

## SPECIAL ISSUE: Judaism's Tenets



Although over until next year, Passover leaves us pondering the fundamentals of Judaism. This week we study the final Plague of the Firstborns. We also examine central tenets in Judaism, and ask why they are tenets.

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### Weekly Parsha

## Emor

RABBI BERNARD FOX

**"When you reap your land's harvest, do not completely harvest the corner of your field. Do not collect the stalks that have fallen. Leave these to the poor and the stranger. I am Hashem you G-d."** (VaYikra 23:22)

One Shabbat I was leaving the synagogue accompanied by my oldest

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## Subjective Justice

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Written by student

**"Do not curse the deaf and before the blind do not place a stumbling block, and you shall fear your God, I am God."** (Leviticus, 19:14) Why would a person commit these two sins, and what is the relationship between these sins, and the verse's conclusion, that we should "fear God"? Are we not to fear God as a reason for ALL of the commands?

We must appreciate why this person sins against the blind and the deaf. In both cases, no one else knows his sin: the deaf cannot hear his insults, and the blind do not know of his trap. But the flaw

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## THE PLAGUE OF THE FIRST BORN

MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Immediately prior to Moses' descent to Egypt to address Pharaoh for the first time, we read the following:

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## TENETS

PRIORITIZING OUR VALUES

**Reader:** I read with approval your article on Punishment and Heaven, and came across the section on "Tenets of Judaism" to which I fully agree. My question is are these "tenets" listed in the Torah? Have you simply established them, and from where? In particular, from where is the section of the tenets where God rewards and punishes? I am sick and tired of hearing from my fellow Jews that I can go against or question these "tenets" because God will forgive me if I am wrong,

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## Tenets

since He is merciful. The tenets establish a line, with no ifs, ands, or buts. Therefore, there is no reason to question them or discuss them. Just like one and one are two. Any discussion is meaningless...end of discussion on the matter, so I say.

I give a talk to my fellow Jews every Shabbos and would like backup information on this item.

**Mesora:** Judaism's tenets, to which I refer, are Maimonides' formulations of the central ideas in Judaism. Those who feel they may violate them based on an assumed system of justice where God forgives anyone, is baseless and defies reason. God granted mankind intelligence, certainly to be used in the most fundamental of areas: knowledge of God. Rabbi Bachya, author of "Duties of the Heart", explains based on Torah verses that we falter when we do not engage our minds in any area of Torah. One is wrong when saying "Man can go against or question these tenets because God will forgive one who is wrong, since He is merciful." Just the opposite is true: God will hold accountable he or she who did not use their mind and question a matter. Why else would God give man intelligence, if he was not to engage it? It is only through questioning that we learn, and that we realize new truths. We are born ignorant, and must question matters until we die. So although these tenets form a line as you say with no "ifs, ands, or buts", these tenets are not an area where we must blindly accept...knowledge is the opposite of faith. Knowledge by definition refers to something acquired by our mind through reasoning and proofs, until we see such an idea as true. Only then have we learned, and only then are our words reflective of convictions. And conviction is the point at which man fulfills his obligation, due to his receipt of intelligence.

The tenets are not to be viewed as matters we cannot question. The converse is the truth: we MUST question them. Otherwise, we will not "agree" with them, by simple parroting. For if man simply parrots these fundamentals, he in fact does not understand them. He might as well be mumbling incoherent sounds. Man's objective is to arrive at new truths. And we only perceive a truth when it conforms to what we view as real. This may be a lengthy process of thinking at times, but without thought, we cannot examine a newly found idea, all of its ramifications, or test its validity. It is only when we engage our minds in this type of analysis that we may eventuate at a conclusion that something is either "true" or "false". And only upon this discovery, can we say that we "know" something. With diligent study we can arrive at Maimonides' reasoning for listing his 13 Principles as the core principles of Judaism. It was with reasoning, and not acceptance, that Maimonides arrived at these principles himself. Certainly,

Maimonides would agree what he did is proper, that is, to use reasoning as the means of arriving at these truths. His very act of formulating these fundamentals obligates his readers to use reason.

You may ask what difference the tenets play, as compared to other Torah ideas, that is, what makes a tenet a "tenet"? But this question is much broader: we are really asking how to "evaluate" Torah principles, and how to "prioritize" them. The truth is, the students of Rabbi Shimone ben Yochai did this very thing and compared the commandments, seeking to determine which ones are more important than others. (Talmud Moade Katan 9a) Their actions were proper, and even supported by King Solomon's words: "Weigh the course of your feet, and all your ways will be established." (Proverbs, 4:26) This means that when one is confronted with two Torah commands, he or she should judge which command is more important, and select the greater command. This Talmudic portion clearly teaches that we must know what is more central.

There are an array of facets belonging to both, the commands and the fundamentals: who they affect, who must perform them, when they are applicable, when they may be overridden, if they may be overridden, and so much more. Therefore, it is not simple to determine which command or fundamental is truly "more important" than another. We wonder, by what measurement do we determine this? Additionally, these two (commands and fundamentals) are distinct at times, and merge together in a command at others. For example, we must know the fundamental truth that the Torah is from Moses, but there is no "command" to obtain this knowledge. We must also know that prophecy exists, as this teaches us an essential idea; that God relates to man and imparts wisdom to us. But there is no command to obtain this

