interesting that opposers of Judaism accept Sinai. This is simply because history (events witnessed by masses) cannot be re-written. No other religion has claim to such an event. They are based on the word of one, or a few supposed 'witnesses' - something which does not stand the test of authenticity. Something which you may either believe or disbelieve, but that which safely cannot be disproven.

Question: How do you know that this wasn't a case of the leaders writing the text and everybody else being forced to conform, on the penalty of death and/or ex-communication (As per Spinoza)? After all, during recent periods of time when Jews has the chance to abandon orthodoxy (The move to America, the Enlightenment, etc..), they did so on huge numbers.

Reply: If this were the case, we would not have unanimous accounts of the events reading identically. There would be alternate stories by writers of the specific time and place when the supposed forced conformation occurred. But we have no stories. So why assume that which is not documented. If we use this line of supposition, anything is possible, we may even assume aliens. But we are trying to base ourselves on historical proof, and on a purely scientific approach which assumes nothing, and does not compel one to simply "believe" as other religions do. Belief is not how Einstein formulated laws of the universe. Belief then should certainly not be used in more crucial areas of one's life, I mean, one's philosophy.

Question: If the national revelation proof is so obvious, how do the bible critics deal with it? They have been around for a couple of hundred years, so they must have dealt with it in one form or another.

Reply: It seems to me that no one opposes it. It would be like one opposing any other wide spread historical account. The presence of miracles in the story does not remove its status as an historical event, well attended, and well documented. Had the event never occurred, then one would have had to fabricate this story. Should one today endeavor to circulate a story of such fantastic content with miracles, and have no proof, he would not only fail at his attempt to circulate such a story, and be laughed at, but he will be forgotten fairly quickly, let alone be believed unanimously by the whole world and become religion.

Unanimous, world acceptance is a solid proof to the occurrence of this event at Sinai, and this methodology proves all world events. ■

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Appearing Before God

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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term "to look" can apply to both God and man, as both can do the act of looking, in some sense. But this allowed Rabbi Yochanan b. Dahavai to entertain this passage as referring to God. To this, Rabbeinu Tam objected,

"...we do not form Torah explanations based on oral transmission. The primary and authentic explanation must be rooted and commenced in the written form of the Torah, and only then do we look to oral transmission for embellishment. But the primary teaching must emanate from the written form." (Paraphrased)

Since this is the case, the written text literally means "to appear". Rabbeinu Tam explained that this is impossible in application to God's actions. He cannot "appear in the Temple" to be "seen" by man, as God does not occupy space. Therefore, this written form of "appear" must apply to man. Thereby defining the command as "man must appear before God." (The additional instance of "yih-ra-eh" in this verse also applies to man - being the same word form - and thereby is interpreted that man must also "see". The Rabbis derive from this second instance that blind men are exempt from this command). We have now clarified the command to be "man's obligation to travel to the Temple, appearing before God". Man only is commanded - as opposed to women - and only those men with eyesight.

We now observe a fascinating statement recorded by the Marsha: "Man must appear before God's two eyes, and even man must come to see God with man's two eyes." This is truly astonishing. What can be meant by "God's two eyes"? He is not physical, His knowledge is not based on vision. God has no organs.

As always, we must ask properly formulated questions to arrive at an answer. How shall we formulate this question? I would suggest as follows: "What do two eyes convey, why not one eye?" Well, two eyes means to me, that something was in full vision, that is, both eyes saw it. But again, in relation to God, how can we apply the term "vision"? But perhaps, "full vision", means not that sight exists with God, but that God beheld something which occupied His 'vision', or, His interest. He was so to speak, "looking" at that which interests Him. What interests God about man? The answer is man's performance of the Torah. We may suggest that "God's two eyes" means, God took full

note of man's action of appearing at the Temple, in accordance with this Torah command. The medrash is relating to us that which "caught God's eyes". It is an important phenomena when the Jews appear before God in the Temple.

This being the case, how can the medrash go on to state that we in turn must have our two eyes working - literally - in order to participate in this command? Why should the Rabbis take a metaphoric gesture of God's eyes, and incorporate it in real, physical action, thereby constraining blind men from attendance?

