

God said: "There shall not be found among you inquirers of the future" ... "for it is an abomination" ... "Perfectly upright shall you be with God." Rashi writes, "Do not seek knowledge of the future, but accept all that happens with perfection, and then you will be with God and among His portion." Thus, the popular practice of "mezuza reading" to learn the future and seek solutions to life's problems violates God's words. It is also a lie. (Deut. 18:10-13)

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Weekly Parsha

VaYeche

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"Zevulun will settle by the seashores and he shall be at the ships' harbor. His border shall extend to Sidon. Yissachar is a strong-boned donkey. He rests between the burdens." (Bereshit 49:13-14)

Yaakov addresses his sons before his death. He rebukes or blesses his

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TIME PERISCOPES: MAGICAL MEZUZAS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

"Magic" is a term we first learn when still a child. It refers to that which we cannot explain. We see a magician at a friend's birthday party seemingly fabricate a rabbit out of his hat. "Where did the rabbit come from?" we wonder. Things that make sense, we understand not to be magic, but are called "nature". We are not impressed with that which we can explain, and see everyday. (However this should be reversed when we mature, as nature reflects God's wisdom) But that feeling of magical amazement lingers, originally entering our infantile consciousness by that magician's unbelievable tricks.

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(VaYeche cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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various children. As is evident from the above pesukim, his message is not always easily understood. Yaakov's comments to Zevulun indicate that Zevulun's descendants will settle by the seashore of the land of Israel and will engage in maritime trade. However, the meaning of his comments to Yissachar is more difficult to unravel.

The translation above is derived from the comments of Sforno. Sforno understand the passage as describing the future duties and responsibilities of Yissachar's descendants. His descendants will be spiritual and communal leaders within the nation. They will devote themselves to the study of Torah and to providing Torah leadership to Bnai Yisrael. Yaakov tells Yissachar that although these are both heavy burdens – challenging responsibilities, he is confident that Yissachar and his descendants will have the strength to carry this burden.

Our Sages comment that there was a close relationship between these two Shevatim – tribes. Shevet Zevulun engaged in trade and generated considerable wealth. With this wealth, Shevet Zevulun helped support the scholars and Torah leaders of Shevet Yissachar. Because Shevet Zevulun made possible the endeavors and efforts of Shevet Yissachar, its members received reward for the efforts they made possible.

Sforno points that the Torah does not legislate the relationship between Yissachar and Zevulun. They developed this relationship through mutual agreement. However, the relationship is not novel or unique. In fact, the Torah does legislate a similar relationship.

Hashem did not provide Shevet Leyve with a conventional portion of the land of Israel. Instead, Shevet Leyve was provided with cities distributed throughout the land. This portion was not designed to be sufficient to support the Shevet. Instead, the Shevet was supported through the tithes that were given to the Leviyim. The Kohanim – who are a family within Shevet Leyve – received tithes and a portion of the sacrifices offered in the Bait HaMikdash. Why did Hashem not provide Shevet Leyve with an equal inheritance in the land of Israel? This is because Shevet Leyve was to be dedicated to and assigned the task of serving in the Bait HaMikdash. Its members were also to be completely devoted to the study of Torah. The tithes and support that they would receive from the rest of the nation would enable Shevet Leyve to fulfill its responsibilities.

In short, Sforno explains that in such a relationship the reward earned for the study of Torah and providing Torah leadership is shared both by the scholar and his supporter. But Sforno offers a fascinating proof and explanation for this thesis.

Before we can consider this proof some background is required.

The Mishne in Tractate Sanhedrin explains that all members of Bnai Yisrael have a place in Olam HaBah – the world to come. Maimonides uses this Mishne as a starting point for his discussion of the thirteen fundamental principle of the Torah – the Ikkarim. But before outlining his principles, Maimonides explains the meaning of the term Olam HaBah. He explains that Olam HaBah is a term used by the Mishne to refer to the afterlife. A person who lives the proper life is assured that his soul will survive his material demise. When he passes from this live, his soul will live on in eternity.

