



Black cats. Broken mirrors. Chamsas. Rabbit's feet. Checking mezuzas. Objects are meaningless if we abandon Torah. And if we properly observe, we have God's promises. Plus, these things can't work. Test them.

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## Weekly Parsha

# Ki Tavo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And you shall write upon them the words of the Torah when you pass over, so that you shall come to the land that Hashem your G-d gives to you – a land flowing with milk and honey – as Hashem your G-d spoke to your forefathers in your regard." (Devarim 27:3)

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# SUPERSTITION

## BLOWING REALITY OUT OF PROPORTION

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Last week we published a letter sent to a Jewish email group moderator. This week we commence with that initial letter; now also including the ensuing dialogue. As you will read, the moderator could not produce promised sources validating segulas, while the member has produced quotes from Rambam and the Baal Shulchan Aruch prohibiting segulas. Our objective is not to critique this single moderator; but to expose prohibitions which he spreads, and states are endorsed by orthodox Rabbis. If his claims are true, community leaders and members must denounce such superstitious practices.

**Member:** Dear Moderator: After reading numerous "pro" posts on segula challas, bereft of any Torah source, I kindly request your fair posting of an alternative post, an actual Torah source:

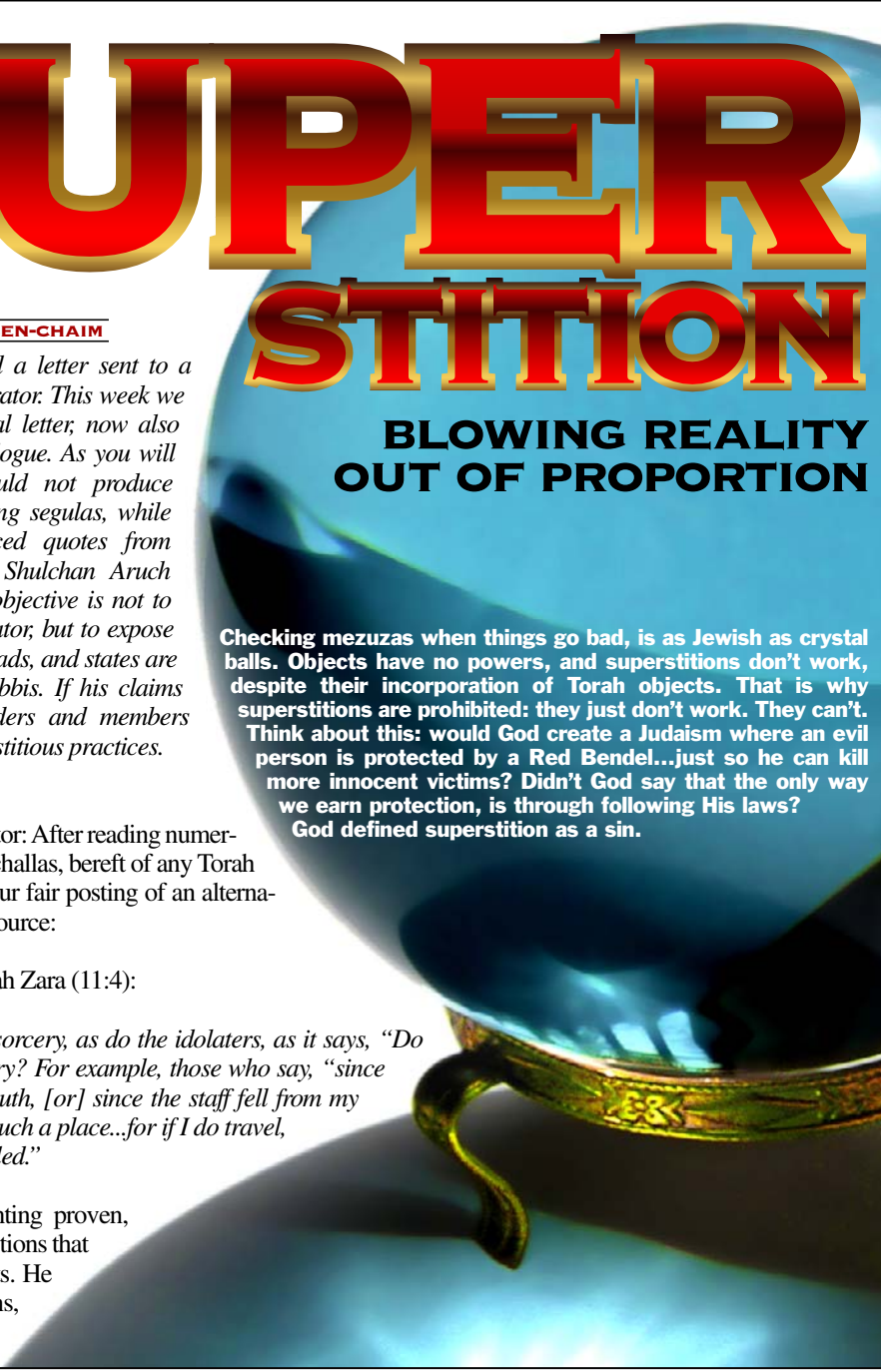
Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zara (11:4):

