



"If you search for it like silver, and seek it like buried treasures, then will you comprehend knowledge of God, and the fear of God will you find."

King Solomon, Proverbs 2:4-5

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of Jewish Beliefs and Practices*

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IN THIS ISSUE:

RACHEL'S DISGRACE	I, 2
DEIFICATION OF MAN	I, 3
WISDOM AND SUFFERING	I, 2
DIVINE PROVIDENCE	2
PRIESTLY BLESSINGS	3
AVRAHAM'S JEWEL	3

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Rachel's Disgrace

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

My friend's wife asked, in Genesis, 30:23, upon her birth of her first son after being barren, Rachel our matriarch said, "God has gathered in (removed) my disgrace". Rachel said this as she was relieved, finally having a child. The simple explanation is that her disgrace was her being barren, and now it was finally removed. However, Rashi states a Midrashic interpretation, "All the time a woman has no son, there is no other person upon whom her guilt may be placed. Once she has a son, it is cast upon him; as in, 'who broke that vessel, your son', 'who ate those dates, your son.'"

(continued on page 2)

Deification of Man

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

I recently had a conversation with an individual regarding her firm commitment in the absolute perfection of her "rebbe". She told me that she heard from her friends that he healed people, and did many miracles. She also said that a tzadik never makes a mistake, so he couldn't. She was also told to check her mezuzos when one is sick.

What is the Torah's view on elevating a human being to this level?

Rambam addresses these issues. In Hilchos Yisoday HaTorah, (8:1) Rambam states clearly that "(the children of) Israel did not believe in Moses due to the miracles which he performed. For one who believes based on miracles, there is doubt in his heart, perhaps he did the miracle out of trickery or slight of hand".

Rambam shows that miracles do not work to validate one's level.

Furthermore, for those who idolize a person by thinking he is the messiah due to so called miracles, I have one question...where is the performance of a miracle a requirement for one to be viewed as the messiah? Again, Rambam addresses this in the Mishne Torah, Kings (11:4), "If there arises a king from the house of David, who keeps the Torah, involved in the mitzvos, like David his father, according to the written and oral Torah, and he causes all Jews to follow this Torah, and he strengthens them in keeping the minutia, and he fights the wars of Hashem, he then has a potential status of being the messiah. If he does this and is successful, and rebuilds the Temple on its original ground, and gathers the dispersed Jews, he is then definitely the messiah." Does the Rambam say anything about miracles? No.

Additionally, how could a rebbe do more miracles than Elisha or Eliyahu who did only 16 and 8 miracles respectively? According to this person, her rebbe did many more miracles than

(continued on page 3)



ASK YOUR CHILDREN:

"Should we follow what everyone else does, or should we follow what makes sense?"
Have your children email us with their answers: questions@mesora.org

Wisdom and Suffering

RIVKA OLENICK

"When a person suffers any type of misfortune, he/she should use it as a cue to arouse his/her improvement." Chovos Halvovos Brochos 5a; 7-6.

We should do everything possible to protect ourselves and avoid unnecessary suffering and psychological harm. First we have to make the effort and try to understand what suffering means. When you think of suffering, you equate it with fear and you imagine that all kinds of terrible situations will confront you. Setback and tragedy are part of life yet the outcome of one's suffering can prove to be very beneficial for a person. Sooner or later each person confronts - but can hopefully endure - their trial of suffering. A person who cannot accept their trial is very unfortunate because they will have gained nothing. Chazal say that God created the world and it is good, that only good comes from God and what happens in the world is for the ultimate good. These ideas are not easy to internalize when one is suffering and in the middle of a crisis or a personal tragedy. Nevertheless, the approach in understanding suffering should be a philosophical one. By allowing your mind and heart to be open to wisdom suffering can open the door to profound joy and may prove to be a great blessing, believe it or not.