Based on this interpretation of Olam HaBah, Maimonides deals with the obvious question on the Mishne. According to Maimonides, Olam HaBah is the greatest possible and ultimate reward. It is reasonable to assume that this reward is reserved for those who have achieved some level of righteousness. Yet, the Mishne seems to indicate that a person gains access to Olam HaBah simply by accident of birth. If one is Jewish, he is admitted into eternity. Certainly, Olam HaBah must be somewhat more exclusive!

Maimonides resolves this issue by defining another term in the Mishne. The Mishne asserts that any Yisrael has a place in Olam HaBah. What is the meaning of Yisrael in this context? Maimonides explains that the Mishne does not mean that any person who is born into the Jewish nation or converts to Judaism is admitted to Olam HaBah. Instead, the Mishne means that a person who adopts and is committed to the fundamental convictions of a Yisrael is admitted to Olam HaBah. Maimonides explains that this specifically does not mean that the person must be perfect in his observance. On the contrary, even a person who is somewhat flawed in his observance can gain entry. But the person must be complete and uncompromised in his convictions. He must accept and fully embrace the fundamental tenets of the Torah. This conclusion leads Maimonides into his discussion of the tenets. In this discussion he outlines his thirteen Ikkarim.[1]

Sforno – in considering this Mishne – was bothered by the same issue as Maimonides. How does the accident of birth earn a person a place in Olam HaBah? However, he comes to a very different conclusion.

According to Sforno, Bnai Yisrael is charged with a sacred mission. This mission is the study of Torah and the service of Hashem. However, this is a national mission. We do not fulfill this mission merely by our own individual efforts. The mission is national. Therefore, we fulfill our individual responsibility through our participation in and support of the national mission.

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(VaYeche continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

In an integrated community effort there is a distribution of roles and responsibilities. For example, we are all citizens of the United States. In order for the United States to thrive, we cannot all be President. We cannot all be medical doctors or lawyers. Who would the lawyers sue? In a thriving community we must all contribute in unique and different ways.

The same analysis applies to Bnai Yisrael. In order for our national mission to be achieved, we must all contribute. But we do not contribute in the same manner. If we each make our appropriate contribution, then the mission can be achieved. If we abandon our individual responsibilities and refuse or decline the privilege to participation in the efforts of Jewish community, then the mission cannot be achieved.

Based on this insight, Sforno provides an alternative explanation of the Mishne. We achieve Olam HaBah through assuming our responsibilities as members of the Jewish community. The term Yisrael in the Mishne does not refer to a person who is born Jewish. It refers to a person who accepts the responsibility of

being an effective member of the Jewish community and contributes to the nation mission. If we are part of the nation – by sharing in the mission, then we are assured a place in Olam HaBah. If we decline the privilege of involvement in this mission, then we forfeit our place in Olam HaBah.

Sforno notes that this interpretation of the Mishne supports and explains the assertion that Zevulun shared in the reward earned by Yissachar's efforts. Together they created a community. The two partners in this community had different but complimentary roles. By contributing to the efforts of the community that they created, they achieved much more than they could have achieved individually. They both shared in the rewards earned by this community for its integrated, mutual effort.[2]

It should be noted that although Sforno disagrees with Maimonides' interpretation of the Mishne, this does not mean that he objects to Maimonides' conclusions. Maimonides contends that Olam HaBah is a reference to the afterlife and he analyzes the Mishne from this perspective.

However, it is unlikely that Sforno understood the term Olam HaBah in this manner. In his commentary on the Torah, Sforno refers to Olam HaBah in numerous places and it seems from these references that he does not agree that Olam HaBah is a term for the afterlife. Instead, he seems to understand the term as a reference to the Messianic era. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that he maintain that the Mishne is discussing the Messianic era and not the afterlife.