"One may not practice sorcery, as do the idolaters, as it says, "Do not divine". What is sorcery? For example, those who say, "since the bread fell from my mouth, [or] since the staff fell from my hand, I shall not travel to such a place...for if I do travel, my wishes will not be fulfilled."

Rambam is not discounting proven, medical cures, or logical actions that have rational, causal results. He describes prohibited actions,

(continued on page 4)

Checking mezuzas when things go bad, is as Jewish as crystal balls. Objects have no powers, and superstitions don't work, despite their incorporation of Torah objects. That is why superstitions are prohibited: they just don't work. They can't. Think about this: would God create a Judaism where an evil person is protected by a Red Bendel...just so he can kill more innocent victims? Didn't God say that the only way we earn protection, is through following His laws? God defined superstition as a sin.



(Ki Tavo cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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Moshe tells the nation that after crossing the Jordan they will arrive at Har Eival. The nation is to erect a structure of twelve stones. They are to record the Torah on these stones. There is a dispute among the authorities regarding exactly what was to be recorded upon these stones. Nachmanides notes that according to some authorities, the requirement is to be understood quite literally. Bnai Yisrael were required to record the entire Torah upon these stones – from the first pasuk of Sefer Beresheit to the last passage of Sefer Devarim.[1] Others suggest that only Sefer Devarim was to be inscribed upon these stones.[2] Rabbaynu Sa'adai maintains that Bnai Yisrael were required to inscribe upon the stones a brief list of the 613 mitzvot.[3] What is the basis of this dispute? In order to understand this dispute, we must consider another issue discussed in our parasha.

**“These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the nation when you pass over the Jordan – Shimon, Levi, Yisachar, Yosef, and Binyamin.”** (Devarim 27:12)

Moshe commands Bnai Yisrael in a second activity that the nation is to perform upon entering the land. Moshe instructs Bnai Yisrael that, upon entering the land, they should publicly pronounce a series of blessing and curses. The blessings are the reward for observing the Torah. The curses are the consequence for abandoning the mitzvot. Moshe instructs that the blessings should be given upon Mount Gerizim and the curses should be pronounced from upon Mount Eival.

Moshe's instructions are not completely clear from the narrative in our parasha. The Talmud, in Tractate Sotah, provides further clarification. The description that emerges is that Bnai Yisrael were to be divided into three groups. Six tribes – Shevatim – were to ascend Mount Gerizim and six were to ascend Mount Eival. The Kohanim and Leveyim were to be positioned between the two mountains. The Aron – the sacred Ark – would accompany the Kohanim and Leveyim.