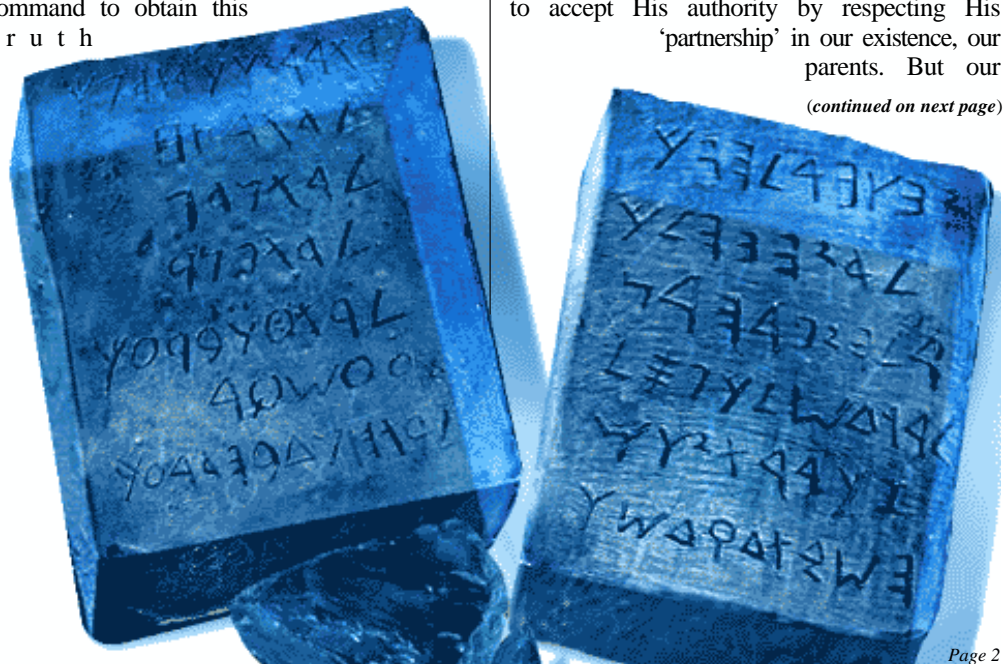
t r u t h

either. But regarding knowledge of God, it is both a fundamental and a command, as it is the first of the Ten Commandments. Why are some ideas fundamentals, but are not "commands"? Although an intriguing question, this is a large study. We do not know what God knows, and therefore we cannot answer in any absolute terms "why" something is a command, and why another is not. But we may definitely attempt to determine what is of more primary status.

## Truths

Now, depending on the measuring rod used, an evaluation will yield different results. To start, the most basic Torah categories are 1) true ideas and 2) correct morality, or "thoughts" and "values". This very distinction of truths versus morals and which are more important in each was not simply left to the fortunate ones among us to decide. The Ten Commandments actually serve this purpose. We may have wondered why God gave these Ten Commandments, if He also gave the entire Torah that includes them. But the Ten Commandments are not redundant. They are "ordered fundamentals". The first five address our relationship with God, i.e., truths, while the second five address correct morality, or our relationship with mankind. Additionally, both sets (explaining why they were written on two tablets and not one) are ordered in decreasing importance. Knowledge of God precedes idolatry, which precedes using God's name in vain, which precedes the Sabbath, which precedes honoring parents. We understand that Knowledge of God must come first, and then based on this truth, idolatry must not be followed. Then we must not disrespect Him, using His name in vain. We enable others to learn about God by mimicking His creation and His rest, so we rest on the Sabbath. Finally, we instill in ourselves a path to accept His authority by respecting His 'partnership' in our existence, our parents. But our

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## Tenets

approach to Him by respecting parents (authority) is of less importance than our public affirmation for the world of His role as Creator (Sabbath).

The order of the second tablet is: Do not kill; do not commit adultery; do not kidnap; do not bear false testimony; and do not desire what is your neighbor's. The prohibition of murder must precede all other acts, as this destroys society's members. Next, adultery destroys not the person, but the harmony and the family unit, and kidnapping affects only one person by location and domination, and it is also not permanent, as is adultery. These three are all 'actions', so lying in court, which is "words", is less significant than action, and our own feelings of "desiring our neighbor's home or wife" is in our hearts, and of even lesser significance and affect so it comes last. With two sets of five, in the Ten Commandments, God imparted to us both; what are fundamentals, and an order of importance. In fact, Saadia Gaon stated that these commands are the headings for all the remaining commands. In truth, these are ten "Sayings", (Aseress haDibros) not ten "Commandments", as the second command actually includes more than one: do not accept other gods; do not create idols; do not bow to them; do not worship them. And the command of the Sabbath includes not only "remembering" the Sabbath, but also a negative command of "not working".

We derive more than ten ideals from these laws. We learn the most primary concept: man must acknowledge his Creator over all else. And even though reason demands there is a Cause for the universe, we learn that a "law" is necessary. This means that man is obliged to acknowledge God, and not from reason alone, but also religiously. With this, comes the realization that we know not what He is, as Moses told the people, "you only heard a voice but saw no form" on Sinai. Thus, idolatry is false, and any assumption about what God is must be false, as no one knows what He is. Isaiah too taught that nothing compares to God. Thus, when "God blew a soul into man", this does not mean God breathes or that He places a "part of Himself" in man. God does not equate to anything, including the phenomenon of division. Hence, God has no parts, and man's soul is created, not a "piece" of God. That is heretical. We learn that an attitude of praise (not taking Him in vain) must prevail towards God, and this may be engendered if one studies the world and sees all the good He has bestowed on mankind. We learn that thanks and appreciation are essential, but this is predicated on the idea that a "relationship" exists. The fact that God relates to man and does good, gives reality to praying to Him: we may voice our needs to the One who already demonstrated that He wishes us good. The numerous stories in the Torah bear this out with emphasis. The command to observe Sabbath also carries with it the theme of

educating others, and not just Jews, as Maimonides teaches, we set ourselves as visual examples by abstaining from work while all others labor on the Sabbath. This distinction calls their attention, and when they inquire why we rest, we are enabled to respond and teach about God, who created and rested. God's name becomes publicized.