Sforno's interpretation of the Mishne is consistent with this assumption. Sforno understands the Messianic era as a period in which the ideal Torah community will be established. According to his interpretation of the Mishne, it is telling us that those who wish to participate in this ideal community must earn this privilege through their participation in the community during their own time and era. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.

[2] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 49:13-14.

(Mezuzah continued from page 1)

TIME PERISCOPES: MAGICAL MEZUZAS

We get older, attend schools, marry, start families, and work rigorous schedules. However, we never lost that infantile amazement and belief in "magic"...nor did we lose the absent-minded impression that maybe this magician really "did" perform some magic. We never think into it, for that birthday party was mere entertainment, and not where we are supposed to apply our minds, nor did we possess minds at such a young age...and therein lies the error: we harbor, and sustain this belief in an unexamined, and accepted magic. However, as Jews, adhering to Torah as our guide in "every" aspect of life, here too we must reexamine our infantile ways, and abandon them, attaching ourselves to truth, and applying our intelligence in yet another unexplored cavity of our unsubstantiated belief system.

Last week we ran an article in which addressed the advertisement of an organization charging \$40 in exchange for what they promise is Divine Intervention: reciting Tehillim or Shir Hashirim – they claim – will generate some positive change in a person's life, providing a "segula" as the ad stated. This organization does

not care whether you are a rasha (sinner). Provided you pay \$40, they claim to override God's system of justice, where although you sinned and God wishes to punish you, their recital of Torah verses will grant your wish. For nowhere in their ad is there any caveat "sinners not accommodated". They claim their practice works for anyone with \$40. Does this practice seem idolatrous, and appear to violate God's just system of reward and punishment? Yes to both.

Why did this newspaper run this ad that violates Torah principles, reason, and with no proof of such claims? Why do people believe such claims, enough to print them, and pay for unproven promises? A few reasons come to mind, as Maimonides stated: these claims are "printed" and people believe anything printed; Rabbis "endorse" them; and the masses follow them. Are these arguments sufficient that an intelligent, Torah abiding Jew should accept such ads' claims as truth? How do you feel, knowing that the Torah (Deut. 18:13), Rashi (ibid) and Maimonides (Laws of Idolatry, 11:7) refer to such Kosame practices as idolatrous,

refuting those "endorsing" Rabbis? Certainly God's very words override these practices. (Kosame refers doing strange acts and forecasting the future including reading mezuzas, as this act deviates from the Torah's words.)

This week again, yet another Jewish publication advertised the following: "Harav XXXXX: Seer of Mezuzot from Jerusalem; endorsed by Rabbinical leaders worldwide such as Rav XXXXX and Rav XXXXX." The first thing that's puzzling is why someone who is successful at "reading" a mezuzah needs any endorsements. Think a moment: a successful doctor needs no endorsement; his cured patients are all the proof necessary to verify his skills. Now, if someone consistently describes peoples' pasts or futures with exactitude, his evidenced skills should obviate any need for endorsements. Endorsements add nothing when evidence exists. Just as the great doctor needs no endorsement, this "seer" needs none...if he truly performs what is claimed regarding him. However, had this Rav the skills claimed about him, he would be a famous, worldwide phenomenon. But he is not, and requires paid publicity in the form of a small, 1/18th page size ad. Could he not also "see" in his own mezuzas that I would be challenging his claims, with this article of mine? Why then has he not phoned me, asking me not to write this paper? Certainly, I would cease from doing so, being overwhelmed by his proof of his abilities with his phone call!