Before we can continue our discussion of the

process of pronouncing the blessings and curses, a critical issue must be resolved. The blessing and curses are not a series of rewards and punishments. They are a list of behaviors that are either rewarded or punished. In our parasha, Moshe lists the behaviors that result in the curse. For example, any person that creates an image or idol will be cursed. The behaviors that are rewarded are not delineated in our parasha. What is the text of these blessings?

The Talmud suggests that the blessings – the behaviors to be rewarded – are the opposite of the behaviors that are punished. In other words, Moshe delineated, as one of the curses, that a person who creates an idol is cursed. According to the Talmud, this curse delineates a corresponding

blessing. One who refrains from creating an idol is blessed. Now, we can identify the text of the blessings. The text of the blessings is merely a derivative of the text for the curses.

Let us return to the Talmud's explanation of the process of pronouncing the blessings and curses. The Talmud explains the process was to be composed of four steps. First, the Leveyim would turn towards Mount Gerizim. They state the first blessing. Second, the Shevatim on both mountains respond, “amen.” Third, the Leveyim were to turn towards Mount Eival and state the corresponding curse. Fourth, the

tribes on both mountains respond, “amen”. This process continues until the entire series of blessings and corresponding curses is completed.

This process raises many questions. Let us consider a few of these. First, as explained above, the blessings would be stated by the Leveyim while facing Mount Gerizim. The Leveyim would then reverse direction and pronounce the curses facing Mount Eival. Why were the blessings and curses associated with different directions and mountains?

Gershonides answers this question. His response provides an important insight into the fundamental nature of these blessings and curses. He explains that the curse and blessing represent opposite extremes. The blessing for observing the mitzvot is uncommon, extreme well-being. The curse that befalls Bnai Yisrael for violating the command-

(continued on next page)



(Ki Tavo continued from page 2)

## Weekly Parsha

ments is not merely the loss of this well-being and a restoration of a more common and moderate pattern. The curse is the opposite of the blessing. The consequence for abandoning the Torah is uncommon, extreme suffering and misfortune. Associating these two states with two opposing mountains and directions represents this relationship between the curse and blessing. This symbolism communicates the message that these two states are extreme opposites.[4]

Gershonides further explains the reason for this relationship. Why are the curse and blessing extreme opposites? He explains that the well-being promised as a reward for observance of the Torah is not a natural phenomenon. It is only possible through the intervention of Divine Providence. Abandoning the Torah is punished by extreme suffering and misery. This punishment is not merely a suspension of the providence that produced the blessing. The punishment is also an expression of Divine Providence. The Almighty intervenes into nature to produce a state of consistent affliction and wretchedness.[5]

Is there a connection between the two activities that Moshe instructed Bnai Yisrael to perform upon entering the land? In other words is there a relationship between the Moshe instruction to record the Torah on stones and the requirement to recite the blessings and curses? Rashbam suggests an obvious connection. He explains the two activities are part of a single process. The Torah is to be recorded on the stones so that the blessings and curses will be recited in the presence of the record of the Torah.[6] In other words, the blessings and curses represent an acknowledgement of the consequences for observing or ignoring the Torah. This acknowledgement is to be recited in the presence of a record of this Torah.

Now, let us return to the dispute between the authorities regarding the text recorded on the stones. We can easily grasp the reasoning behind recording the entire Torah on the stones. The curses and blessings represent entry into a covenantal relationship to observe the Torah. It is reasonable that in entering into this agreement the object of the covenant – the Torah – should be present.

We can also appreciate the reasoning of the opinion that Sefer Devarim alone was recorded on the stones. Sefer Devarim is Moshe's final admonishment to Bnai Yisrael to observe the Torah. Moshe repeatedly urges Bnai Yisrael to be scrupulous in their observance of the Torah and describes to the nation of the consequences of disobedience and the rewards for observance. Sefer Devarim – more than any other text – is reflected in the blessings and curses. In fact, the blessings and curses can be regarded as no more than a summary presentation of this final admonition of Moshe. The recording of Sefer Devarim

upon the stones creates a fixed record of the substance of the covenant entered into by Hashem and the nation.

