

Inexcusable: Why are students today taught ideas contrary to Judaism's Fundamentals, like "God puts a part of Himself in each of us", or that "Rabbis permitted false religions for gentiles"? Schools are responsible to insure their teachers present Judaism's truths, not these fallacies popular among Jews. Higher level institutions training teachers must verify that their prospective teachers know our tenets. Left as is, the next generation will teach idolatrous beliefs, that we are supposed to refute, not follow. Such heretical ideas might cause one to forfeit their Olam Haba, the next life.

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## IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: VAYERAH	1,3,4
ONE GOD	1,5,6
PARSHA: VISITING THE SICK	2
WISDOM OF THE TEXT	3
SOLDIERS OF FREEDOM	7
BOOKS: HOOKEY	8
TRAINING YOUTH TO THINK	9,10
MESORA III	11
CHANUKA OR CHRISTMAS	13
LETTERS	13

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**Weekly Parsha**

# VaYerah

RABBI BERNARD FOX

**"I will descend now and see. If they have done as the cries that have come to Me, I will destroy them. And if not, I will know."**  
(Beresheit 18:21)

Our parasha discusses the destruction of Sodom. This pasuk introduces the narrative. Hashem tells Avraham

(continued on page 3)

# "ONE GOD"

## GENTILE OR JEW

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

I am now in regular contact with someone who has brought to my attention her ongoing debate on a Jewish message boards regarding the unity of God. This principle, that God is one, is the truth most vital to our existence, and the truth responsible for all knowledge. For when we err, we thereby suggest that the universe has more than one cause, which in itself is impossible. And with any error, all things we think we have discovered to be true, lose all meaning, for they then cease to reflect the true God, which must be the aim of all areas of life: "And you shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might". "And you shall speak these words when you sit in your home, and when you travel on the road, and when you lie down and rise". (The Shema Prayer)

Many have already adduced the unity of God, and it is not my objective here to discuss those proofs. I wish to address another issue. This person I have been in contact with informed me that a Jewish teacher had quoted the following from a book entitled "The Jewish Book of Why II": Jews must know God is one, but there is no violation for gentiles to assume God to be composed

(continued on page 5)

*Nefertiti joined her husband Pharaoh in worship of this new religion that celebrated the power of the sun disk Aten - a god of light. In this religion, she was a priest. Supposedly, it was only through the combined royal pair, that the full blessing of god Aten could be bestowed. We learn that polytheism may incorporate humans as contributing deities, mirrored in Christianity's trinity.*



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## Water on the Lungs

RABBI MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

Abraham is ninety-nine years old. He has just been circumcised, and he is in pain. It is also extremely hot. Abraham sits in his doorway, recuperating, and God visits him in a prophetic vision. As the prophecy is in progress, Abraham suddenly spots three dusty travelers, who are really heavenly angels in disguise. He immediately takes his leave of God and runs to invite them into his home (18:1). According to the Midrash, this episode is a supreme expression of Abraham's dedicated hospitality and God's kindness in visiting the sick.

Why, however, did God trouble Abraham with visitors while he was recuperating from surgery?

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 86b) addresses this question. God saw that Abraham was distraught that the sun-baked road was empty of travelers to whom he could offer his hospitality. Therefore, God sent angels in the guise of travelers to visit him.

This answer, however, generates its own difficulties. In that same passage in the Talmud, we learn that God had caused the day to be unusually hot in order to keep the roads clear of travelers who might importune the recuperating Abraham by availing themselves of his hospitality. Now, why would God have distressed Abraham by denying him opportunities to do acts of kindness?

Let us digress for a moment. Water on the lungs is a very serious medical problem, but is it life threatening? If water is found in the lungs of a slaughtered animal, does this mean that it had suffered from a fatal disease and was therefore rendered unkosher (treifah)? The Talmud (Chulin 47b) discusses this question and resolves it with a

recorded precedent. It once happened that Rabbi Hananiah was sick, and Rabbi Nathan and all the leading rabbis of the generation visited him and asked this selfsame question. Rabbi Hananiah answered that the meat was kosher.

It would appear that this story, in addition to resolving the immediate question of whether the meat was kosher, was meant to be instructive on a deeper level. It is unlikely that the purpose of this visit to Rabbi Hananiah and the consultation were simply to determine the status of the meat. "Rabbi Nathan and all the leading rabbis of the generation" could have resolved the issue on their own. Rather, it seems there was a message to Rabbi Hananiah in the question they presented.

Barring trauma, most terminal geriatric illnesses involve the heart, lungs or liver. When diseased, these organs frequently have the sequelae of accumulated liquid in the parenchymal spaces and alveoli of the lung. Most likely, the rabbis were asking Rabbi Hananiah about a symptom that he himself was having. When he declared that this symptom did not necessarily signal a terminal condition in the animal, he was in effect reassuring himself as well. The rabbis sent him a subtle message of hope.

The story of God visiting Abraham serves as the paradigm for the mitzvah of visiting the sick. By causing the day to be exceedingly hot and then sending him angels disguised as travelers, God demonstrated that the mitzvah in its noblest form is not performed by a mere mechanical presence at the bedside of the sick. It calls for an investigation of the emotional needs of the ailing person and the discovery of creative methods to bring him hope, encouragement and relief. □



## The Torah's Clues

(VaYerah continued from page 1)

## Weekly Parsha

# Wisdom of the Text

“Chochmas haCasuv”

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Genesis 14:11 says the four kings plundered Sodom and “left”. The next verse says they took Lote, “the brother of Abraham, and left”. Why did they leave twice? We already know Lote is Abraham’s brother (nephew) - why tell us this again? The next verse says that this news was told to Abraham the “Ivri”. Why in this verse alone is Abraham given the appellation “Ivri”? (As we said last week, Ivri means he was of a different philosophy than the idolaters.) Finally, in verse 16, Abraham returns “the spoils, and Lote his brother”. Shouldn’t the verse first mention Lote, and then mention the spoils? After all, is this not why Abraham retaliated?

I believe there is one answer: Abraham retaliated primarily as a defense of monotheism. Recognizing that the kings captured Lote, a secondary act, unconnected with their initial plunder of Sodom, Abraham understood Lote’s capture as an act of attacking Abraham’s fame, his monotheism, expressed in kidnapping Abraham’s brother. This is why Abraham is referred to only here as Ivri: here, he was acting in the capacity of a monotheist. This also explains why Lote is not mentioned first upon Abraham’s return of the spoils: Lote was not the focus; rather, it was the defense of monotheism. Had Lote been mentioned first, the reader might assume Abraham was merely protecting an individual life, or that he was partial to a relative. In fact, Abraham’s mission here, was much broader: he retaliated to protect not one life, but all of mankind by defending monotheistic beliefs, insuring that no attack of God’s fame is successful.

that the cries of the people of Sodom have risen before Him. He will descend in order to judge to wickedness of the people. If these cries truly and accurately reflect the evil of the people, then He will destroy the city and the surrounding communities.