But the primary problem is this: the Torah

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(Mezuzah continued from page 3)

Idolatry

demands that we follow all 613 commands, and they include the prohibition of consulting seers, warlocks, and enchanters. These idolatrous practices include the reading of bones to determine future events, and making noises and falling into faked trances where the seer would then claim knowledge of the future. Also included by Maimonides as prohibited, is saying, "Since such and such happened, I shall gauge my activities accordingly". It makes no difference of one says, "Since a fox crossed my path", since "Food fell from my mouth", or..."Since the mezuzah is missing this letter". If one follows any of these categories of gauging one's action based on unrelated phenomena, one violates a very severe Issur D'Oraissa, "Torah Prohibitions". The Rabbis teach that one who admits of idolatrous practice, is as if he denies the entire Torah. And do not be misled that since this person is Jewish, a Rabbi, or endorsed by others, that this in any way removes God's prohibition. Study the Torah, and you will realize that this practice is idolatrous.

But now, let our minds enter the picture: let us think about the very claims of this "seer advertisement". The claim of mezuzah readers in general is that by reading a mezuzah, someone obtains true knowledge about the mezuzah's owner: the reader can tell about your past, your present, and forecast events. However, can anyone explain how this works? Even the seer himself cannot explain how his words are validated. He won't even guarantee he is correct. But he will take your money. Thus, with no evidence, why should one accept his claims as truth? Why do newspapers accept these ads? Are they not concerned with misleading people if these claims are unproven? Are they not concerned with violating Avodah Zarah?

I phoned the number on the ad and asked if they could validate their claims before I spend my money. I asked to learn what type of information would be offered to me by the reader, and if he guaranteed this as 100% accurate. They said they don't ask for money, but rather a "contribution of \$100 per month for 12 months". More dishonesty. I asked to speak to the Rabbi before paying, and they said he is holy, and does not come to the phone. I asked for some proof that what he will say is true, and they said, "we have many cases of success." I asked for one. I have not heard back from them. During my conversation, I tried to educate them saying, "We do not find Moses, Joshua, the Patriarchs are any prophet succumbing to such idolatrous practice, and they never read mezuzas. Why does this Rabbi deviate from the Torah?" They apparently could not accept that their Rabbi violates God Torah. The "person" of

this Rabbi became more important and "true"...than God's Torah, Rashi, Maimonides and all the prophets from Moses through Eliyahu.

Entertain this scenario: 2 years ago I buy a new house. I have 12 doorposts that require mezuzas, so I purchase 12 mezuzas from my local scribe (sofer). However, this scribe was miserly: he saved on his ink purchases by diluting his inks used in about 35 mezuzas. By natural law, these 35 mezuzas with thinned-out inks were going to become brittle in under a year. And if placed on doorposts exposed to the outdoors, regular moisture and heat would hasten their decomposition. Unaware, I purchase 12 mezuzas from this crooked scribe's lot of 35 flawed mezuzas. I ended up not needing all 12 mezuzas, so I gave 2 to my parents as a gift. Three months later, my mezuzas and those I gave to my parents have deteriorated. But of course, we do not know, as the parchments are encased in opaque cases. At this very time, both I, and my parents fall sick. My

friend Michael says, "Have your mezuzas checked". However, we don't follow this practice of accepting mezuzas as possessing powers, and do not check them. Additionally, as the mezuzas are practically brand new, Halacha does not demand we check them yet. When we recover, we take a trip, and Michael secretly enters our homes, takes our mezuzas off our doorposts, and has them read. Sure enough, they are found to be missing letters and are invalidated. Now, what are we to say about this scenario: that my parents and I deserved illness because of something out of our control? Surely, the scribe was the sinner. So such a claim that we are punished because of someone else's corruption cannot be so: this is not God's justice. Another ridiculous conclusion Michael is forced to make, is that it was divine intervention that I purchased "these" specific 12 mezuzas, just so that I would have a "sign" that my punishment was divine. Michael must suggest that all events contributing to the mezuzas falling into my

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Why hasn't a single palm or mezuzah reader ever successfully predicted the lottery numbers? Where is their "knowledge" of the future?



(Mezuza continued from page 4)

Idolatry

possession were “planned”. As you can see, this is a far-fetched fantasy, created by people to substantiate their baseless faith in objects, as opposed to God.