In short, these two opinions agree that there is a relationship between the text on the stones and the blessings and curses. However, they differ on the precise nature of the relationship. The first opinion – that the entire Torah is recorded – maintains that the stones were part of the process of creating the covenant. When the nation entered into the covenant, the text over which the agreement is entered is before it. According to the second opinion – that only Sefer Devarim was recorded on the stones – the text is not part of the covenant. It is intended as a fixed record of the covenant for future generations.

This leaves the opinion of Rabbaynu Sa'adia. According to Rabaynu Sa'adia, the stones are inscribed with a short list of the 613 mitzvot. What is Rabbaynu Sa'adia's reasoning?

In order to answer this question, it is important to appreciate the nature of 613 mitzvot and their relationship to the Torah. The Torah includes the

commandments. But these commandments are not the entire content of the Torah. In addition to these commandments the Torah includes a vast array of concepts, perspectives and ideas. This material is not incorporated into specific mitzvot. There are many examples of this distinction. The opening chapters of Sefer Beresheit provide an obvious example. These chapters contain an elaborate description of the creation. Although this material is clearly a fundamental element of the Torah, this account is not incorporated into a specific mitzvah. The mitzvot are the action items of the Torah. They represent the activities and beliefs that we are required to accept and observe.

Rabbaynu Sa'adia maintains that the covenant into which Bnai Yisrael was to enter through acknowl-

edgement of the curses and blessings relates to these mitzvot – to the action items of the Torah. Although we are required to accept the entire Torah – every passage must be acknowledged as a divinely revealed truth, the blessings and the curses constituted a covenant in regard to these action items of the Torah. Therefore, according to Rabbaynu Sa'adia the mitzvot are recorded on the stones and not the entire Torah. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 27:3.

[2] Don Yitzchak Abravanel, Commentary on Sefer Devarim, 252b.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Devarim, 27:2.

[4] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on the Torah, p 217a.

[5] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on the Torah, p 298d.

[6] Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) Commentary on Sefer Devarim 27:8.

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(Superstition continued from page 1)

as they are not found in the Torah, since they have no natural relationship to their imagined promises. So too, keys in challas have no relationship to fertility. The Kessef Mishna – author of the Shulchan Aruch – states that Rambam merely describes the “principle”, which includes many other actions. Rambam could not list the innumerable permutations of sorcery, and therefore, described the Torah's prohibition with a few examples. In his conclusion, Rambam writes this:

*“And these things [listed herein] are all fallacy and lies. They are what the original star worshippers misled the gentile nations to accustom themselves after them. And it is not fitting that Israel, who are very wise, be drawn after these futilities, and they shall [also] not assume they afford any help...But wise people, with complete knowledge know with clear proofs that all these matters prohibited by Torah, are not wise matters, but they are emptiness and futile...and because of this, the Torah prohibited them.”*

**Moderator:** This sounds very familiar. Have I not previously articulated my reasons to you for not posting your “rebuttal?”

**Member:** Yes, you articulated your position before. But your continued posting of Torah prohibitions requires another reiteration of those prohibitions. This time, I have sent you exact quotes from the Rambam, and the Baal Shulchan Aruch. Although you previously expressed your sentiment, that you feel these acts offer infertile women comfort, there are no opinions that allow these practices that you continue to reprint and spread among unknowing Jews. Comfort does not override Torah prohibition, certainly, a comfort that is a lie. “Midvar Shekker Tirchak”, “From a lie, distance yourself”[1]. Similarly, we do not allow someone who is cold, to warm themselves with a Shaatnez sweater. More severely, we do not allow an infertile woman to violate idolatrous rites, namely, Kosame and Nichush (sorcery) by performing invented acts, assumed to provide fertility...no matter how desperate she is. It matters none that within these prohibited, fabricated acts, women include challas and mikvahs, i.e., Jewish ritual objects. Such inclusion does not condone foolish practices prohibited by Torah.