There are a number of problems presented by this pasuk. We will consider three of these difficulties. First, the pasuk describes Hashem as “descending.” Hashem is not a material being. We cannot ascribe descending or ascending to Him. It is clear that this term is used by the Torah as a metaphor. But what does the metaphor represent? Second, the pasuk implies that Hashem conducted some sort of analysis of Sodom. There was some issue that Hashem investigated before he decided whether He would destroy the city. But Hashem is omniscient. What further information can He have required that added to His knowledge? Finally, the pasuk seems to imply that Hashem conducted some sort of analysis in order to secure this new information. Can we identify the nature of this process of analysis? In other words, can we determine the means by which Hashem secured the additional information that was essential to His decision?

Let us begin with the first two issues. The pasuk refers to Hashem as “descending.” The same phrase is used earlier in the Chumash. The Torah describes Hashem as “descending” in order to investigate the activities of the Dor Haflagah – the generation of the Dispersion.[1] This post-Deluge generation joined together with the goal of unifying all of humanity. They wished to build a single civilization that would encompass all humankind. Hashem “descended” to judge this generation. Based on this judgment, He intervened in their plans by bringing about the Dispersion.

Rashi explains that in both instances – in our parasha and in the narrative regarding the Dor Haflagah – the Torah’s description of Hashem “descending” is intended to communicate that He conducted an investigation. However, Rashi points out that this message cannot be understood in a literal sense. Hashem is omniscient and does not need to conduct an investigation in order to secure additional information. Instead, these references are to be understood homiletically. In both instances, the Torah is telling us that a judge should only render a decision after thoroughly investigating the particulars of the case. The Torah ascribes a process of investigation to Hashem in order to establish a standard of conduct for mortal judges. The Torah is telling us that just as Hashem only rendered a judgment based upon a full consideration of all of the elements of the case, so too we are only to pass judgment after conducting a thorough investigation.[2]

Rashi’s interpretation is unusual. He asserts that

the Torah ascribes a material activity to Hashem not as a metaphor but in order to teach a lesson regarding our own conduct. In other words, although the Torah often uses material expressions in describing Hashem and His activities, these terms are usually mere metaphors. Here, Rashi asserts that the terminology is not for some action emanating from Hashem. In this case, the phrase is related to Hashem in any sense. It is merely designed to teach us a lesson as to the manner in which we should conduct ourselves.

Why does the Torah specifically employ the term figure of “descending?” Rashi discusses this issue. He explains that the term “descent” has an idiomatic meaning. It refers to making a judgment based upon the ultimate outcome of a pattern of behavior. The people of Sodom were not judged solely on the basis of their behavior at the moment. They were judged based upon the ultimate outcome of these behaviors. Hashem considered the direction in which the people were progressing. He punished them because they were progressing towards absolute evil. However, Rashi does not identify the specific outcome towards which the people were progressing.

Radak offers a different explanation of the figure of “descending.” He explains that when Hashem involves Himself in the affairs of human beings, He is descending from His exalted honor. Hashem is the Creator. He is exalted over all of His creations. When Hashem interferes with the natural universe that He created in order to save humanity or punish humankind, He is descending from His glory and majesty.[3] Netziv expands on this explanation. He explains that Hashem created a universe governed by a natural order. It is His will that this natural order be preserved. However, He interferes with the natural order in two situations. First, He exercises His providence and interferes with this order in order to help the righteous. Second, He interrupts the natural order in order to punish the wicked. When we act in a manner that demands providential punishment, we are – metaphorically – requiring Hashem to “descend” from His throne of majesty to correct our behavior.[4]

Both of these explanations present some difficulties. Rashi does answer our first two questions. According to Rashi, our third question is not relevant. Hashem did not conduct an actual analysis. The phraseology employed by the Torah is not intended to be applied to Hashem. However, Rashi’s explanation is somewhat radical. As we have noted, it is unusual for the Torah to ascribe a material behavior to Hashem that does not have a metaphorical meaning. In addition, Rashi asserts that Sodom was not punished for its present behavior. Instead, the people were destroyed because they were destined to perform some great evil. Yet, Rashi does not indicate the

(continued on next page)

(VaYerah continued from page 3)

## Weekly Parsha

specific nature of this evil.

Radak's and Netziv's explanation also answers our first two questions. Yet, they seem to leave our third question unanswered. What was the nature of the investigation performed by Hashem?

Sforno, offers a comprehensive explanation of the events in our parasha that resolves all three of our difficulties. He begins by adopting an element of Rashi's explanation. Like Rashi, he asserts that the term "descending" must be understood idiomatically. When the Torah describes Hashem as descending, it is identifying a particular type of judgment. Hashem is making a judgment based upon the ultimate outcome of a pattern of behavior. But at this juncture, Sforno extends his explanation beyond this initial observation. In each instance in which the figure of "descending" is employed Sforno identifies the outcome that demanded Hashem's interference. Let us focus on our parasha. What outcome demanded the destruction of the people of Sedom?

A corrupt society can reverse itself. Sforno asserts that as long as the potential for repentance exists, the society can be spared. However, there is a point at which the society can no longer reverse its direction. At some point, repentance is no longer possible. This occurs when no dissent is tolerated – when no one remains that can provide the society with a new direction. When all members of the society have accepted and champion the corrupt values of the civilization, there is not opportunity for reevaluation and repentance. If this point is reached, the society can only continue in its deterioration into absolute evil.[5]

Hashem "descended" in order to test Sedom. He designed a test to determine whether Sedom had reached the point at which there was no longer an opportunity to repent. What was this test?

**"And the two angels came to Sedom in the evening and Lote was sitting at the gate."** (Beresheit 19:1)

The Torah tells us that three angels came to visit Avraham. They foretold the birth of Yitzchak. After taking leave from Avraham, two of these angels proceeded to Sedom. The angels told Lote that Sedom would be destroyed. They urged him to gather his family and flee the city. Lote left with his wife and two daughters. Lote's wife died during their flight. But Lote and his daughters escaped the destruction of Sedom. It is clear from the Torah that these angels had two missions. They were charged with the mission of destroying Sedom and they were sent to save Lote and his family. However, the Torah describes in detail the activities of these angels in Sedom and their interaction with the people of the city. Why is this information included in the account?



**"They had not yet lied down and the people of city, the people of Sedom, surrounded the house – from the young to the old, all of the people, from every quarter."** (Beresheit 19:4)

The angels came to Lote and agreed to spend the night in his home. The people of Sedom did not extend hospitality to strangers and were not willing to tolerate Lote's offer of lodging to these visitors. They surrounded Lote's home and demanded that he deliver his guests to them. The Torah explains that all of the people of Sedom were involved in this protest – the young and old, all of the people, from every quarter. Why does the Torah provide such a detailed description of the mob that surrounded Lote's home?

Sforno explains that the Torah's intent is clear. The message is that the entire population of Sedom – without exception – joined into this mob that congregated against Lote. There was no dissent. Not one opposed the mob. No one even held back from joining the mob. The opposition to Lote was unanimous and complete.

Sforno explains that this was the test. Hashem provided the people of Sedom with an opportunity to demonstrate either that they deserved to be

spared or to be destroyed. The test was simple. Would anyone rebuke this mob? Would anyone refuse to join in the attack on Lote's home? The people of Sedom failed the test. There was no opposition to the evil designs of the people. Every person joined the mob. The people of Sedom failed the test. They lost their last opportunity to be spared. No one in Sedom was willing to oppose the evil of the citizens. No one resisted the urge to join the mob. Repentance was not longer possible.[6] □

[1] Sefer Bereshiet 11:5

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 11:5, 18:21.