When a crisis occurs a person feels they lost control of their life. Many people become depressed and anxious when they are suffering. They find it hard to focus on study or prayer and/or their livelihood and they feel alienated from their family and friends. This suffering produces uncertainty, which is scary. Many people feel lost and can't figure out what to do. If suffering entraps you, first you should look into your life and examine it closely. Seek practical guidance or advice from someone you trust and who is willing to help you feel grounded. Feel positive and optimistic if you don't rebel against God because of your suffering, because that itself is a high level and a very good starting point.

Rather than acquiring more possessions, a person should think about acquiring more wisdom. Make an investment in your peace of mind. How can acquiring wisdom help a person through suffering? Wisdom can significantly help a person accept their suffering. Acceptance is extremely important. Acquiring wisdom is for anyone who can understand a concept contained in an idea. Engage yourself in thinking about and exploring the concepts and ideas that are based on wisdom. Do this by making time to learn and acquire. Study the great ideas contained in Pirkei Avos,

(continued on page 2)

Rachel's Disgrace

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from page 1)

This Midrash sounds quite accusative. Who would ever think that a mother would feel relieved once she has a son, and crudely view him as a vehicle through whom she may divert her blame. The question is certainly strengthened when the woman at hand is Rachel, the mother of the Twelve Tribes.

How does one approach interpreting such a Midrash? The first step is to review the facts and note inconsistencies. My first question is WHO is the one casting blame on the mother? Is it the neighbors, a friend, a relative? And what is meant that there is now another who may be blamed? I believe the answer to the first question opens up the whole area.

The one who would blame the mother would be the husband. If a neighbor's property was damaged, they would take measures to be recompensed, blame is not the recourse for this objective. I suggest the one casting blame is the one person who has no recourse for compensation - as the damage took place by his own dependents. It is the husband.

Now we may view the mother's sentiment. Having someone "to take the fall", the mother is not happy to shift blame. This is not what is meant. The focus is not on the child, but rather, on her. I mean that she is relieved that she is no longer the focus of blame. She doesn't willfully lie stating the child broke objects - if she in fact did. The person casting blame is the father. He says to his wife upon seeing a broken object, "Who broke it, your son". It is the father's assumption, that the son broke it. The mother is not malicious - certainly not a Rachel. This we see from a careful reading of the text: It does not say, "she has no one else to blame", but it says, "there is none other." The mother is passive. Nonetheless, the mother is relieved that she was not the target of her husband's fury. Since there is another person in the house now, she no longer feels the brunt of his disappointments. She doesn't choose her husband to accuse the child, but she does enjoy not being scolded.

This must now be examined. Why is there "relief"? To answer this question, we may first note that whenever we see a reaction in people, such as relief, it is indicative of the person's overall personality. We can induce something about the person at hand by their very reactions. When for example we see children mocking a fellow student, we induce that a prior event was committed by the one mocked, not to the approval of his peers. Again, if we see someone sad when it starts raining, we induce he had plans for

outdoors. In our case, we see Rachel relieved when she has a child. We can ask, "what need is being filled when blame is not cast upon a wife? It would seem clear that she desires the husbands praise and favor. Rashi is not teaching that the mother desires the son to be blamed, but rather, this response indicates she needs her husband's approval. This is the lesson of Rashi.

When Rashi came upon this passage, he saw the plain meaning of "...God has gathered in my disgrace". This is clear; a mother feels relief when after years she bears children, as childbearing gives a woman her sense of worth. Her self image is greatly marred if she cannot fill her vital role in family life. But Rashi desired to teach us that this is not the only focus of a mother. She equally desires one other thing - her husband's approval. His love is also something which she cannot bear to be without. These are the two great desires which form a woman's central focus, and give her happiness. They are both essential for a peaceful and productive home. In connection with a wife's need for husbandry, the Torah teaches, "v'el ishach tishukasayche", "and unto your husband will your cleave". The simple meaning teaches that a woman has a yearning for her husband. The same idea is taught in the Talmud where it teaches that an unmarried woman has it more difficult than an unmarried man.

We see that Rachel's "removal of disgrace" can be understood to refer to one of two central desires in woman. We also see how if taken superficially, a Midrash can be inexplicable. We learn to appreciate the depth of knowledge possessed by our Rabbis, the Midrashic authors. Even more, we are awed that there is a Divine Source to all this knowledge which is so pleasant and reasonable to our minds.