But we also must note that these commandments were not given in a vacuum. The very fact that these laws were "given" teaches God's awareness of man and His concern for our good. This in turn demands that we maintain a justice system, as God desires the good for more than just myself, but for all men, as is seen by His wish that all men follow His law.

Maimonides understood the need to clarify the fact that there are "Torah fundamentals" in addition to commands, and formulated his 13 Principles. We owe him a great debt of gratitude. These are the most primary ideas we must obtain regarding God and reality. These also are to function as the foundations of our remaining knowledge. For example, knowledge of the laws of Succah is not as important as knowledge of what God is, and is not. For by living in a Succah, we seek to fulfill God's command. However, if our notion of God is incorrect, then so is our performance of Succah, or any law for that matter. One cannot be described as fulfilling "God's will", if one's idea of God is that He is physical, or a man, or something else which is false. Similarly, if one places a mezuzah thinking it protects him, he misses the point. But this error is traceable to an incorrect idea of life: he feels his body and physical health and wealth surpass his knowledge of God in importance. Therefore, he looks to the Torah's commands to insure what he values, instead of looking to what the Torah values. He projects his wishes onto the Torah, thinking he is living in line with God's true intent. His error is borne out of his lack of knowledge of Judaism's fundamentals. The fundamental he is missing is that our purpose is knowledge, not wealth or health. Of course these latter two are important, but only when they serve the former - when they drive towards securing a life of knowledge. But in themselves as ends, the Torah places no importance.

We thereby learn, that simply following the commands, but not spending time thinking, learning, and inculcating the Torah's fundamentals and underlying truths, we may waste our lives. The words of the Rabbis are indispensable for this crucial task.

### Morals

This first example addresses the former category, ideas. An example of the latter (morality) is as follows: We find many Jews who are devoted to attending Temple every morning, but may be

dishonest business people. Here too we find a disproportionate approach to Judaism: this type of character lacks inner perfection and a sense of justice, as he is happy to cheat others. He lives an unbalanced lifestyle, and has not apprehended what is more fundamental. For some reason, he prioritizes Temple attendance over honesty. Perhaps social venues are more important to him than his private life with God; he needs others to see him in Temple each week. He needs approval. But this uncovers his flaw: he respects man more than God. Or, perhaps he does not view death as a reality, as he possesses no fear of punishment in the next life, so he steals. Again, his activities display his underlying lack of knowledge of Torah fundamentals: as punishment, death, and the next world are all fundamental truths. His ability to steal from others may be indicative of his lack of these fundamentals. Alternatively, this crook may cheat as a means of revenge, again, displaying his value system as needing to satisfy the infantile 'revenge' emotion. A fundamental is missing in him: he feels that his inner emotional needs must be catered to, instead of mastering them, and living in accord with the command not to take revenge. However, honesty is far more important than attending Temple. For without honesty, man is corrupt. Additionally, the Rabbis teach, the fulfillment of a command cannot erase a sin, and God takes no bribes. As the Rabbis say, "a mitzvah does not extinguish a sin." The only means to vacate one's self of a sin, is to see his error, regret his act, and commit to never returning down that sinful path. (Sforno, Deut. 1:17) The reason the Rabbis wrote this is because they were addressing a real phenomenon: people do think by doing a command, they are forgiven for a sin. But this is false.

A person would be wise to confront himself or herself and honestly examine if he or she is lacking any fundamentals. "And you shall know today, and return it to your heart, that God is God in heaven above and on Earth below, there is no other." (Deuteronomy 4:29) God demands of us that we must learn, but then we must place it on our heart - we must see it as a truth and feel convinced. This conviction only occurs after we engage our minds and use reasoning, removing all possibilities of fallacy and removing all our emotional doubts. Then, and only then, do we "know" anything. And when we do, and we possess this conviction, we are moved by this realization of reality. We were designed to enjoy truth over all else. We were designed to have the most pleasant lives. But we must prioritize our learning, and immediately reflect to determine if we really know the fundamentals of Judaism. To start this path, study Maimonides' 13 Principles. I also urge your read of Duties of the Heart, especially the author's introduction. These two areas should serve only as a starting point. ■

## Weekly Parsha

of such a transgressor is that he cares only about the social arena: if no man knows his error, he is content. He does not gauge his values based on God's approval or disapproval, but on man's. It is essential that our estimation of morality depend on objective truths, i.e., God's Torah, and not on social approval. For this reason, this area concludes with "and you shall fear your God." Man must be reminded of He, who is the true judge, and to whom man must answer to.

**"Do not be crooked in judgment; do not favor the poor and do not adorn the wealthy; with righteousness judge your people."** (Leviticus, 19:15) What would motivate a judge – to whom this is addressed – to find someone innocent guilty, and vice versa?

Rashi says that a judge might be faced with a court case between a wealthy man and a poor man. And although the wealthy man is thought innocent by this judge, he may be prompted to consider that the wealthy man must give charity anyway, so he will invert the ruling, favoring the poor man – even though guilty – and he will force the innocent wealthy man to give the

poor man money. We see that a judge may overstep his role – to seek exact justice – and feel he may play God. Since his role is justice, he may feel it is valid to achieve a good ends, through crooked means. But this is the lesson: a judge must act with justice, as the verse concludes, "with righteousness judge your people." The judge has no rights to act outside of his designated role, and must be on guard to humble himself before God who limits his actions to Torah principles, and go no further. It may be a good intent to assist the poor, but not through crookedness in judgment.