[3] Rabbaynu David Kimchi (Radak), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 11:5.

[4] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Hamek Davar on Sefer Beresheit 11:5.

[5] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 18:21.

[6] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 18:21.



(One God continued from page 1)



of many deities, or parts, such as the Christian “trinity”. This Jewish teacher – citing that book – said the Torah’s sources support polytheism for gentiles. I wish to refute those allegations.

To commence, let us learn from the chief philosopher and halachist, Maimonides:

**Maimonides** – Laws of Kings 11:10 (Capach Edition)

“[10] Can there be a greater stumbling block than this (Christianity)? That all the prophets spoke that the Messiah will redeem Israel and save them, and gather their dispersed and strengthen their Mitzvot, and this (one, i.e., Jesus) caused the Jews to be destroyed by the sword, and scattered their remnants and humbled them, and exchanged the Torah, and caused the majority of the world to err to serve a god other than the Lord.”

Read that last line again, “Jesus caused the majority of the world to err to serve a god other than the Lord.” Maimonides is perfectly clear; not only did Jesus’ Christianity kill Jews, but also, Christianity misleads “the world” (Gentiles included) away from God to serve a false god. Maimonides knew all the Talmudic sources, and yet viewed Christianity as an evil for gentiles. Therefore, any claim that “Christianity is permissible for gentiles” violates reason, according to Maimonides. How can this teacher call that, which is evil, a good for others? Christianity or any other form of polytheism is an absolute violation of the Noachide command against idolatry, defined as a “corrupted view of the ‘One’ Creator”.

#### Correcting the Distortion

One source the teacher cited from this aforementioned book is a portion of Tosfos (Bechoros 2b), which discusses a gentile taking an oath (an oath includes swearing to God). Tosfos is a commentary on the Talmud, so it behooves us to first view the portion of Talmud on which Tosfos comments. The Talmud states, if we know a gentile to be idolatrous, and we require his oath on a matter, such an oath would violate “Lo yishama al picha”, “False gods’ names shall not be mentioned via your doings (lit. “your words”). (Exodus 23:13) Demanding an oath, we would cause the gentile to swear, and he would swear to ‘his’ gods, thereby affirming idolatry. Exodus 23:13 prohibited not only “our” mention of alien gods, but also prohibited is our ‘causing’ those gods’ names to be uttered, even by others. Thus, causing an idolatrous gentile to swear would be a direct violation of this Torah command. On this, Tosfos writes:

*“Even though when a gentile takes an oath to God (of heaven and earth), and he joins God’s name with another deity, there is no violation of deception (Lifnay Ivare) for Noachides are not warned on this, and for us [Jews] we do not find a prohibition regarding ‘causal’ cases of misleading others towards joining.”*

If read in a cursory manner, the phrase contained therein, “for Noachides are not warned on this” appears to imply that Noachides are not warned on “polytheism” and are allowed to view God as not truly one. However, the Torah states emphatically “Hear Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One”. Can God be both, “one” for Jews, and “plural” for gentiles? That is absurd. God is one, as He stated through Moses’ words. Gentiles too are prohibited from idolatry, and polytheism is idolatry. We then wonder, to what does Tosfos refer when stating, “gentiles are not warned on this”? On ‘what’ are they not warned?

The answer is: they are not warned on the prohibition of “mentioning” alien gods’ names. Meaning, when we demand their oath – forcing them to swear to God – and in doing so, we cause them to mention other deities of their faith, there is no problem for two reasons, as Tosfos states: 1) “for Noachides are not warned on this”, and 2) “for us [Jews] we do not find a prohibition regarding ‘causal’ cases of misleading others towards joining (shittuf).” This means that, 1) Noachides or gentiles have no prohibition to ‘mention’ a false God. That prohibition and high degree of sanctity is mandatory for the Jew alone. Mentioning the name of idols is not one of the 7 Noachide Laws. 2) As Jews, even if this demand for an oath ‘possibly’ causes the gentile to join God with another deity, there is no violation for us, as his joining is merely a ‘possible’ outcome, and not a definite result. Of course, had a gentile’s commitment to idolatry been an “inevitable” result of our actions, we are certainly concerned for him, and we are prohibited from causing him harm.

To be clear, Tosfos mentions two reasons why we can enforce the oath of a gentile: 1) “Noachides are not warned on this” meaning, he is not warned against mentioning false gods, and 2) we as Jews are not prohibited from cases that are infrequent and only ‘causal’. The Torah has limits on its prohibitions. The Torah does not go so far as to demand Jews against an act that ‘might’ cause gentiles to violate joining names to God. Causal (grammah) cases are not treated with the same degree of stringency, as are inevitable cases. This means polytheism is absolutely and unequivocally prohibited for gentile and Jew. However, our prohibition does not extended to less-likely cases.

The cause of the error of both the teacher and the book is the reading of Rabbeinu Tam’s words out of full context. Had the full Talmudic portion, and the beginning of the Tosfos been read and “studied”, all would understand the issue discussed, and not obligatory on gentiles, is the “mentioning of false gods”. The issue is not as the teacher thought, that gentiles might violate God’s unity. No intelligent person, including Rabbeinu Tam, Maimonides and any Rabbi, would ever

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suggest that “any human” might be allowed to corrupt the most vital fundamental, that God is one. Before all, every human being must obtain the truest knowledge of God, and that starts with His exclusive nature; His exclusive responsibility for the universe; and His antithesis to anything of this world, including possessing parts, or being subject to division of any kind. Although accepting Maimonides’ view that Christianity and polytheism is prohibited for all mankind, this teacher greatly erred, as he repeated with support from that book, that someone as great as Rabbeinu Tam thought it acceptable for gentiles to violate God’s unity. I strongly urge this teacher to retract his statements, and correct those whom he misled. It makes no difference whether one possesses the wrong view himself, or repeats it as truth based on hearsay or books.

Avtyalon said, “Wise men, be careful with your words...” (Pirkei Avos 1:11) Maimonides comments that teachers must be careful what they say, lest heretics misunderstand them as teaching that the Torah contains heresy, as they believe, thereby profaning God’s name. Such occurred to Tzadok ad Baysos, Talmudic scholars who misunderstood their Rabbi and left the path of Torah. Now, if we must be careful how we teach true ideas, certainly, we must first ascertain that we possess those Torah fundamentals. Had we all been taught Torah fundamentals, no one would have interpreted Rabbeinu Tam or the Shulchan Aruch as condoning polytheism: we would have properly interpreted what we read, we would dismiss the written quote in Tosfos as an error, or we would have said, “I just don’t know what Rabbeinu Tam means”. But, we would never assume any Rabbi or sage to support polytheism for anyone, Jew or gentile. I will now correct other misunderstandings.

#### **Shulchan Aruch** (Yoreh Dayah 148:12)

This section discusses the prohibition to transact with gentiles before and after their holidays. By doing so, we give the gentile a reason thank his gods (monetary success). (Taz 148:1) This would lead him astray, and we must be concerned not to directly lead any human astray from the one God. The Mechabare states (148:12) that some opinions are lenient with the restriction of transacting with gentiles during this time of their holidays. But the Mechabare explains his reasoning is due to the current-day ignorance of alien religions. However, this means that had someone the accurate knowledge of a faith that is clearly idolatrous, like the Christian trinity, then in such transaction would be definitely prohibited: the gentile would thank his false gods, and it would be our fault for encouraging his attachment to idolatry. But be clear: in no source do we find any claim that Christianity or other idolatry as permissible for gentiles.