Rashi writes, “Do not seek knowledge of the future, but accept all that happens with perfection, and then you will be with God and among His portion.” (Deut. 18:13) Seeking future knowledge, one is no longer “with God or part of His portion”. This is because God created the world with cause and effect, and free will, precisely so man uses his mind to learn “how” the world operates, so as to procure his good, and avoid evil. Had God desired mezuzas to offer this knowledge, he would not have prohibited this mezuza-reading practice, and He also would not have granted us intelligence to discern what actions lead to success or failure. Intelligence would be useless if all our answers are magically provided. But as God gave us intelligence, and as a Rabbi taught, even called it by His name (Tzelem “Elokim”), we understand that God desires we use our intellects. This is how we are “perfect with God”...we follow His will that we use intelligence.

Furthermore, regarding those seers who forecast matters based on mezuzas’ flaws, what exactly is this seer supposedly “reading”? The words are identical in both kosher mezuzas and flawed ones. So the only differences are in the weathered letters and arbitrary cracks in the ink. Reading these random cracks is exactly what palm readers do: they claim each randomly-formed crease in your skin is...well...not random but significant. These seers do the same thing, and are violating laws of idolatry, as they claim accidental cracks and missing parts of letters to convey our personal flaws, where we must correct ourselves via Teshuva. But there is one grave injustice seers thereby promote: that God is evil. Through their theory, a person will be punished, if he does not check his mezuza and find out the “secret message” to repent. Thus, if I follow Torah law – acting properly – and know that I don’t need to check my mezuza for another 7 years, I am still going to be punished, since I never learned of my flaws, indicated by the “magical” mezuza! This view teaches that God’s system is evil. For He will punish people, even when observing the Torah!

In direct contradiction to this sinful theory of “mezuza seers”, our Torah actually says this: “Let us search and examine our ways and return to God”. (Lamentations, 3:40) Here, the Torah teaches again that Teshuva (repentance) has nothing to do with mezuzas, but must occur after we examine our actions, realize our flaws, feel remorse, abandon our sins, and only then...God will forgive us. This happens with



Cracks in mezuza texts or palms...both are purely accidental, with no relationship to world events.

or without reading mezuzas, which do not communicate God’s will, or are anything more than their written words. God’s Torah contains only those ideas that are pleasing to our minds and hearts. “This makes sense” must be an intelligent person’s response to this verse in Lamentations. God defines from where man might repent: he must recognize his flaws and resign himself never to act this way again. Only with such an intelligent realization of that which destroys us, and our abandon of such sins, does it make any sense that God should pardon our sins, and be close with us. But the absurdity that God should punish someone who didn’t check his mezuza since Halacha does not warrant it yet, is a crooked thought, and not part of God’s just system.

This lie that mezuzas are tools of “communication” is not seen in any of the books of the Torah, and the idea itself is against reason and putrefies the beauty of real Torah truths.

Where in God’s perfect Torah did He write that mezuzas are divinely endowed with messages? Nowhere. God, Moses, Joshua, Aaron and every great prophet never claimed mezuzas to possess such information. Thus, anyone today who opposes God, Moses and these prophets is a liar. These “seers” are crooks, as they take money for lies, unproven claims, and newspapers further this sin.

If we count the sins involved herein, we find

1) lying (to others about these readings), 2) stealing (people pay for these false readings), 3) idolatry, 4) Chillul Hashem (since the seer represents this as Torah philosophy), 5) Lifney Ivare (misleading), 6) Gaava (haughtiness, as in claiming knowledge of the unknown), 7) distortion of the mitzvah of mezuza, 8) denial of God’s system of Reward and Punishment, and I am sure many more. These are the worst of sins. For Shima, which is written in the mezuza, is the Torah portion teaching of God’s Unity, one of the most fundamental commands, and these sinners turn it into some magical spell that was never practiced by our great Torah leaders...for money no less.