As a rabbi once taught, we must eventuate in a deeper love of God whenever we see new knowledge. We should reflect and appreciate God's kindness in creating us, and doing so in a manner where we have an intellect through which we can perceive His wisdom. □

Divine Providence

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: Can you please help me understand the area of G-d's daily involvement in our lives. A friend seems so certain that G-d is involved in every aspect of our lives. He uses The Guide on pages 270-280 in the Dover edition. I am of the opinion that our lives work based on the laws of nature and cause and effect. We must be on a much higher level of Torah to

relate with G-d on a daily basis.

Mesora: Maimonides writes, "There are in Scripture many more passages expressing the principle that men enjoy Divine protection in proportion to their perfection and their piety." (Maimonides, "Guide for the Perplexed", Dover ed. pp 290)

Maimonides shows through various passages in the Torah that depending upon one's perfection, he will enjoy God's providence to a proportional degree. (ibid, pp 289)

I feel your friend misquoted Maimonides, perhaps misunderstanding Maimonides' Fifth Theory (pp 285) as his own, which Maimonides clearly states is not.

Reader: When it comes to the area of chance how does G-d relate? If I won the million dollar lottery, would you say this is from G-d or would you say that it is possible it is from G-d and we must thank him?

Mesora: One has no absolute knowledge whether a specific action is due to God's will or stems from natural occurrence. I agree with your latter statement, that it is possible. Unless one is a prophet, he cannot know with certainty whether God actually did something or not. There is no way for man to know this. It maybe, but then again it may not be. One can certainly say to God that "if it is from You, I thank You."

Reader: We pray every day and have areas in our prayers for specific personal requests. How does this fit in?

Mesora: If a person is living properly, and is committed to observing the Torah and all entailed therein, and prays for that which is fit for this philosophy, this is the type of request most likely to be responded to by God.

God is certainly aware of all our actions, we say this on Yom Kippur, "nothing is hidden from Your eyes." But there is no guarantee that God will respond positively to our prayers. Even the matriarchs who desired children - that which we would view as a noble desire - did not receive children immediately. The Rabbis explain the reason why God did not grant their requests was that "God desires the prayers of the righteous". This means that God desires the perfection which stems from prayers. Prayers which go unanswered cause one to reflect on one's state, thereby, one may analyze their nature for an imperfection, addressing it, and raising themselves to a higher level. This is God's wish for man.

We may not realize, what we wish for may be counter-productive for our own good. We feel justified in requesting what we want, although it may remove us from perfection. In such a case, the Rabbis already taught that God will rightfully abstain from granting such requests, as this will be a good for us.

Conversely, if what we request from God

will in reality assist in our perfection, God will most certainly grant it. That is the purpose for our existence, and it is perfectly in line with God's Will.

Asking God to be involved in our lives is not only a correct notion, it is halachikly bound upon us, as we must pray a few times daily. We should certainly insert our personal requests in our prayers as well. We see countless examples of the prophets and perfected individuals in the Torah who prayed when they were in need. They were convinced that God could save them even by a miracle, as we see from Mishael, Chananya and Azarya who said to Nevuchadnetzaar, "God can save us...." (from the furnace).

When hunted by his brother, Jacob demonstrated, by preparing a bribe, arming for war and also praying to God for salvation, that our lives should be guided by sound reasoning teamed with a mutual reliance on God. Jacob was not certain of God's intervention, nor was he certain of his own might and ingenuity. Therefore he relied on neither exclusively.

Many pledges are made to us by God, as He will "protect the bones of the righteous" (Psalm 34).