#### **Shulchan Aruch** (Orech Chaim 156)

This section deals with transacting with gentiles in general. The Ramah states, “Today, since gentiles do not swear by idolatry, and although they mention another god, their intent is for the Creator of heaven and earth, and even though they join another deity with God’s name, there is no deception, as gentiles are not warned on joining.” This means to say that had a gentile truly intended on swearing to a deity other than God, then it would be prohibited, and we could not transact with them, or enforce an oath. These sources prove the point that leniency exists only when we estimate gentile as intending on swearing to the true God. We also learn that the word “joining” (shittuf) cannot refer to polytheism. It is impossible that the Torah, a system whose primary aim is to make mankind aware of One God, might suggest that gentiles may become heretics.

A Rabbi once taught that if we know something to be true based on reason, it is inconsequential if we find printed words that imply otherwise. Certainly in this case, when the word in question is “joining”. To suggest that gentiles not being warned against “joining” refers to polytheism, one errs twice: first, by interpreting the word according to his own notions, and second, by undermining the entire fabric of Torah monotheism.

**Shulchan Aruch** (Yoreh Dayah 147, see the Taz): “It is completely prohibited to strengthen the beliefs of idolaters”. Reason dictates that God desires all mankind to recognize Him. The “Alaynu” prayer with which we conclude our services states clearly, “V’chol b’nei basar yik-ri-uh shimecha”, “all flesh will call your name”. This means that God desires all mankind to recognize His truth, Jew and gentile alike. Since polytheism is false, it is therefore prohibited for gentiles as well as Jews.

This area in the Shulchan Aruch says that one is allowed to say to a gentile during the years of shmitta, “Elokim should bless you with good this year.” The Gra states that this term “Elokim” cannot reference the false gods of this gentile. If so, one would be strengthening the beliefs of idolaters, which is prohibited. In fact, the Gra held that when you say this, you must be referring to God Himself, thereby wishing a real blessing for the gentile. Even though we cannot work the field, we can wish the gentile success, as laws of shmitta do not prohibit him from working the land in this year.

#### **Pilpula Charifta** (Sanhedrin Chapter VII)

Quoting Maimonides, the Pilpula Charifta states, “polytheism is real idolatry”. He further states via a fortiori argument, addressing the accepted law that celebrating multiple deities carries prohibition, “How can their holidays be

prohibited, but their beliefs be permitted?” He thereby reasons that celebration of polytheism cannot be worse than the belief itself. Accordingly, the Pilpula Charifta deems polytheism a prohibited belief; otherwise the holidays would not be of prohibited status.

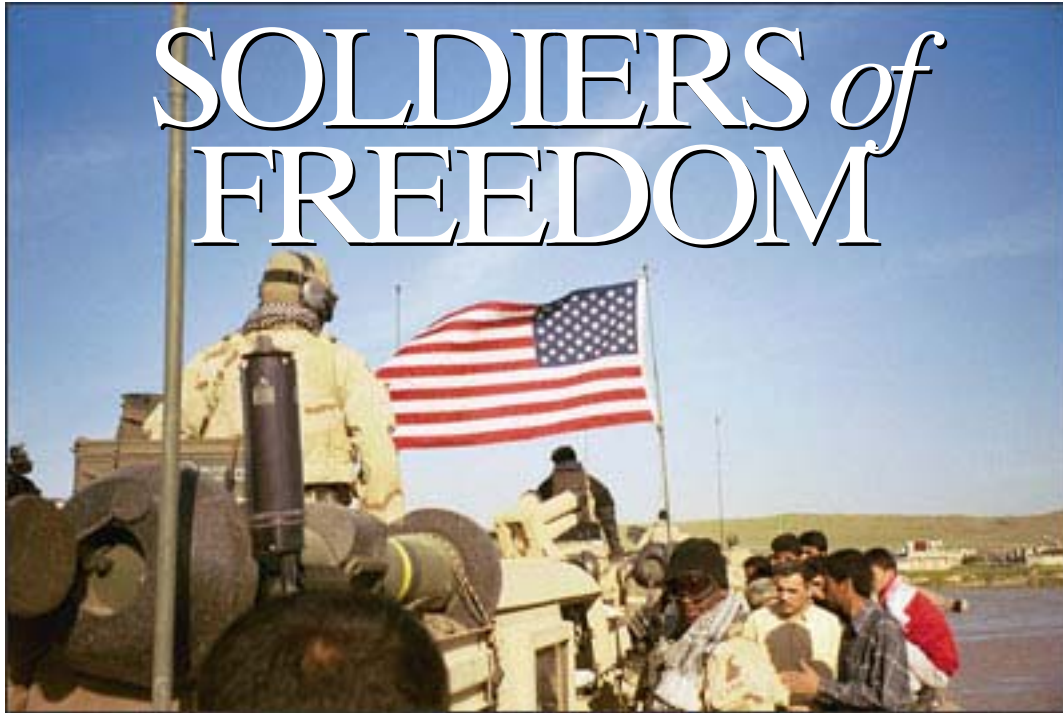
#### **Summary**

Polytheism denies the most central, Torah Fundamental: God is one, an idea mandatory for every intelligent being. If one believes God to be more than one, even if he says I believe in the God of the Torah and another god, his concept of God is completely wrong. Any prayer to such a god would be idolatry. For with such a view, one’s idea is no longer that there is “one” cause for the universe.

Be mindful of Abraham’s refutation and destruction of idolatry and idols, and his life-risking mission to teach monotheism to ALL members of the human race. God selected him, appointing him as the forefather of a nation destined to teach the world of Jews and gentiles. May it be soon, that all Jews learn earnestly, guide themselves first and foremost by reason, strive for the available proofs of the One true God and the beautiful reasons behind His laws, and educate others on what incontrovertible reason proves must be the exclusive truth. □



## Gratitude



**RABBI REUVEN MANN**  
 CONGREGATION RINAT YISRAEL  
 PLAINVIEW, N.Y.

Almighty G-d, Creator of heaven and earth - We have gathered here today, men and women, of diverse backgrounds and persuasions to honor the veterans of all our armed forces past and present whose patriotism and courage has sustained this great nation through all of its wars.

We thank Thee Almighty G-d for all the blessings you have bestowed on us and for instructing us to be just, compassionate and respectful of the dignity of all people. May we truly appreciate the gifts of liberty and opportunity with which we have been blessed. We acknowledge our duty to preserve and protect the American way of life for ourselves and future generations. We affirm our responsibility to meet the challenges that confront us and defeat the enemies who seek to destroy us.

Let us always avoid the path of denial and have the courage to admit that America has been targeted by a cruel and remorseless enemy who despises our freedom and tolerance and is envious of our wealth, power and success. The evidence of his unyielding hatred and cruel intentions are clear for all who have eyes to see. Let us always remember the World Trade Center bombing of '93, Khobar Towers, U.S.S. Cole and the numbers that will forever be etched in the annals of infamy 9/11/01.