These mezuza readers should really read something else: Maimonides Mishneh Torah (“Star Worship”, chapter XI) wherein these exact practices are identified as idolatry. The question is this: will one continue accepting magical mezuza theories as Torah and truth, or, will one consult the Torah and reason, and determine if these practices fall outside the pale of Orthodox Judaism, regardless of the numbers who follow such practices, or the reputations of those who endorse it?

These unproven claims are sinful, and those who advertise for these liars with no proof, lose credibility: not a good move for those reporting “news”. These claims mislead others, and reinforce what Maimonides defines as Avodah Zarah. Don’t think that our generation is exempt from the same idolatrous sins for which the Prophets rebuked the Jews in the times of the Neveim. The Jews back then also adhered to idolatrous shortcuts to secure good fortunes and futures. Man today has not been reinvented, that he no longer possesses the same emotional makeup as those who Yeshaya rebuked. Follow the Torah understand Hashem’s message delivered by His prophets, and you too will see through the false claims of today’s foolish Jews endorsing idolatrous practices. Hashem granted us intelligence to detect what is false, such as mezuzas readers, chamsas, and segulas. Unfortunately, these practices have become so ingrained in the Jewish culture, that “prevalence” becomes the barometer for what is viewed as authentically “Jewish”, even if to opposes the Torah.

This is a great shame: what is popular overrides what makes sense and what God says openly. These ads are a disgrace, and I am sorely bothered that other Jews do not join and denounce such travesties of Torah.

If a house catches fire, it will burn to the ground with all of its mezuzas. If the mezuza cannot protect itself, how can it protect you? ■

Idolatry

Perfectly ^{Walking} with God

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The Torah says in Deuteronomy 18:9, “When you come into the land which Hashem your G-d gives you, do not learn to do as the abominations of those (other) nations.” The Torah lists idolatrous prohibitions; passing children in between pillars of fire (Molech), inquiring counsel from your staff (Kosame), fortune telling, witchcraft, consulting the dead and other practices. We understand that all these idolatrous practices are not based on truth and knowledge, and thus, are completely false. But this section concludes with a statement not found at the end of other sections of commandments, (18:13) “Perfect (tamim) shall you be with Hashem your G-d.” Why isn’t this statement applied to other areas, i.e., kosher, laws of robbery, court systems, or any other section? Why is the statement of “Perfect shall you be...” mentioned here? What does “perfect” mean?

We must say that only in the area of the idolatrous practices is one in violation of “perfect shall you be with Hashem your G-d”. If one were to eat non kosher foods, he would not violate this command to be perfect. To what specific objective does “perfect” with G-d refer? Framing the question this way, we are forced to understand these “abominations”.

Each of the aforementioned idolatrous practices is an attempt - in some way - to procure information. In each case, there is an inquiry, or an attempt to secure oneself. A few examples will help to illustrate this point. Molech was a practice where a parent would pass his son or daughter through two flames - not burning the infant, according to at least one view. What was this objective? Let us consider: Fire is the one element, which opposes all biological existence. In all elements, an organ-

ism may survive, except in fire. Passing the child through unharmed, the father imagines that just as the child is shielded from flames, so he is shielded from all other mishaps during his life. It makes sense that the parent/child relationship forms the prohibition, as the parental instinct is focused primarily on survival of their infant. This parent has a distorted notion that such action is fortuitous and actually “protects” the remainder of his child’s existence. Kosame and Nichush were two practices, which foretold the success or failure of future events or actions. So too was the practice of consulting the dead. The goal is to obtain knowledge of the ‘other side’, or of future events. One would usually attempt to consult a dead friend or relative. As there was nothing to be learned about someone with whom you were already intimate with, the interest in consulting the dead must serve some other need; knowledge of the future, or more specific, the inquirer’s future. Obsession with the dead is an expression of one’s own immortality fantasy.