The Talmud[2] cites this very practice where consultants of the dead – a severe Torah prohibition – would say that certain consulting would not ‘work’ on the Sabbath. Now, why would such liars[3] include the Sabbath in their false practices? The reason is to gain legitimacy. It is widely misunderstood, but accepted, that provided a practice includes a true Torah object like a challa, a mezuza, or is connected with the



Torah's leaders like strings wrapped around Rachel's grave...that such connection with legitimate Torah elements actually endorses the foolish act. Thus, we do not find Jewish leaders endorsing rabbit's feet, since this item shares nothing with Torah. But we do find a preponderance of practices, which are exactly as sinful as rabbit's feet, but swap a mundane object with a Torah object. This inclusion of a Torah item fools the masses into believing there is some truth to the superstition. But according to the Torah and our greatest minds, it matters none if someone uses a rabbit's foot, or opens the door of an Ark, if the intent is to procure some good for the self. Both acts are equally forbidden. So the sale of Pesicha D'Neila, (opening the Ark) or any Torah need, in exchange for the promise of any good, is forbidden.

Objects, events, or times have no affect on our success or failure in any area of life. To believe this nonsense, is to deny God's institution of “Reward and Punishment”, what Rambam classifies as a Jewish Fundamental, and a large part of our Shema Yisrael blessing.

Rambam cites this very flaw of superstition where Torah is included in an attempt to validate this foolishness:

*“One who whispers over a wound, or recites a Torah verse, and also one who reads for an infant so it should not be worried, and on who places a Sefer Torah or Tefillin on a minors so they might sleep, it is insufficient for them that they are considered enchanters (Nachashim) and diviners (Chovrim), but they are in the category of deniers of the Torah -- Kofrim -- rendering Torah as a bodily remedy, when the Torah is truly only a remedy for the soul.”*

You may not be aware, so I will inform you of another Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva, 4:1:

*“24 matters prevent Teshuva. Four of the are great sins and one who performs one of them, God does not allow him to do Teshuva, on account of the severity of his sin, and these are they: 1) Causing many Jews to sin. Subsumed herein, is also one who has the ability to dissuade others from sinning, but does not, and let's them go in their stumblings.”*

Please consider Rambam's words, as well as those of Rav Yosef Caro.

**Moderator:** Thank you. I am fully familiar with all of your sources and could not agree more with your underlying point (as I've indicated to you previously). But that's really not the issue here. You're misunderstanding what this group is all about. We do not represent any “halachic authority.” We do not reject posts because the moderator believes the post to be contrary to Halacha. For example, I personally believe employing housekeepers illegally is at least an issue d'Rabbanan, as is underage employment, attending certain kinds of concerts and, perhaps, even attending Mets games and participating in office pools (and possibly, even having the internet in your home).

Yet, never once have you complained about posts like those - you only choose to pick on perceived “segulas” which, I agree, is a form of idolatry.

To be clear, we are a “frum” group e-mail list to the extent something is clearly beyond the pale and undoubtedly inappropriate (for example - “seeking pornographic magazines for my collection” would obviously be rejected). Segulas, however, are not as black and white, notwithstanding the fact that I agree with all your sources. The irony is that very few people are as vocal as me in opposition to segulas, yet I am now put in a position to defend their merits. I am doing so only as a “limaid z'chus” to allow the challah posts and not lump them in the same category as a pornography seeker. Stay tuned for sources.

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(Superstition continued from page 4)

## False Beliefs

As for why your particular post was rejected - this is not a "chat board" - and we do not allow "debates" on this group list. Try to be creative and maybe I'll allow. For example, if you G-d forbid have a choleh you know, ask people to keep the name in mind in their tefilos and add to your email (NOT as an attack on other posters) that in the z'chus of putting our faith in G-d (as distinguished from idolatrous segulas), the choleh should merit a complete refuah. More later, time permitting.