Let us have the courage to acknowledge the truth. A worldwide war has broken out once again. From the subways of London to the schoolhouses of Beslan, Russia – from the busses and cafes of Israel to the roadsides and public squares of Iraq – from the hotels in Jordan to the burning cities of France – the message is loud and clear. We are engaged in a fight to the finish with a deadly enemy who seeks to destroy civilization, as we know it.

Let us be forever grateful to our veterans for the great role they have played in the preservation of our nation. They remind us that America has never cowered in fear or backed down from any enemy who has confronted us. America's soldiers have been at the forefront of the battle to preserve freedom throughout the twentieth century. The tyrannies of Fascism, Nazism and Communism have all crumbled and fallen before the steely determination of the American people and the American military. Without America's heroism and expertise, the light of freedom and democracy would long ago have been extinguished from the world.

Ladies and gentlemen – Let us thank G-d for the privilege of being an American and pledge to renew our loyalty and dedication to this great nation and its fighting forces that are right now in harms way on dangerous battlefields far from home.

May G-d guide them and protect them and give them the strength and courage to complete the mission in which they have so magnificently performed. May they speedily return in sound physical and mental health to their country, home and loved ones...and let us say, Amen.

*Presented at the Annual Veteran's Day Ceremony  
 Middle School Veteran's Memorial Park  
 Hicksville, New York  
 November 11, 2005*



Taken from "Getting It Straight—  
Practical Ideas for a Life of Clarity"

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PURCHASE ONLINE

# Hookey

DOUG TAYLOR & RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ

"So what's wrong with playing hookey? We all need a break now and then, don't we?"

I paused to stab an oversize bite of the bagel, lox, and cream cheese floating on my plate amid a sea of shredded lettuce. I was having lunch with my friend, the King of Rational Thought, at a local restaurant. We were talking about responsibility.

"There's nothing wrong with taking a break," he said. "But you have to be sure of your motivation."

Before he could continue, a newscast from the television in the nearby bar grabbed our attention. The announcer was talking about the President's latest overseas trip. He would be gone for three weeks and planned to visit six countries. Foreign dignitaries were lining up their red carpets.

The King of Rational Thought looked at me thoughtfully and said, "Now there's a case in point."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"When a child has a certain responsibility, and he doesn't want to do it, what does he do?"

"He just doesn't do it," I said.

"That's one possibility," he said. "The other possibility is that he feels guilty, so he covers up his guilt by doing something else. Take school, for instance. For some kids, school is hard. Rather than work through it, as they know they should, some kids drop out and then cover their guilt by getting a job to make some quick money. True?"

"True," I replied. "But so what?"

"Now tell me," he said, "Was the President elected on a platform of solving domestic problems?"

"Absolutely."

"And has he done it?"

"Not in my opinion."

"So if that's true, why is he spending so much time on foreign matters?"

He paused, then went on. "It's simple. Solving domestic problems is hard, like school. And it's virtually guaranteed to make one or more constituency groups mad. So it's easier for presidents - and this one is by no means the first - to travel and focus on foreign matters where they can look successful, just like the school dropout who makes a few bucks at his new job."

I pondered all this while skewering another gargantuan piece of the freshly baked bagel. "But we all do that sort of thing," I said. "Apart from the obvious - kids drop out of school and presidents don't solve domestic problems - what difference does it make?"

"Let's look at how this emotion, this playing hookey, affects your thinking process," said the King of Rational Thought as he rested his fork on his plate. "Consider this. When you look at something, there's usually an essential part and an unessential part. Take a car, for example. The essential part of the car is that it gets you from one place to another. But most people don't buy cars for that reason. They buy them for the image they project. So they lift a non-essential thing - the image - to the level of an essential."

"That's the same thing presidents do with foreign policy and school dropouts do around getting jobs," he said. "Each one is training his mind to lift the non-essential to the level of the essential."

"That," he concluded, "destroys your ability to think."

I laid my fork down and said, "So that's what you meant about being sure of your motiva-



tion when you take a break."

"Right," he said. "Just look at the implications of the word 'hookey.' It doesn't mean taking an appropriate, well-earned break. It means skipping out on doing what you should be doing."

I was silent for a long time.

Finally, I asked quietly, "If this kind of behavior is practiced by everyone from school kids to presidents, what does that say about our collective ability as a society to think clearly and solve problems?"

"I think you know the answer to that," he said.

I did. I just didn't like it. □



## Education



# TRAINING our YOUTH to *think*

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

*This is an actual letter sent as a follow-up to a conversation I had last week with my friend's eight-year-old daughter. I wish to share my approach in dealing with incorrect ideas taught in yeshiva. The cited sources are intended for parents and teachers.*

"Dear Rachelle,

It was nice seeing you today in town. I always enjoy your questions, and your question today was a very good one. Just to make sure everything we discussed is clear, I want to repeat what we said, so you can tell me if I explained myself clearly, and that you understand it.

Shlomo Hamelech was the smartest man next to Moshe Rabbeinu. The first thing I want to tell you is something that Shlomo Hamelech said: "No person is always good and never sins" (Koheles 7:20). Who was the greatest person? It was Moshe Rabbeinu. And even Moshe sinned. Now, if Moshe can sin, and he is greater than anyone else, then all of us today sin. And what do we mean by the word "sin"? It means that we make mistakes. It is important for you to understand that every person makes mistakes, I make mistakes, you make them, your parents make them, and your teachers make them. This is how Hashem made us, that we make mistakes, until we use our minds and figure out what we did wrong. And the reason we all must make mistakes, is because we are not Hashem, only Hashem has all of the answers, so only Hashem never makes mistakes. A mistake happens when someone does not know something. And when someone makes a mistake, and we can help them, Hashem says in His torah that we must correct the person who we saw make a mistake. This is a way that we are nice to people: we help them see their mistake so they don't do it again. So I want to help correct your teacher's mistake.

### **Avraham and the River**

The first thing we discussed, was what your teacher told you, that when Hashem told Avraham to make Yitzchak a karban on Mount Moriah (sacrifice) that a "bad Malach" made a large river in front of Avraham. You said your teacher told you the waters were so high, it came up to Avraham's chin. This made it very hard for Avraham to continue walking, and to listen to Hashem and sacrifice his son Yitzchak on Mount Moriah. But Avraham was a very good man, so he listened to Hashem, and not the bad Malach. My response to you was that many times, the Rabbis in Chumash and Gemara would tell us a riddle or a story. They like us to think, so they tell us things that are true, but they say the truth in a way that sounds impossible, and then we have to figure out the riddle. Even Hashem does this. In the Torah, Hashem wrote that when the Egyptians felt so bad after the Ten Plagues

(Makos) they said the plagues were "Hashem's Hand" at work. That is quite amazing, isn't it? We know Hashem is not a person, because Adam was the first person. And Hashem came before Adam. Hashem is not something we see, but what we do see, is what Hashem made, and the miracles that He performs. So when the Egyptians, the Mitzrim, were so hurt by all the Plagues, they said, "It was Hashem's finger" (Shimos, 8:15). This does not mean Hashem has a real hand, He can't have hands! Only people and animals have hands: the sky has no hands, the clouds have no hands, and Hashem too has no hands. So what does it mean? It means that Hashem "made" the Plagues, like man makes something with his hand. The Egyptians were just talking about Hashem like they talk about a man. But they did not see any hand.