What common thread runs through all these practices? The answer is “knowledge”. In each of these violations, the inquirer seeks security through some imagined source of knowledge, via a warlock, an enchanter, or the dead. He assumes there is a source of knowledge out there - besides G-d. This is precisely where one removes his self from following G-d perfectly, or rather, “exclusively”. To assume sources of knowledge other than G-d, is to not follow G-d “perfectly”. It is a dilution of G-d’s unique and exclusive position. Therefore, the command to “be perfect with G-d”, means, in other words, “do not assume other causes for the universe’s existence and operation”.

(continued on next page)

Idolatry

The followers of these practices assume that aside from G-d, there are other means by which the universe operates. They assume supernatural powers other than the perceived laws of cause and effect. This of course is baseless. Their insecurities propel them to seek forecasts for their actions, so they need not think for themselves. Relying on another's advice removes their need to make decisions. This is the opposite of G-d's plan that man engage the gift of intelligence. Similar to these idolatrous practitioners are present day Jews who check a mezuzah when household members fall sick, or those who don red bendels, place keys in challas, use prayer books as protection, and those who ascribe powers to Rebbes, Mekubals and Kabbalists. I recently heard of a "Meir bal Hanase" practice where foolish individuals believe that by giving charity, you can locate a lost object. How ridiculous and damaging are such notions! What is "created", cannot oppose the "Creator". It is clear. Just as G-d set boundaries for the sea, "You set a boundary, they cannot overstep..." (Psalms, 104:9) so too, all creation follows the laws governing its matter and behavior. Just as parchment and ink mezuzas burn, so too they are static, and have no will, and cannot "do" anything.

All practices assuming forces aside from G-d are idolatrous. It makes no difference if we see "religious" Jews practicing such foolishness, or if we read about them under a Hebrew title, or authored by a Rabbi. What is the objective truth? That which G-d created and wrote in our Torah. He created and controls the universe; therefore, He alone determines reality. Not people, and not objects. The same mezuzah consumed by flames, people foolishly think possesses protective abilities. If mezuzas cannot protect themselves, how can they protect anything else?

G-d created everything. There is no other source. G-d's knowledge alone defines the operation of the entire universe. Therefore, there cannot be anything which can alter our reality, other than G-d, the Sole Creator.

"Perfect shall you be with G-d" means we must not deviate from following Him alone. G-d, to the exclusion of anything else, is the only Cause. This makes sense: how can That which has ultimate power, coexist with anything else laying claim to His power? G-d's ultimate Kingship and power negates anything else from having any power whatsoever. This is so clear; it boggles the mind that there are such idolatrous practices within our fold.

Having shown that the term "perfect" (tamim) refers to man's requirement not to assume knowledge or powers outside of G-d, we have a question: In Genesis 17:1, regarding

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circumcision, G-d instructed Abraham to "walk before Me and be perfect". G-d again uses the term "perfect". How does this fit in with our theory? I believe it is 'perfect'! The Ibn Ezra says the following commentary on this command to Abraham to "be perfect", "You should not ask why (to) perform circumcision." On the surface, Ibn Ezra defies all he stands for, i.e. a life of understanding. How then can he verbalize such a statement? I don't believe Ibn Ezra is saying we should not use our minds. Rather, he is teaching us that Abraham should not make his performance of divine decrees dependent on his own intelligence. Ibn Ezra teaches that man can fall prey to an erroneous notion that "only when I know the reasons will I perform, but not before". To this, Ibn Ezra teaches, "do not inquire why the circumcision" - "do not let your inquiry determine your acts". "Be perfect with G-d and don't render your intelligence superior to His" - this is what Ibn Ezra is teaching, and why the term "perfect" is also used here. In this case too, man can go so far as to think of himself as a source of knowledge outside of G-d...making his subjective knowledge supreme to the knowledge contained in G-d's divine commands. G-d says to Abraham, "be perfect" - follow me even when your mind does not grasp with complete understanding.