The next case is where one might feel he wishes not to defame a rich man, so he too might alter the judgment in his favor to save face. This too is corrupt. But we wonder, may we derive anything from the order of these two cases? I believe the first case is placed first, as it is a greater corruption. For in this first case, the judge feels what he does is actually a 'good': he feels that the ends justify the means, and that he is justified in stealing from the rich to feed the poor. This is far worse than a judge who knows he errs, but does so. The former actually corrupts his thinking, not only his actions. ▣

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## Weekly Parsha

son – Yosef. On our way home we passed an older gentleman and he and I entered into a brief conversation. Yosef asked me who this man was. I told Yosef that although this gentleman led a quiet, humble life, he was a very remarkable person. This man was not a wealthy person. Yet, many years before he had invested a significant portion of his savings into an endowment devoted to supporting Torah education. I explained that people think that endowments are created only by wealthy people. But this gentleman realized that he did not need to be wealthy to make a difference through creating an endowment. He only needed to make tzedaka, a priority.

I have been involved in raising funds for many years. It is a difficult responsibility. But the reason for the difficulty may not be because there is not enough funds out there. Perhaps, the reason it is so difficult is because – unlike this special gentleman – so many people are willing to fulfill their minimum obligation. I am convinced that if each Jew gave the required ten percent of their income to tzedaka, we would have no problem funding community's needs. But instead of each person fulfilling this individual requirement, there is a tendency to dodge the responsibility of giving and insist that it someone else's job. Now, since everyone can think of someone else that should have the responsibility, it is very difficult to make progress. A friend of mine is fond of saying that to raise funds you don't need to find people with deep pockets. You need to find the ones with long arms!

Why do so many not fulfill their responsibility of giving tzedaka? How should we respond to these attitudes? These are questions addressed in this week's parasha.

One of the subjects discussed at length in this week's parasha is the festivals. The Torah briefly describes each – beginning with Pesach and ending with Succot and Shemini Atzeret. However, there is an odd element in this discussion. In the middle of the narrative – directly after describing the festival of Shavuot – the Torah mentions the mitzvot of Peah and Leket. These mitzvot both involve the harvest. When a field is harvested, any stalks of grain that fall during collection must be left for the poor. This is the mitzvah of Leket. The mitzvah of Peah requires that the corner of the field not be harvested. Instead, this portion of the field is left for the needy. Why are these two mitzvot inserted into the middle of the discussion of the festivals?

Rashi offers an enigmatic answer. He explains that the Torah is intentionally juxtaposing the mitzvot of Peah and Leket with the description of the festivals in order to direct our attention to a common quality. In the discussion of the festivals, the Torah mentions that each requires its own sacrifices. The juxtaposition is intended to teach us that through observing the mitzvot of Peah and Leket, one is regarded as if he has rebuilt the Beit

HaMikdash and offered sacrifices.[1] The difficulty with Rashi's explanation is that it is not clear the observance of the mitzvot of Peah and Leket can be equated with building the Beit HaMikdash and offering sacrifices.

In order to understand Rashi's comments, we must begin by understanding some of the common, curious behaviors that people have regarding their wealth and the attitudes that underlie these behaviors. Let's begin with the behaviors. We sometimes find that individuals that are relatively scrupulous in their observance of halacha are not completely honest and ethical in business practices. Furthermore, even among those that are upright and ethical in business dealing, some do not fulfill their obligation in regards to tzedaka. What are the attitudes that underlie these behaviors? First, there is clearly a dichotomy that is being made between religious life and business dealings. One who is less than ethical in business but otherwise observant, apparently feels that Hashem has His domain within our personal lives. He has the right to require that we fulfill our religious rituals – Shabbat observance, davening, observing the laws of kashrut – but He has no right to manage our professional lives or business dealings. With this attitude this person dichotomizes and separates his life into two portions. In one portion he is faithful to Hashem. In the other, he is completely his own master.

Second, this person feels that his wealth is his own. He feels that although Hashem has a right to make demands upon us, He is not the master of our wealth. This attitude is closely related to a third attitude.

It seems that these behaviors reflect a world view regarding one's own mastery over one's personal fate. A person who excludes Hashem from his professional and business life, apparently believes that he does not need Hashem in this area. He is the master of his own fate. His own decisions control his fate. He is wise enough to secure his own success and does not need assistance from Hashem. It is not surprising that a person with this attitude will also feel that Hashem has no place in directing how one's wealth should be used. If a person has earned his wealth without Hashem, why should Hashem tell this person how to use it?

Now, let us return to Rashi's comments. Rashi equates the observance of the mitzvot of Peah and Leket with the building of the Beit HaMikdash and the offering of sacrifices. We all recognize that service in the Beit HaMikdash is a form of serving Hashem. But not everyone recognizes that the manner in which one conducts oneself with personal wealth is also a form of service to Hashem. A person who dichotomizes recognizes that we must serve Hashem. But through the dichotomizing the person eliminates Hashem from his a part of his life – his relationship with his personal wealth. Rashi's comments attack this

dichotomy. One cannot relegate service to Hashem to the Beit HaMikdash. Service to Hashem pervades all elements of our lives. We serve Hashem not only in the synagogue but also in the manner in which we manage and relate to our wealth.

Gershonides offers another perspective on the juxtaposition in our parasha. He observes that the festivals of Pesach and Shavuot both involve elements relating to the harvest season. On Pesach, the Omer sacrifice is offered. This offering is brought from the first barley grain of the harvest. On Shavuot the Sh'tai HaLechem – the Two Loaves – are offered. This offering is the first grain offering of the harvest brought from fine wheat. Both offerings have a single theme. They are expressions of thanks to Hashem for the bounty of the harvest. They are intended to reinforce the recognition that we are dependant on Hashem for our wealth. Our wealth is not merely a result of our own wits and wisdom. We need the help of Hashem. Furthermore, Hashem does not bless us with this wealth so that we may do with it whatever we please. He requires that we use the wealth that He grants us as He directs. The mitzvot of Peah and Leket express the same theme. Hashem granted us this wealth. He granted it to us with the expectation that we will support the needy. It is not ours to use exclusively as we please.[2]

Gershonides' comments directly address the second and third attitudes outlined above. To the person that feels that he is completely in control of his fate, the Torah provides a reminder that this is not the case. Control is an illusion. Without the assistance of Hashem, we are helpless. We are also not the masters of our wealth. We have not earned it on our own. We only succeed through Hashem's benevolence. So, it follows that Hashem has every right to direct us in its use.