I explained to you the story of Avraham and the river in the same way. When the Rabbis said that the bad Malach made a river to stop Avraham from being good, it means something else. Like you told me, Avraham loved Yitzchak and did not want to kill him, even though Hashem told him that he must kill Yitzchak. Now we have to ask, what was stopping Avraham from listening to Hashem? The answer I told you is, it was part of Avraham that wanted him not to kill his son. Avraham's emotion of love was trying to stop him from killing Yitzchak. Sometimes our feelings of love can be a good thing, and sometimes they can be a bad thing. Like when a person loves somebody who is mean. It is bad to love someone who is mean, because this mean person will then be mean to you, and hurt you. So if you are not friendly with the mean person, he will not be around you, and you will be safe. Here, it is bad to follow our feeling of love. Loving a mean person is not good. Now what about with Avraham? When Avraham was told by Hashem to kill Yitzchak, do you think it would be right for Avraham to show love to Yitzchak and save him? No, it would be wrong if Avraham listened to his feelings of love, and did not kill Yitzchak.

Now what is another way to say that Avraham's strong feeling of love was stopping him from traveling to the mountain to kill Yitzchak? Well, the Rabbis said Avraham's feelings of love for his son were so strong, these feelings were "like a river blocking the road". The Rabbis wanted to teach us how great Avraham was, that he was able to fight his feelings of love, and still follow Hashem. Avraham was "like" a person who was up to his chin in water, but still wanted to walk further to the mountain to kill Yitzchak, since Hashem said so. But he really was not in any water. Really, Avraham was on dry ground. So you see, the Rabbis created this story of the bad Malach and the river, so we can learn an important idea. But the story did not really happen. Something different than the story really happened, but the Rabbis wanted to make us use our minds to figure it out.

*(continued on next page)*

The bad Malach is really Avraham's own feelings of love that could have made Avraham do something bad, and not kill Yitzchak. The "river" really means to teach us how strong Avraham's feelings were, they were as strong "as a deep river", trying to stop him from traveling to the mountain.

Another way we can figure out if a story we read is real, or not really true but only teaches a hidden meaning (metaphor), is by thinking if the story makes sense. So I will ask you Rachele: If Hashem wanted Avraham to kill Yitzchak, does it make sense that Hashem would also make a bad Malach that makes a river, which stops Avraham? This sounds like Hashem is saying to Avraham "kill Yitzchak", but then says the opposite, by making Avraham stop because of the river Hashem's Malach made! But it makes no sense that Hashem changes His mind. The Torah says Hashem never changes his mind. (Malachi, 3:6) Because of this contradiction, we can figure out that Hashem did not really make a bad Malach that would go against Hashem. So then, we have to figure out what the story means. I think it means like I said: something "in Avraham" is what the river 'represents'...meaning, the river is just a story about how powerful Avraham's love was for Yitzchak, it was as great as a river.

In his first chapter of Mishley (1:6), Shlomo Hamelech says that the Rabbis talk in riddles and hints. Rambam's son Avraham said the same thing in his introduction to a book called Ain Yaakov. We have to read the Rabbis words, and then figure out the puzzle. It's like I told you, "I am so hungry, I can eat a horse!" Now we both know that I can't eat a horse! I really mean that I am "Soooooovoooo very hungry"...as if I can eat a horse! With this type of talking, I tell you a really strong point, its called, "exaggeration", when I say something that is not really true, just so you will listen, and figure out what I am saying. The Rabbis did the same thing, they said things that were really not true, like a made up story, but they did that to make the story interesting, so we would listen, and then we would try to figure out the real meaning. This is a very important lesson. And when we do this enough, and we think about the deep ideas inside of the Rabbis words, we make ourselves smarter! By thinking, we become smarter, and this is what Hashem wants.

### Is Hashem Inside of Us?

The other thing you told me was that your teacher said that Hashem put a piece of Himself in all of us. You must know Rachele, Hashem never said this in His Torah, and no great Rabbi ever said this. Even our siddur says that Hashem "created" our neshama (Elohai Nishama prayer) and not that He just took a piece of Himself and put it in us. Rambam also says this in his 13 Principles, and in his Mishneh Torah (Yesoday HaTorah, 1:7) So why did your teacher say this? Sometimes, even teachers will repeat what

they heard, even though it does not make sense, and even though they do not have any proof. It also sounds nice to feel like Hashem put some of Himself inside each of us. But we should not say things just because they sound nice. When we learn, we must be looking to learn what is true.

Many people make a big mistake and say this, even though they cannot explain it. Rachele, a very, very important rule for you know is this: if you can explain something clearly, and it makes sense, like  $2+2=4$ , then you can be sure the idea is true. It does not matter if people say the opposite, that  $2+2=5$ . We know this is false, even if one million people say it is five, we know they are all wrong. Even if a book says  $2+2=5$ , the book is wrong, and we are right. Hashem created every person in a way that we know the difference between "true" and "false". So you also have this ability, and you can use your thinking to find out if something is true, or false.

Now, if someone tells you something, even your teacher or your parent, and it is not clear to you, you should ask them to please explain exactly what they mean, until it is clear to your mind. You must make sure that you completely understand something, and then it will be "true". What do we mean by "the truth"? It means that when we learn, we want to make sure we learn how the world or the Torah really is. We don't want to learn what is false, because then, we didn't really learn anything! We don't want to make a mistake. I know that when I go to a class, I want to understand what the teacher or Rabbi is saying, and not every teacher or Rabbi is saying something true. They are not being mean and they do not want to fool us, but sometimes, they just did not study enough and they make mistakes. Even teachers and Rabbis make mistakes. We all do.

So let's study this point, and listen very carefully, because this is not such an easy thing to talk about: Did Hashem put a piece of Himself in us, or not? Your teacher said yes. Well, does this make your teacher right, just because she said so? Let's say another teacher disagrees with your teacher. Now what do you do? How do you know who is right, and who is wrong? Do you agree with your teacher because you like her better? Of course not, because we can like someone who makes a mistake, right? Do you agree with her because she told you first? No, that does not matter who talks first, because someone who is wrong can talk before someone who is right. Do you see, that we are using reasoning to find out the right thing to do.

The only way to decide truth is to use your mind and think about it, just like we are doing right now. So let's do that. But let me tell you some more things.

One of the greatest Rabbis named Rambam said that Hashem is not something "physical", which means Hashem is not something we can see or feel. (Yesoday HaTorah, 1:7) When we got the Torah,

Moshe Rabbeinu told this to the Jews at Har Sinai. He reminded the Jews that they did not see Hashem, but only heard His voice. (Devarim, 4:12) He said this to them because he wanted to make sure all the Jews have the correct idea about what Hashem is. He is invisible, like you told me today. Hashem has no body, no face, no hands, and He is something that we cannot know. Even Moshe Rabbeinu did not know what Hashem is, and Hashem told Moshe he cannot know Him (Shimos, 33:20) Since we don't know what Hashem is, we cannot describe anything about Him, like we describe things that we do know, like what paper is. We cannot "touch" Hashem, but we can touch paper because the paper is something "physical" and we can control it with our hands. We can also cut paper into pieces. Can we cut Hashem into pieces? The answer is no. This is why we say that Hashem has no pieces. Only something we can touch can be divided into pieces. So Hashem cannot be cut into pieces, and therefore, there is no piece of Hashem in us. Our Neshama is a thing Hashem made from nothing, just like He made the whole world from nothing. And Hashem can do that.