We see Abraham does follow this concept, as he did not second-guess G-d when he was commanded to kill his son Isaac. A Rabbi once asked why Abraham inquired of G-d's decision to destroy Sodom, but not regarding Isaac's slaughter. The Rabbi suggested that Abraham realized he could learn about G-d's justice by asking. But regarding perfection via commands, Abraham felt he could not necessarily understand how a command would perfect him, although it did. He therefore did not ask about the killing Isaac - a divine command - but he did inquire about G-d's justice for Sodom. ■

OBSERVANCE



REWARD

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by student

“Ontignos, the man from Socho... said: Don't be like servants who serve their master to receive 'pras'. Rather, be like servants who serve their master not to receive 'pras' and let Fear of Heaven be on you.”

The first difficulty in reading this Mishna is the meaning of the Hebrew word 'pras'. Rashi explains that the term 'pras' means a gift. The Rambam also says that it does not mean 'sechar', reward, which one deserves, but rather 'chesed', kindness and favors that are unearned and given for free. The implication here is that though one should not serve God for a gift or a favor, which he does not deserve; it is okay to serve God for reward, which he deserves. This requires some understanding: is the Mishna allowing one to fulfill commandments in order to receive reward?

The notion of performing commandments in exchange for reward is, on reflection, illogical. Reward has a notion of owing, that we did something so that, in return, God must pay us back for it, as if God owes us something. This cannot be true in relation to God: man cannot possess a claim of being owed something as he does towards another man. Within human society, there is a system that we call justice, and within that system, man realistically makes claims on others. God, however, does not exist within our system – as such, we cannot claim that 'God owes' a human being anything. Unlike our relationships with man, we cannot benefit or detract from God, so that by definition any claim on God would be absurd. Thus the Mishna does not mention serving God for reward because it is unnecessary: with some thought, it is easy to see how it is wrong.

The Rambam explains that the Mishna is teaching us that we should not serve God so that He will do kindness and favors for us, but rather we should serve God out of love. According to this, the parable given in the mishna is very precise: not only does it say that the servant should not serve the master to receive benefits, but the servant should do it out of love for the master. Relative to God, this would mean that it is not only that one should not perform commandments in order to receive

favors, since there is another possibility: one might still serve God for the benefits of the commandments. This is what the second half of the parable tells us not to do; the highest level one should strive for is where he carries out the Will of God out of love for Him, without any care for personal benefits. Love of God demands that the individual has the perspective of the self where his own value is obliterated: the higher the level of the person, the less importance he gives to his own self.

“...Let the Fear of Heaven be upon you”. Rashi explains that there is no reward for fulfilling commandments in this world, as the verse says “as I commanded you today”- to perform today, but not to receive reward for them. According to Rashi's interpretation, this Mishna addresses a problem that many religious people have when they experience some type of evil. They end up losing their Fear of God because they then maintain that God is not concerned with man.

A similar lesson is learned from a Gemara in Tractate Kiddushin (39b). The Gemara records the story of a child whose father told him to go up on a roof and get the birds that were there. The child went up, sent away the mother bird (thereby performing the commandment of sending away the mother bird before taking the chicks), he took the pigeons, and then died when returning. The Gemara asks: doesn't this seem to contradict the verses in Torah that say that one who performs these commandments will receive good and long days? The Gemara answers that these verses are referring to receiving the good of the world which is only good and having lengthy days in the world that is only lengthy, meaning Olam Haba, the world to come. This, the Gemara explains, is what is meant when we say that there is no reward for the fulfillment of commandments in this world.

When we reflect on the idea that there is no reward for fulfilling commandments, we need to consider its implications. What does this mean for the notion of Divine Providence? If the Torah says that there is Divine Providence over those who keep God's commandments, how then could it be that there is no reward for the commandments? To be continued. ■



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