Those pledges should be as real to us as our lives. He created both. □

Wisdom and Suffering

RIVKA OLENICK

(continued from page 1)

Psalms, Mishlei, and Horeb, the list is endless, but first you should make an attempt. Ask your friends and family what they have read that has been helpful to them. Your Rav may have a list of books for you to read - all you have to do is ask. In the meantime, become more introspective about your life even if things are "ok." Maybe things can be a lot better. We shouldn't simply rely on the fact that "everything is in God's hands." Although this is true, we are still expected to do as much as we can for ourselves in fulfilling our purpose and using all of our potential in life. When we do this we continue to grow so that we can meet the difficult challenges that will find its way into our lives. Don't rely on anyone else to remove your suffering for you. It is more beneficial to be introspective with the right guidance, which can bring about your own peace of mind. Most people's sufferings are based on false illusions or denial. Situations which produce a negative outcome, are mostly caused by faulty thinking. Often people are fooled into thinking that life means continuous and uninterrupted pleasure and so when reality interrupts, a person feels they are truly suffering. This is when acquired wisdom truly comes in very handy. So persevere, and ask for God's assistance through honest, meaningful prayer.

Suffering is a great teacher. Suffering teaches you the limitations of your power; it reminds you of the frailty of your health, the instability of your possessions, and the inadequacy of your means which have only been lent to you and must be returned as soon as the Owner (God) desires it. Suffering visits you and teaches you the nothingness of your false greatness. It teaches you modesty. Horeb, Vol. I pg. 36 □

Page 2

Deification of Man

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(continued from page 1)

16. This is clearly impossible.

We also recite everyday in Uvah L'Tzion "v'yivtichu bicha, kol yoday shimecha", "and there will trust in You, all who know Your Name". We do not trust in man. King David also said this in Psalms, 146, "Do not rely on nobles or a human being who hold no salvation".

The Torah is permeated with attempts to dissuade one from idolizing man. God desires that we recognize that "He alone does wonders", as is stated every morning in "L'Kale Baruch Ne-emos".

The woman also held of the view that one can't question one who is greater. Don't we see from the Chumash (Bible) itself where Aaron disputed Moses who was much greater, and Moses agreed that Aaron was correct, and that he was wrong? If Moses can make a mistake, certainly all of us alive today can, and do make mistakes. Don't we also see countless times in the gemora where an Amora would ask questions on a Tanna? (An Amora is one who came after the completion of the the compilation of the Oral Law. A Tanna is one who participated in that compilation, and is therefore greater in authority.) The Amora was fully correct in asking questions of one greater than he. The entire purpose of our creation is to gain an appreciation of the loftiness of Hashem through our knowledge of the wisdom in the Torah. Not to have humans share His limelight.

Regarding mezuzah checking:

Yes. One should check his mezuzah, but merely to see if it is still kosher. Not however to function as a protective device.

Rambam clearly admonishes us from specific practices outlined in the Mishneh Torah, (Laws of Tefilin 5:4) where he states: "...but these (people) who write on the inside of the mezuzah the names of angels or sanctified names or passages or seals, they are in the category of those who have no world to come. Because it is not enough that these fools have taken a command and nullified it, but they rendered a great command - the Unity of G-d, the love of Him and the worship of Him - as if it's an amulet for personal benefit and they assume in their foolish hearts that this will give them pleasure in their futilities of this world."

Rambam clearly states that the mezuzah is not for personal benefit.

Where did any Rishon, or Prophet or Forefather ever practice such foolishness? To think that there are powers in physical objects is something in the imagination, not in reality. These beliefs are not supported by the Torah. Though we might witness so called religious Jews practicing these foolish activities, we don't say something is true even if a million people are doing it. The validation is, "did G-d sanction it".

Summary

To say that a human being is infallible is very dangerous, as it unconditionally validates anything such a person would say or do. The only unconditional validation the Torah gives is to G-d Himself. One must realize that the need for attachments to human personality is a human need, not sanctioned by the Torah. The Torah tells us, "Ain tzadik b'aretz she'yaaseh tove v'lo yechtah", "there is no righteous man in the land who do good and haven't sinned". Infallibility is synonymous with G-d alone.

Another loss one realizes by idolizing people is that it takes one away from love of G-d.