The reason why I spend time writing you is because the most important ideas we can have are ideas about Hashem. And if we start off with wrong ideas when we are young, it is harder to correct our mistake when we get older, because we start to like the idea, and then we don't want to learn that we are wrong. So it is very important that now when you are young, that you make sure as best as you can, that you understand what you are taught. If something is not clear to you, then always ask your teacher to prove what they mean so your mind agrees. And remember, teachers are not always right, they make mistakes too, just like you and me. And don't be afraid to ask questions, because that is why you are in school, to learn! Even the Torah says don't be afraid to ask question, "For a person who is afraid to ask questions will not learn". (Pirkei Avos, 1:6)

As you continue to learn, keep asking questions, and you will start to see the difference between what is true and what is false. You will start to become smarter than you are now, and you will be able to prove things...all by yourself! And then you will be able to help others learn too.

I look forward to hearing any questions you have on what I said." □

*I ask all those involved in Torah education to insure that you are training our youth in the fundamentals of Judaism, for they are our next generation of teachers.*



## Pirkei Avos – Ethics

*the*  
**MESORA**  
**PART III**

**RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT**

*Written by student*



We last explained how Joshua was selected to be responsible for transmission of the Torah due to his unique qualities of perfection. The idea that our 'Mesora' is only entrusted to these types of individuals can also be seen in the type of people to whom Joshua selected to transmit the Torah. The Mishna states that Joshua passed it over to the 'Zekanim', the Elders of the nation. Rashi comments here that Joshua did not give it to all the Elders but rather only a select few, those who policed and ruled over the society. The question again presents itself: why only these elders? What is it about being 'policemen' that qualified them as fit to be charged with responsibility for transmission of the Torah?

The simple fact that these elders acted as policemen, supervising and ensuring that the Jewish society be structured and run in accordance to the Torah, shows that they were involved and concerned with the community. They were not just great individuals who had reached tremendous levels of Torah knowledge - they were 'Osek B'Tzarchei Tzibbur', involved in the needs of the Jewish community, to a great degree. As such, they had reached a different level of perfection and therefore warranted being entrusted with transmission of the system as a whole.

We are now in a position to take up a basic question with regards to our Mishna: Why would Pirkei Avos, a tractate designated to ideas of perfection, begin with a historical account of our Mesora? How does this history fit as an introduction? It would seem that a more appropriate place would be at the beginning of the entire Gemara as an introduction to the entire system of laws!

From our analysis of the Mishna, we see that the history of the Mesora is not just a factual recounting of what occurred. From the process of transmission we see that those who were charged with the Mesora were great Torah giants, people who reached the heights of perfection. When we study ideas about how to perfect ourselves and how to make internal, psychological changes to live in line with God's Will, it is these great individuals that we turn to in order to learn from and model our lives. Learning about perfection means turning to these 'baalei Mesora', great people who were geniuses in the realm of ethical perfection.

The Mishna continues that the Elders passed on the Mesora to the Prophets who then passed it on to 'Anshei Knesset Hagedola', the Men of the Great Assembly. Rashi asks how the Great Assembly got this name and answers with an interesting Gemara from Tractate Yoma (69b) that says they brought back 'the crown to its

place'. The Gemara states that Moshe described God in the Torah with the terms 'Hakel Hagadol Hagibor Vehanora', meaning the Almighty God Who is Great, Strong and Awesome. The prophet Yirmiyahu, while living at a time when non-Jews were defiling the Temple, said "where is His Awesome Power?" and therefore left out the term 'Nora', which means Awesome. The prophet Daniel, while living in a time when Jews were enslaved to non-Jews, asked "Where is His Strength?" and therefore left out term 'Gibor' which means strength. Then came the assembly of men and said "Just the opposite! His Strength - Gibor - is seen in how He controls His Will, tolerating and giving time to wicked people. His Awesomeness - Nora - is seen, for without it how could one nation survive amongst all the other nations?" So, the Gemara asks, how could these rabbis (referring to the prophets Yirmiyahu and Daniel) originally uproot the terms that Moshe had previously established? Rabbi Eliezer explains that it was because they knew that God is Truthful so they didn't deceive him. Rashi on this Gemara elucidates this answer, saying that God agrees to that which is true and hates that which is false.

When we read this Gemara a number of questions arise. First, what bothered the Gemara that it asked why those prophets took out the words? Is the Gemara suggesting that they still should have used these adjectives when they weren't applicable and then be involved in a lie? At first glance, we can simply answer that all these terms describe our relationship with God so that even if we don't see these aspects of the relationship manifest, the terms are still applicable and would not be considered a lie or deception.

But then we are left to understand the Gemara's conclusion - if in fact these statements are always true, why did the prophets not use them? How does saying that "God is Truthful" answer the question if in fact the terms are truthful?

Apparently, the Gemara is saying that in order to be able to express these descriptions of God, one must be able to see the ideas clearly. Since these prophets lived in a time when the terms could not be appreciated as manifest in a clear manner, they did not use those terms.

At this point, however, the issue doesn't seem to be fully resolved. Were these terms manifest or not? If not, how could the Men of the Great Assembly reinstate them? The apparent disagreement between the prophets Daniel and Yirmiyahu and the Assembly needs to be clarified - what exactly is the reasoning behind each side? (To be continued) ◻

## SPECIAL ISSUE

# CHANUKA or CHRISTMAS?

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 GEORGE HANUS
 

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There is an eight hundred pound elephant in the room. Everyone is pretending that it is not there and acting indifferently. The eight hundred pound elephant represents the current massive and devastating exodus of Jewish youth from any Jewish affiliation. The ignoring observers are the organized Jewish community, its leaders, Rabbis and self-ordained spokesmen. The ramifications of this crisis are enormous and far reaching while the organized Jewish community sits on its corporate backside and does nothing Herculean. There is plenty of room to point fingers but that won't solve the problem. It is as if no one really cares about Jewish children or the continuity of the Jewish people. The certainty of the published and re-certified population statistics is real and unrelenting: A majority of today's young Jewish parents will be celebrating future December family gatherings around a Christmas tree together with their grandchildren's other non-Jewish grandparents.

The forecasts are absolutely merciless in predicting that approximately 80% of the children of these marriages will not be Jewishly affiliated, will not visit nor care about Israel, will not contribute to Jewish charities, will not raise their children as Jews, and will not attend synagogue.

These ominous predictions have been well known for almost two decades and Jewish leadership have done absolutely nothing substantial to counter this trajectory. They have convened blue ribbon commissions that report to no one and then do nothing. They have redefined

the meaning of being Jewish so that the intermarriage rate statistics don't look so discouraging. They have wringed their hands and proclaimed the issue to be important while following up with no meaningful budgetary resource to do anything.

The remedy is really simple, hugely expensive, but something we can not afford to ignore. If high quality universal intensive affordable Jewish education was available for all children who seek it regardless of their family's stream of religious affiliation or financial resources, the problems of assimilation and intermarriage would be substantially resolved. If we paid a dignified living wage to our teachers, the best and the brightest would continue to enter the field. Everyone agrees, but leadership remains silent. It is as if, no one cares about our Jewish kids.