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## Weekly Parsha

One of the most fascinating explanations of the juxtaposition in our parasha is offered by Sforno. Sforno begins by adopting Gershonides' approach. He explains that the grain offerings of Pesach and Shavuot are designed to remind us of Hashem's role in our material success. But Sforno adds that the Torah commands us in the mitzvot of Peah and Leket as a means to retain our wealth. Hashem tells us that if we wish to retain our wealth, we must share it with the less fortunate. Sforno continues by referencing an interesting set of statements of the Sages. The Sages comment, "What is the salt – the preservative – of wealth? Giving from one's wealth." Other Sages phrase the lesson somewhat differently. "What is the salt – the preservative – of wealth? Performing acts of kindness." [3],[4]

The general message of Sforno's comments is easy to identify. Hashem gives us wealth. He rewards us and allows us to retain our wealth, if we fulfill our obligations towards the needy. If we ignore these obligations, we cannot expect Hashem to continue to act towards us with benevolence.

However, the comments from the Sages are more difficult to understand. More specifically, the Sages expressed their message in two slightly different comments. What is the precise difference between these two comments? Rashi provides some assistance. He explains that according to the first version of the Sages' comments, preservation of wealth requires that we reduce our wealth by giving to others. We can use Rashi's comments to understand more clearly the two perspectives contained in these two slightly different comments of the Sages.

The second version of the Sages' comments corresponds closely with Sforno's message. Hashem requires that we help the needy. He will only reward us with retention of our wealth, if we perform acts of kindness. But there is an additional subtle message in the first version. According to the first version, it is not enough that we perform acts of kindness. We must demonstrate a proper attitude towards our wealth. We cannot become so attached to our wealth that we cannot give from it. We must be willing to adopt an objective attitude towards our wealth and recognize that its accumulation is not an end in itself. We must be willing to step back and recognize that our wealth is a means to a greater end. If we cannot use our wealth appropriately, we cannot retain it.

To this point, we have interpreted Sforno's comments as an insight into Hashem's providence. In other words, Sforno is telling us that there is message in the pasuk regarding Hashem's relationship to us. He rewards and punishes. We need to act according the prescribed commands of the Torah in order to receive the reward and avoid punishment. However, there is another possible way to understand Sforno's message.

The way we relate to wealth is fascinating. We

feel that wealth brings us happiness. The more wealth we acquire, the happier we will be. But I have noticed that anecdotally this does not seem to be true. We all know people that are relatively wealthy but seem unhappy. And we know others that struggle financially but seem very content in life. If our attitude towards wealth is correct, we would expect there would be a direct correlation between financial success and happiness. But there is not obvious evidence that this correlation exists.

In fact a USC economist – Richard Easterlin – recently conducted and published a study on this issue. And he discovered that there is no correlation between wealth and happiness. The study, released in August of 2003, surveyed 1,500 people and concluded that, "people are no happier when they acquire greater wealth." One explanation for this phenomenon is that the assumption that wealth is associated with happiness is founded on a faulty premise. This premise is that happiness can be purchased – or secured through purchasing objects. Every person discovers that, regardless of how desirable some object may be, once acquired it soon loses its attraction. Once this initial discovery is made, a person can come to two conclusions. One conclusion is that he simply has not purchased the right thing. And if he continues to make more and more purchases, eventually happiness will be secured. If a person adopts this conclusion, each purchase and disappointment is followed by an even more desperate attempt to buy happiness. This cycle can continue endlessly. But Easterlin's study suggests that the initial purchase and disappointment points to an alternative conclusion. Happiness cannot be purchased. As long as a person continues to pursue happiness through acquiring wealth and then purchasing more objects, the cycle of fantasy, purchase, and disappointment will continue – endlessly. Instead, happiness must be found elsewhere. Maybe, Sforno and our Sages are suggesting that happiness comes from spiritual development. One who wishes to maintain his wealth – for his wealth to be meaningful – must learn to relate to his wealth from a more spiritual perspective. As long as a person's attention remains focused on wealth and acquisition, happiness will evade the person. But once a person steps back and objectifies – once a person considers his wealth as a gift that can help others and advances to a more spiritual level of function – then happiness can be secured. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 23:22.

[2] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), pp. 340-341.

[3] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, 23:22.

[4] Mesechet Ketubot 67b.

## Students

## Yosef's Column

YOSEF ROTH



# Right Ideas

## WRONG IMPRESSIONS

In this weeks parsha we mention the mitzvah of shaking the lulav. In Gemaras Succah we are told that when Rava shook his lulav he would say "May this be a dagger in the eye of the Satan." The Rabbis told Rava that he should not continue this practice because all it will do is enrage the Satan. What does this statement of Rava mean? Does the Satan really get angry if you say that? And furthermore what is wrong by enraging the Satan? Often when the Torah talks about a wrong idea it refers to it as the Satan. Performing mitzvos stops your wrong ideas and shows you the right way. This would explain why Rava said "May this be a dagger in the eye of the Satan". This act should take away your false ideas. Why then did the Rabbis prevent you from saying such a thing? How will making this statement enrage the Satan? The answer is that the rabbis thought you would get the wrong idea. You would think that by shaking the lulav you are 'literally' putting a dagger in the eye of the Satan. This idea is wrong so the rabbis said you should not say this. ■