Here we find a beautiful idea: The fact that God looked at our fulfillment of this command with "both His eyes", conveys, as we said, the idea that this command is set apart from all others. There is some element in this appearance before God, which "fills God's vision", i.e., it is most favorable to Him. As such, the Rabbis interpreted the second instance of "yay-ra-eh" to mean an exclusion for all blind men. They were saying that this very concept of God's delight in man must somehow permeate the very maaseh mitzvah - the act of the command. By what interpretation can the Rabbis imbue our action with the concept that this specific mitzvah carries such importance? They decided to characterize our action with the element of God's delight as is demonstrated by requiring that we too, have full vision. This full vision displayed by all attendees at the Temple, reflects the very nature of this mitzvah as one which man performs in God's delight.

What do I mean by God's delight? It is a state in man, where man performs THE command of God, the single act which epitomizes man's ultimate state of perfection. This inevitably thrusts our quest onto the specific design of this command: "What purpose may we find in the act of traveling to the Temple, simply to "appear" before God? (I isolate appearing from the obligation of sacrifice, for the passage clearly separates the two - "do not see God's face empty handed" is a subsequent embellishment on the primary obligation of appearance.) Why on the three Holidays? Why is this not applicable to women? Is it only the principle of "zman gerama" which exempts the women? Or is it something more basic in the command itself?"

We state that man's goal is to arrive at his highest appreciation of the Creator. This - by definition - requires a 100% conviction in God's existence. Above all else, we must view this as absolute truth. We must also acknowledge that His system is perfect for man, meaning, all God's ways are just, as it is written, (Gen. 18:17):



"And God said, 'Shall I keep hidden from Abraham that which I do? While Avraham will become a great and might nation, and all there will bless him all the nations of the land. For I known in him that he will command his sons and his household after himself, and he will guard the path of God, to do charity and justice..."

God immediately informed Abraham of His plan to destroy Sodom and Ammorah. Had Abraham awakened after the destruction of the city, he would not have learned the fine intricacies of God's justice, but only that the people were corrupt and deserved obliteration - as with the Flood. However, God 'invited' Abraham to discussions, which was followed by Abraham's defense of Sodom. Abraham exclaimed, "the Judge of the Earth won't execute justice?" This, Abraham did not ask as a question, but posed as a certainty, as we see God does not answer him on this. God only answers on his true query, i.e., whether the merits of some, can save others. Abraham asked this, as he was yet unlearned in certain ideas of charity, as this is beyond natural observation - beyond the idea that each man pays for his own sins, and each merits his own rewards. Abraham now realized that God's invite in this decision making process must mean that there are other considerations which he could not arrive at without God's intervention. Proof of the hidden quality of this idea is that God saves people based not only on THEIR OWN merits, is God's own words, "Shall I keep hidden from Abraham that which I do?" The reason for this engagement is also clearly taught, "that he will command his sons and his household after himself". For Abraham to be a leader, he must lead with accurate knowledge.

We can now answer what is the unique quality in the command to appear before God: This act is a demonstration that we admit God's existence. We do this by traveling to a place known only for His glory. There is no other attraction at the Temple mount. Besides a desire to approach God, there can be no other reason for going there. Additionally, observing this as a commandment simultaneously demonstrates our conviction that this command, this representation of God's system, is completely just, and ought to be followed. Men are obligated, as men are the ones charged with Torah teaching and learning. Endorsement of the system of Torah must be via those who carry the full weight of the system.

The reason this command is to be performed at the holidays, is that these holidays are samples of man acting at his most pristine level of existence. Therefore these days must be inextricably bound up with the concept of Torah adherence - this is man's sole purpose. On these days, man is prohibited from labor, he must divert his attention and activities from the mundane to the sublime - from the physical pursuits, to the spiritual. On these days, man's focus is redirected solely to God's existence, and the system of his perfection. His appearance at the Temple embodies these ideas.

Appearance at the Temple three times a year during the Holidays, is an endorsement of our complete belief in God, and His just system. This action is so grand, God beholds our appearance, as it were possible, with "both eyes". □

Did Our Forefathers Observe the Torah?

Reader: I have always been troubled by the assertion that our forefathers observed the 613 before Sinai. It sounded like revisionism to me. And it seems that the commentators (Rashi, I think) go to great lengths to explain away what seems obvious from the text, that Avraham served milk and meat to the visiting angels. They say he didn't. How should I interpret the claim about the forefathers and the 613?

Mesora: Egypt didn't exist during Abraham's time, so how could he be celebrating Passover, before the very event commemorated happened? A rabbi once taught that when the Rabbis say that Abraham and the forefathers kept the entire Torah, it means they upheld actions and ideals which were in line with the very perfections derived from the Torah. It teaches us metaphorically that the forefathers were not missing any of the perfections which God placed in the Torah. □

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