Deification of man is not reinforced by the Torah. If it were, G-d would most certainly omit all instances where great people sinned. What the Torah is interested in is truth. Honesty. Commitment to following one's mind. Not being biased towards a personality. The gemora itself quotes a Rabbi who said, "Had Joshua the son of Nun told me such and such, I would not listen". (Talmud Chulin 124a, at the very bottom). Meaning, just because a great person says something, this doesn't make it correct. This Rabbi was displaying the proper attitude one should have towards learning: To get the facts, and process his own thoughts without respect to the views of others. Had G-d wanted us to merely follow a person, our minds would not be needed.

G-d gave each of us a rational faculty so as to use it. To investigate. To think.

Let us all follow the path of Hashem, to understand the wisdom of the Torah which He as given us. □

Priestly Blessings

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

I often wondered about the purpose of the priest's blessings spoken about in Numbers, 6:24-26:

6:24) "God shall bless you and watch you."

6:25) "God should shine upon you favorably and show you grace."

6:26) "God should lift His face



towards you and place peace before you."

Ibn Ezra explains these blessings to mean the following: 6:24) God should assist in your monetary needs, 6:25) God should answer your prayers, and 6:26) No evils should befall you.

We must ask, as always, what the necessity is for Torah commands, such as these blessings, as the perfect God only does that which is necessary - this is a perfection of His ways. We must also ask why these blessings are bestowed on the Jews via the priests. We read in 6:27 "and place My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them". Clearly, God alone is the One who determines whether a blessing occurs to the Jews, it is not in the hands of the priests to make the blessing a reality. What then is the need for the priests to utter these blessings? Cannot God bestow blessings Himself without the priests' declaration?

This last question forces the Torah student to think into the relationship between the Jews and the priests. The first step to answering this question is to properly categorize the role of the priests in these blessing. They are acting as benefactors of some sort. They are blessing the Jews. Our next question should be, "what is the purpose of the priests as benefactors of the Jews?"

By looking at the dynamics between the Jews and the priests, perhaps their relationship affords us some insight. After some observations: The priests receive gifts from the Jews, the priests serve in the Temple, the Jews do not. What attitude might be generated from such a relationship where one party receives gifts from the other, and where they also have exclusive rights to the Temple's services? Would the Jew feel justified in his resentment, because he works hard for his possessions while the priests get free possessions. The Jew might also feel that the priests are "closer to God" since they can be in the Temple and he cannot.

Perhaps this is exactly what the blessings address: The preempting of the strife which might occur based on the Jews' resentment of priestly gifts and the exclusion of Temple service. However, precisely by God commanding that the priests publicly bless the Jews in these two areas, the monetary needs of the Jewish people, and concern that God pays attention to the people as well. Any ill feelings will be addressed before they even become an issue. God developed a method so that Jews regularly heard the priests wishing their monetary success. The Jews also hear the priests wishing God to respond to their prayers. Precisely the two areas reserved for the priests. Concern of the priests that the Jews be blessed by God in all areas will create a harmonious for all Jews, necessary for the Torah system to operate.

Since the goal is harmony between Jews of all roles, I believe the final blessing is appropriate, that is, the blessing of peace, including internal peace among all Jews. □

Avraham's Jewel

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Understanding allegories literally is a grave mistake. The Rabbis of blessed memory composed metaphors and allegories to teach us many ideas in a concise format.

One such metaphor is the Rabbi's statement, "Avraham had a jewel on his neck which healed people". Literally understood, we cannot fathom how a stone can effect someone's health. However, taken as the Rabbis intended, as a metaphor, I feel I can offer an interpretation of Avraham's Jewel which makes more sense than taking it literally: Avraham was known for teaching thousands of people the ideas of monotheism. His speech was the tool used to direct masses to follow the Creator. Perhaps the Rabbis meant that Avraham speech in his throat which cured incorrect notions among the masses. The Rabbis simply exchanged speech "jewel" as both are prized objects, and neck hints at the source of speech.

Lucid and correct ideas is meant by "jewel on his neck". The neck being the origin of speech. (This metaphor is also used by King Solomon in Proverbs, 1:9)