The JewishTimes is happy to announce a new column, "Yosef's Column", delivered by our young friend Yosef Roth. He invites other young students to contribute your Divrei Torah. Email your Torah to Yosef here: [yosef@mesora.org](mailto:yosef@mesora.org)

# CHASSIDUS: HONESTY IN IDENTIFYING TORAH DEVIATION

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** Shalom! I read your article titled “Praying to the Dead”. I am a little confused and need some direction. Firstly I like to know your Jewish denomination. Secondly I like to know how you feel about Chabad and Chassidic movement. Is your objection aimed toward the reader, or all of Chassidic movement? I have started becoming more observant recently and am very attracted to the Chabad movement and attending a Chabad shul. Do you have any further instruction for me to follow my spiritual journey? Thank you, Nissan

**Mesora:** The article to which you respond attacks a specific practice, not the entire group. However, feel free to search our site to read of other deviations in Chassidus, which violate Torah. It comes prior in this discussion to define “Chassidus”. If it refers to a system of truths based in Torah, then in fact, it is “Torah”, not Chassidus. And if we refer to ideas extraneous to Torah, then it is not proper to follow, as God did not miss any points. Chassidus cannot create “anew” anything said to be Torah. So one must distill what is meant by Chassidus. Chassidus is just a few hundred years old. Notions central to Chassidus veer from original Judaism in two dominant themes: in distinguished clothing/hairstyles, and in their beliefs. Judaism does not ask that one wear black, or grow a beard. I am certain no Chassidic group would accept as their leader, as their Rebbe, a clean-shaven man. That is absurd, to judge man based on facial hair. In the Prophet Tzefania 1:8, Radak discusses how God punished certain Jews who dressed different than the rest of the people, they desired to look more distinct and pious. The Radak calls their ways “evil”. This makes sense that they were punished. As God did not command Jews in a certain dress (other than prohibiting cross-gender-dressing, dressing in idolatrous garb, and immodesty) the step Chassidim took to dress in black and white is not part of Judaism or Torah. And if one would claim this is a “religious” issue,

he violates the prohibition to add to the Torah. There is no obligation to grow a beard or dress in black and white. If these were important actions, God would have commanded them. But He did not, so we should not seek dress or hairstyling as a means of approaching God, because it has nothing to do with approaching Him. A wicked man would be no more perfected if he grew a beard, and a righteous man loses nothing if he shaves.

Another deviation is their focus on Rebbees, and all the fabricated stories of their miracles. Rebbees became more popular than God. And miracles became an inherent attribute – essential for validating a Rebbe. Conversely, God does not say miracles are necessary to validate one’s piety, nor are they possible for man to enact. It is clear that these Chassidim do not value a Jew as following God on the highest plane, unless he performs miracles. This is unfortunate, as these Chassidim will invariably meet other Jews who are good, but they will not value them as much as those surrounded by miraculous stories. This approach veers from Judaism’s fundamental, that perfection is internal; it is due to one’s knowledge and application of truths to his life, his concern for others, and his diligent adherence to mitzvot, while avoiding sin. Chassidism praises something else as the mark of man’s perfection: miraculous stories. If miracles or prophetic visions validate someone, then Bilaam and Lavan – two evil people – should be vindicated by their visions. But they remain evil, so miracles or prophetic vision are proven not to be validation of one’s perfection.

I don’t see why one feels obligated to recognize this movement as a “Torah” movement – I see it as purely “cultural”. If one wishes to follow the accurate teachings of Chassidus, he is free to do so, provided he avoids the errors initiated by some original Chassidim. Originally, Chassidim felt that God permeates all, even sin, so they allowed a “Tzaddik” to sin, as they felt there is some “Godliness” in sin too. These were grave mistakes.

**Reader:** Then is there a way to separate the good (“Judaism’s original form”) from the bad (“other deviations in Chassidus”)?

**Mesora:** The way to separate true from false, is first to learn clearly what are Judaism’s tenets, understand why they are true, and finally, be careful to observe them and avoid any deviations. There is no need to become part of a group, or to assume that since a “group” exists, even in large numbers, that their numbers in any way validates their views. But this is most difficult for a large majority of men and women; people automatically, with absolutely no thought, will attribute validity to opinions when vocalized by a group of large numbers, or one of recognized status. But according to this position, Christianity too must be recognized as true. You see, this position ends in an irresolvable contradiction.

Continue engaging in regular, honest Torah study, and fulfill the commands. Study the commands, learn why they are reasonable and why God desires we observe them. Most importantly, understand the ideas behind each command, as much as you can. Torah study and understanding is the most important activity. Do not be swayed by what the Jewish masses do, for they deviate in many areas. Rather, be guided by the Torah’s words, the Rabbis, and the great thinkers, who will teach you through their writings what makes sense - what is true Judaism.

A Rabbi recently lectured that we view the command as a means to understand the underlying themes of Torah. “Kedoshim tehiyu” (be sanctified) teaches that even with that which is permissible, one must seek to sanctify himself. One must not overeat or engage too frequently in sex. Although permissible actions, one who acts this way is referred to as “disgusting within the boundaries of Torah law”. Hence, he who keeps all the commands, bereft of the understanding of their higher objective, sorely misses the goal of perfection. ■



## Letters

## WHAT MUST WE DEFEND:

MAN  
OR TRUTH?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** I was about to send your writing about the red bendels to a friend who put one on her baby. Then I saw your reference to heresy in Tanya. God protect us from narrow minds, which think there is only one face to the Torah, and deny the other 69. I am not a Chabad-nick, but you have lost all credibility in my eyes as a serious source of Torah information.