Obviously, little children don't make educational or medical decisions for themselves. It is their parents that decide where and how their children will be educated. If the parents aren't super rich or ready to make extraordinary financial sacrifices, they are not sending their children to Jewish day schools. How can they? The annual tuition ranges from \$10,000 to \$15,000 per year per student, which statistically places it out of the affordability range of 80% of the families. How many young families can afford that annual economic drain? There are tens of thousands of Jewish children that cannot receive an intensive Jewish education because their parents are not rich. The organized Jewish community is doing nothing substantial to

provide scholarship assistance to all Jewish children who need it.

Clearly, it is in the self-preservation interests of the Jewish community to have Jewish youth educated because it is those children who grow up becoming Jewishly committed adults.

Even though it is unmistakably in the interest of every Jewish institution to have children educated and become Jewishly committed, there is a deafening, communal silence. Even though the number of new young donors is decreasing annually, there is not one national Jewish philanthropic fund that has dramatically reprioritized its budget to try to raise massive amounts of funds to provide scholarship assistance to Jewish children. Not one of these communal charities chests has seriously commenced a second line campaign to try to tackle funding Jewish schools in earnest. There has been no national initiative by any of the rabbinic movements to openly declare war on Jewish illiteracy and demand that intensive Jewish education be communally funded. No national Jewish leaders have spoken at their communal plenary to declare a "Manhattan project" to fund Jewish education for all Jewish children and then followed through in a serious manner to move massive funds into local school budgets.

There are many reasons for the massive spiritual withdrawal by our young people. It is not a black and white direct causal occurrence. We Jews are not a monolith: many factors enter into the equation of religious choices including peer group and family support.

But we do know that most of today's adults were Jewishly educated in the Hebrew school bar mitzvah factories established by the synagogues.

The typical cycle was initiated by young Jews being sent to Hebrew school or Sunday school; the family joined the synagogue just in time for the child to be "Bar Mitzvahed" and then they were rarely seen again in the temple, except for the occasional High Holiday visit.

Of course, there are many exceptions and there are many deeply committed Jews who experienced the Hebrew school system. But the common experiential thread of most of today's Jewish adults is that their Hebrew school education was horrendous. There are many Jews who still cringe when they recall those years. Even nostalgic revisionism is not enough to overcome the uneasy memory of the dislike of being sentenced to that after school environment of Jewish learning. The teachers were well meaning, but ill prepared to teach those American students who saw their musings irrelevant to modern America. This was all happening in the context of the "other children" engaging in fun after school activities such as girl scouts,

(continued on next page)



baseball, or chess club.

No one is to blame. The afternoon school system was the post World War II response of American Jewry's craving to blend into the larger secular society. The primary family focus was to get a fancy college education and get a prestigious job, or better yet to become a doctor, lawyer or accountant. Don't stick out or don't be "too Jewish."

The afternoon Hebrew school system became a place where parents dropped off their children to warehouse them and hope that they come out with a full knowledge of everything they need to know Jewish. At a minimum, they were supposed to learn their Torah readings, give the famous "Today I am a fountain pen speech" and have a fancy party. For most Jewish kids, the system did not work.

Gather any random Jewish adults and they will tell you their Hebrew school horror stories. Not only did those experiences not create a love of Torah, but rather an almost Pavlovian, negative response to anything that resembles Jewish ritual. From World War II until the late 1990s, the majority of Jewish children were educated in these classroom settings while a minority was educated in the day school environment.

It is the product of these afternoon Hebrew school experiences that are running away from Jewish affiliation and either totally assimilating or intermarrying. The products of the day schools are the Jews that are staying affiliated and marrying other Jews. A vast majority of these day school graduates not only have succeeded in their secular studies but have also developed special spiritual connections to their heritage and history. In most cases, the children of these day school graduates are sending their own children to day schools.

It is interesting to further note that participation in Jewish education has declined so much that more children are currently enrolled in day schools than in afternoon Hebrew schools.

Maybe it is too late. Maybe the trajectory of communal indifference is so far gone that we won't be able to educate all of our children. Maybe Torah education will be limited to the twenty percent of the children currently enrolled in Jewish day schools. Maybe future Jewish affiliation will be limited to those children whose parents were very rich or who made extraordinary financial sacrifices to give their children an opportunity to learn about their 4,000 year heritage.

But the one thing we must never allow to continue is to prevent Jewish children to learn about their heritage because they couldn't afford an education. If we do, history must maintain a clear record that our institutions knew the ramifications of their budgetary priorities.

# Letters

## Jewish Idolatry II

Shavua Tov Rabbi,

I read the answer and Thank you I learned a lot and your reasoning is very logical.

That leaves me with two more questions. Would you agree that the Chamsa, over time, has become a Jewish symbol? I do know that the Chamsa is not literally the hand of G-d and would be against Torah of course to make Hashem physical, but is it such a sin to have something to remind us of the fact we Jews are in Hashem's hand? This is really what it does for me.

Also, in my rich Sephardic heritage, the Chamsa was used to serve as a mezuzah on our doorposts in places where we Sephardic Jews could not publicly be known as Jewish. The Chamsa played a role in fulfilling a mitzvah of the mezuzah. This is how we began to write Bible texts on the back of the Chamsa when it was hung in our homes. Again in the Middle Ages in some places it was not safe to be known as Jewish. So to have our home enriched with Hebrew etc, the Chamsa symbol was used to serve those purposes and in some cases such as the first case and point, to fill a mitzvah requirement by Torah and Jewish Laws of the mezuzah.

Thank you again for your time and patience in answering my questions

*Kul Tov,  
Rivka Sari*

**Mesora:** Rivka, God said we must not add or subtract to His Torah. He said this because the system works only if unaltered. Even if our intent is for what we feel is a good, we must respect God's intent over ours. He knows all of history and conditions, and yet, He did not make concessions of Chamsas and the like. Any addition ruins Torah. God's limits on our practices are for reasons we should study, and not attempt to "improve" or replace.

# Oral Rules II

Dear Jewish Times,

Regarding the letter "Oral Rules," you discussed that the prophet uses the word "wife" even though we know from Oral Law that King David did not technically violate adultery and therefore Batsheva was no longer officially Uriah's wife. "And Hashem struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David." I have always understood that the Written Law was making the point that in God's eyes, even though King David had technically not violated adultery, Batsheva was still considered Uriah's wife and that King David, although not technically violating the law, was taking Uriah's wife. It always struck me that referring to Batsheva as "Uriah's wife" was an elegant and subtle way to make this point. This is similar to Megilas Ruth where it says, "And also Ruth the Moabite, wife of Machlon, have I [Boaz] acquired as a wife."

We have to use the Oral Law to understand the Written Law. When the Written Law speaks about God's hand, it doesn't mean He has a hand. However, the word "hand" is chosen for a reason, just as here the term "Uriah's wife" was deliberately chosen because it contains an idea for us to learn from. Mesora mentioned that it is important for us to acquire a rabbi whom we can learn from in order to understand how the Oral Law explains the Written Law. Thank you to the Mesora website for being available to answer these questions.

*Jessie Fischbein*

## Letters

Mesora invites your letters in response to articles, to share your own thoughts, or to make suggestions to the JewishTimes. Email us at: [letters@mesora.org](mailto:letters@mesora.org)