**Member:** Thank you for your elaboration. However, nothing you wrote removes the prohibition of Nichush, violated by these challas and segulas. Nothing you wrote mitigates the prevention of your teshuva, as you are enabling sin, and not dissuading Jews from sin. Please consider what you are doing. Furthermore, your categorization that pornography is worse than segulas, is your own invention, and not based on Torah.

While your suggestion of my "being creative" shows your flexibility, it should not be the condition that you

remove those segula posts, or allow mine. The only criterion is Halacha.

And what you said, "I am now put in a position to defend their merits" was Shaul HaMelech's downfall, as Shmuel chastised him for listening to the people, instead of God's commands.

If you like, I will work with you to develop a strategy where all involved might save face, while no longer

proliferating prohibitions. But under no condition, does Rambam or the Shulchan Aruch allow the proliferation of idolatrous prohibitions.

**Moderator:** You wrote, "However, nothing you wrote removes the prohibitions of Nichush, violated by these challas and segulos. Nothing you wrote mitigates the prevention of your teshuva, as you are enabling sin, and not dissuading Jews from sin."

Of course not. First, that is not my role. Second, I told you I'll send you sources later. You're losing credibility very quickly with your non-responsive replies.

Before I respond further, I need to better understand your position so that I can tailor my response on point. You state, "There are no opinions that allow these practices..."

Is your position that unless an act is specifically permitted by the Torah, the Rambam (or, I'm sure you'll be willing to include the Rif and the Rosh), or the Shulchan Aruch (or the Rama), then that very act is "prohibited?" So, for example, spending large sums of money on "Psicha D'neilah" for parnasa purposes, or a woman reciting "Perek Shira" each day is also prohibited? What about the sourceless minhag for a "Yoledes" not to leave the house until she hears kaddish or kedusha? Is that also an Issur D'Oraisah? Is going to Shul on

Succos and performing the "Nanuim" with the Lulav not in accordance with the Rama (say, for example, in accordance with the Ari-z'l) also an Issur D'Oraisah?

Personally, I might say that the answer to all these questions is "yes" and, in fact, these practices are all contrary to the Torah and, therefore, a form of Nichush according to the Rambam and

Shulchan Aruch, but I would like you to clarify whether you are challenging these practices as well.

**Member:** Rambam, Hilchos Avodah Zara (11:4): "What is sorcery? For example, those who say, "since the bread fell from my mouth, [or]

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(Superstition continued from page 5)

since the staff fell from my hand, I shall not travel to such a place...for if I do travel, my wishes will not be fulfilled."

Rambam describes prohibited actions, as they are not found in the Torah. His rule: practices with no causal relationship to their imagined promises are considered *Nichush*, and prohibited. So too, keys in challas have no relationship to fertility, nor does opening the Ark (*pesicha d'neila*) help pregnancies. "*Nichush*" – divining/sorcery – refers to any activity where the act is in no way causally related to the desired outcome. Just as penny pitching into wells does not grant my wish, keys baked in challas do not ease pregnancies. Both are clearly *Nichush*.

People are severely insecure, in need of physical ritual. It is from this insecurity that idolatry was born. They err grievously; assuming their inclusion of Jewish ritual objects condones any practice that includes them. Again, Rambam writes the following, after listing *Nichush*: "And these things are all fallacy and lies. They are what the original star worshippers misled the gentile nations to accustom themselves after them. And it is not fitting that Israel, who are very wise, be drawn after these futilities, and they shall [also] not assume they afford any help...But wise people, with complete knowledge know with clear proofs that all these matters prohibited by Torah, are not wise matters, but they are emptiness and futile...and because of this, the Torah prohibited them."

It matters none if a kabbalist condones such practices, for they already have. Their act to condone does not make sense out of these practices, and we are to be "wise" using wisdom, our "*Tzelem Elokim*" to judge our actions.