**Mesora:** Then you must also classify Rambam in this negative light, for it is he who said what we quoted.

**Reader:** Really? The Rambam called the Tanya heretical? Did you attend the Time Travelers' conference at M.I.T. by any chance?

**Mesora:** Evidently your basic studies are not complete, as you have omitted his 13 Principles from your reading. Your humor unveils this.

**Reader:** There are opinions that the 13 Principals were intended by the Rambam as a simplification for people who did not have the resources to learn in depth. I apologize in that I do not recall the source. I am always skeptical when people attribute their strong-minded views to Rambam, as it is too easy to quote him out of context, to prove whatever one wants to prove. The best example of this is Chabad identifying Moshiach.

**Mesora:** I advise you read the 13 Principles for yourself in Hebrew, at the back of Talmud Sanhedrin in Perek "Chalek". See also Rambam's Yesodei HaTorah - the first few chapters. It will be clear to you that Tanya does

in fact suggest God has parts, against the Rambam, against all reason, and this statement is clearly heretical. We must not be afraid to speak the truth, even if it opposes the masses. You will also learn that Rambam's 13 Principles are not for simpletons, but they include fundamentals, necessary knowledge for all Jews.

**Reader:** I suggest we end this discussion before it becomes a machlokes (argument) that is not le-shaym shamayim

**Mesora:** If you fear you might enter that realm of "lo lshame shamayim" (for the sake of truth) by all means decide for yourself. But my last email was written with a true feeling that you might be willing to accept Rambam's words, and thereby benefit. My intent was for your good.

**Reader:** I'm worried about the discussion. I am not one of those who insisted that the Rambam's books be burned. I am concerned about your approach of seeming to have the only right view of Torah (or of Rambam- as you know, Rav Shach's ZT"L dispute with Chabad started over Chabad's teaching Rambam as Halacha). To say there is only one right understanding of Torah is a "maytzar" mind. A narrow mind is one that didn't experience Yetziyat Mitzrayim. Certainly, the Gemara is not a reflection of "there's only one answer."

**Mesora:** Regarding your concern that one (me) is in error to feel he has the sole right view, please think about this: Every Rabbi who voiced



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## Letters

an opinion against another, be he a Rishon, Acharon, Amora, etc....this act of disagreement means he did not accept the other opinion, but felt he had to follow his mind. He felt his view was correct, and the other view was wrong. Derech haTorah is to be honest, and not simply accept someone, regardless of his title. Therefore, Aharon HaKohane argued against the greatest prophet, Moshe. Aharon was correct to follow his mind, and it so happens that he was right on this occasion, and Moshe was wrong. Moshe conceded the argument to him. The Baal Tanya too can be wrong. "Ayn tzaddik Baaretz she-yaaseh tove v'lo chata." If Moshe can be wrong, the Baal Tanya too can be wrong. Can you accept this?

**Reader:** That I can. "Heresy" I can't. You write, "We define this quote from Tanya as absolute heresy." Those are fighting words that provoke disunity amongst the Jewish people. If your main preoccupation was truth, you could have easily entitled your essay "Rambam versus Tanya" or "Serious concerns about some points in Tanya." Why don't you find a less provocative way of saying the same thing? I can't forward your comments to any Chabad rabbis for their opinions, because there is no "rechilus leshaym shamayim." People might mistakenly think you simply want to start fights amongst Jews, God forbid. The Baal HaTanya has enough credibility amongst Chassidim, Misnagdim, and the Jewish Torah world at large, that for you to accuse him of heresy reflect badly only on you.

I am the Webmaster for a large Orthodox shul. I link our site to many learning sites. I would never link to something that promotes friction between Jews like Mesora.org. Why not pursue peace, like Aaron whom you discussed earlier, and re-word your writings about the Tanya?

**Mesora:** Lack of severity in verbally addressing heresy, suggests heresy is a casual issue. When desirous of alarming others to flee from that which forfeits their Olam Haba, one must not engage words, which mitigate the fatality of losing Olam Haba. One must be "hakhay es shinav".

You said you could accept the Baal Tanya being wrong, but not that the statement is heresy. Please see the Rambam I quoted. Judge the statement on its own merit; you cannot compromise a wrong because you wish to defend the author. I also see that you brought in to this discussion your position as a webmaster for a large website, or shul. Why should this matter to me? Why should that matter to you?

Are you out for truth, or to try and intimidate me with your position of creating links on your site for so many to see? I care less who you work for or who you know. I want you to see the truth. That is it.

**Reader:** You are a zealot.

**Mesora:** You have the facts - don't escape the issue. Calling me a zealot does not solve your dilemma. No man is perfect, and just because something is found in books does not make them absolute truths. The question remains: why you seek to defend a person, instead of truth.

**Reader:** No man is perfect, and just because he has an Internet site does not make him an authority on absolute truths. Can a mouse be victorious over a lion, such as the Baal HaTanya?

**Mesora:** That is correct, having a website makes no one an authority on truth. And according to your own reasoning, writing a book also plays no role in one's ability to discern truth. The Baal Tanya has no claim to absolute knowledge just because he wrote a book. Now, I don't know who wrote that heresy, but who ever wrote that God has parts and placed it into the Tanya, is clearly wrong.

If the mouse said  $2+2=4$  and the lion said it was 5, the king of the jungle would be dethroned. ■

## Students

# Parshas Emor

CHAIM TZVI MANN &  
RABBI REUVEN MANN

Parshas Emor comes right after Kedoshim and continues the subject of being holy. Most of Emor is directed at the Kohanim (priests) the special group from the tribe of Levi who go all the way back to Aaron, who were chosen by God to do the work in the Beis HaMikdash, the Temple. All Jews have to live a life of Kedusha (holiness) by controlling their desires and acting with respect, kindness and compassion. But the Kohanim who have a special mission to perform, must live by an even stricter set of rules.

The Kohanim are commanded not to become Tamay (defiled) by being in contact, or even in the same room with a dead body. Even today, Kohanim do not go to funerals or enter into a cemetery. However, an exception is made for the closest relatives of the Kohane. He is obligated to become Tamay for his seven close relatives – father, mother, sister, brother son, daughter and wife. This is true for an ordinary Kohane. During the time of the Beis HaMikdash, there was a Kohane Gadol (High Priest) who was in charge of the service in the Beis HaMikdash. He had an even higher level of Kedusha. He was not permitted to become Tamay to any dead person, even his closest relatives. This is because he was always supposed to be in a condition, which he could do the service, which secured atonement for all of B'nei Yisrael.

The spiritual needs of the B'nei Yisrael must always be the main concern of the Kohane Gadol. There was only one exception to this rule: it is called a Mase Mitzvah. This is where a person has died and there are no relatives or friends to bury him. If the Kohane Gadol is traveling and comes upon a Mase Mitzvah, he is commanded to become Tamay and engage in the mitzvah of burying the dead person. This teaches us that the mitzvah of Kavode Hamase (honor of the dead) is as important as the sacrifices that are brought for the B'nei Yisrael.

Today we do not have the Beis HaMikdash but we still keep the laws of purity because we believe that the Beis HaMikdash will soon be rebuilt and sacrifices will again be brought to atone for B'nei Yisrael.

May we have the privilege to see this in our lifetime. ■

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## The Plagues

*“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 a bit 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,

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## The Plagues

'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 loose 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. ■

## Footnotes:

[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.





# *a Dialogue on* *Idolatry*

DEBBY KOBRIN &  
RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



**Reader:** Dear Rabbi Ben-Chaim,

I was asked the following questions in a friendly conversation (we have many friendly conversations about religion), which I answered to the best of my ability. Would you please review my answers for accuracy? Many thanks! Debby Kobrin

**Jamie:** (Reform Jew): *I just don't see how someone can say you aren't welcome at a [synagogue] to worship God regardless of what that person does in their personal life. Isn't it up to God to determine these things?*

**Debby** (Me): According to traditional Judaism, God does indeed require Jews to judge others and - in certain circumstances - even excommunicate them. Yes, it is up to God. The Torah (including both the written and oral) is God's instruction manual for us. It is the original source and foundation of Jewish law. People who follow the law are law-abiding citizens.

**Jamie:** (Reform Jew): *It isn't the Rabbis' place to tell someone that they are wrong in what they believe and that they can't come and worship with us.*

**Debby:** According to traditional Judaism, it is precisely the Rabbi's job description to lead his congregation to increasingly uphold the commandments. Is a Jew ever

*unwelcome within a traditional Jewish congregation because of his belief? Yes, if his belief interferes with Jewish observance. (See below for a legal example.)*

**Bob:** (not a Jew): *[What about] an example of a Christian trying to attend a service at a temple and not being allowed to by the Rabbi?*

**Debby:** This is simply a legal issue. Legally, certain prayers can be recited only when Jews pray together as a minyan - a group that meets certain legal qualifications. What could make a group legally INVALID as a minyan? Well, for example, a minyan is legally invalid if it includes an individual who prays to a different (or "strange") god. Praying to a different god is called, "avodah zarah," which means "strange worship." This is usually shortened to the less accurate translation of "idolatry."

Even a Jew could legally invalidate a minyan and therefore must be excluded. For example, there's a new phenomenon of some Lubavitch Jews who have deified their late Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson. Naturally, their concept of god changed to accommodate the deification of their Rebbe. Therefore, when such a person prays, he's now praying to a different or "strange" god.

*It follows that such a person could not be included in a traditional Jewish minyan, because his avodah zarah would legally invalidate the minyan.*

Again, many thanks for your quick review!  
Sincerely, Debby

**Mesora:** Fine job Debby.

**Debby:** I understand a minyan of ten adult Jewish males is not legally valid if one of the ten deifies the Rebbe. May I please take another step? What if the individual that deifies the Rebbe (let's call this individual Sam) is the eleventh person instead of the tenth? Does Sam's participation impact the legal status of the minyan that's formed by the other ten people (not including Sam)? If yes, what is the legal principle at work? Thanks again, Debby

**Mesora:** I thought of that question too. I don't know yet, but the ten Kosher Jews will not accept the 11th heretic as part of their union. I don't see why the 11th's "presence" would affect the Kosher status of the 10, and render them all unfit as a Minyan. But there is precedence; if an uncircumcised man joins in the eating of the Passover Lamb, he renders it unfit. But, in this case too, perhaps his mere presence - w/o eating - may be inconsequential. I have to think about it, and ask other Rabbis, Moshe.

**Debby:** Here's another thought offered by my son, Gil Kobrin. He explained to me that a Jew couldn't pray in a place of idol worship - avodah zarah. From this, Gil is extrapolating the possibility that a Christian renders any place in which he is praying as a "place" of idolatry - and therefore Jews may not also pray in any place in which a Christian is praying. What do you think? Would you please keep me posted on your findings from other Rabbis?

**Mesora:** A Christian or idolater cannot render a "place" idolatrous, as the objective significance of a place overshadows the subjective use of the idolater. Thus, an idolater's worship of the ocean for example, cannot render the ocean prohibited from use, unlike the case with movables. He could render movables (objects) idolatrous. This is because an object's designation is man made, and once a man uses it for idolatry, it is subordinated to this usage, and becomes prohibited. Maimonides discusses this in his Laws of Idolatry (Mishneh Torah) chapter 8.

I will keep you posted on my findings.

Moshe Ben-Chaim ■