Just as one would be called foolish if he assumed that his opening of the Ark to be grounds for him to quit his job and assume a new "opening" will be waiting for him Monday, it is equally foolish to assume it helps pregnancies. This last example actually unveils the true feelings...people don't think these actions are a surety, since they see no relationship between the act, and their desired result. When it comes to risking a job, people won't rely on these *Nichush* practices. People are not consistent. But that matters none...we do not gauge Torah law on people's performances, but on the *Baalei HaMesora* – the Masters of Traditional Judaism.

This is Rambam's point: practices bereft of explanation are all *Nichush*. And proliferating matters of such penalty should be what we avoid first and foremost. Even if you find some Rabbi who endorses it, he is not a *Baal HaMe-*



sora, like Rambam, Ibn Ezra, Saadia Gaon, or Rav Karo...all whom prohibited *Nichush*.

**Moderator:** A simple "yes" would have sufficed (i.e., you believe all those actions are contrary to the Torah).

So here's the deal. You go ahead and write a letter to every Rabbi in the community who allows *Pesicha* to be doled out primarily to men whose wives are pregnant, and you write a letter to every Rabbi who allows his Shul to sell *Pesicha D'Neilah* for thousands of dollars to raise money for his Shul (in effect - *GENEIVAH* - by virtue of the fact that the Rabbi knows that these people's intention for donating this money on the holiest day of the year to help a Shul is tantamount to worshipping idols).

Once you have written that letter and ended the madness in all the community Shuls then - and only then - will I allow you to espouse your seemingly correct views on my email list.

Until then, just like I need to live with the guilt that is facilitating incessant violation of labor laws, and facilitates the sale of tickets to concerts, which are clearly prohibited by *Halacha* for many reasons, I will also need to pile on the guilt of facilitating the violation of *Hilchos Avodah Zarah*.

I encourage you to take on this mission, preach this throughout the world, write articles in newspapers, etc. But my list - in my view - is not the place for such debate.

I understand that this final decision will undoubtedly cause you to unsubscribe (since by participating you are also in effect condoning this practice - like buying membership at a Reform Temple) and, consequently, reduce our

current membership. The less members we have, the less attractive this site becomes for *Tzedakah e-Sponsors* through which over \$10,000 has been raised thus far. But don't worry, I'm sure your intentions are for the sake of heaven, and the numerous cancer patients helped by this group will not be impacted.

I look forward to reading your community-wide letter/article on this topic and anxiously await Rabbinic response."

This concludes the dialogue. In the end, not one Torah source was produced endorsing *segulas*, since Torah does not validate superstition. The moderator was evidently motivated by public approval, not Torah values. He did not view idolatrous superstitions on par with sexual deviance, although this week's *Parsha KiTavo* equates the two in the curses.[4] This moderator informed us that many Rabbis in his area condone such superstitions. As concerned Jews, we can allow proliferation of these superstitions, as does this moderator, or we can try to improve Judaism.

Other Jews, leaders, and educators espouse the prohibited views discussed herein. Baking keys in challas, Red Bendels, *Chamsas*, promising easy pregnancies by opening the Ark, checking *mezuzas* upon bad tidings, and all such practices, are clear Torah violations, as Rambam and many others have stated. It is not proper to allow such lies to spread; rather, it is obligatory on each Jew to denounce these beliefs, since idolatry and superstition destroys the very core of Judaism: a God who is all powerful, "alone" all powerful, and a God who rewards not based on phony superstitions, but on truth...on Torah adherence.

If such leaders do not respond to Torah or reason, as is the case with this moderator, perhaps they too respond better to mass disapproval. We can at least use that to Judaism's benefit, and disapprove of similar beliefs by informing others of these sources describing their Torah prohibitions. Although proper Torah practice requires understanding and not fear of human rejection, our disapproval will at least curb such lies, and shield others. ■

[1] *Exod. 23:7*

[2] *Sanhedrin 65b*

[3] *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishna; Sanhedrin chap. VII, "Baal Ove..."* (See last few lines)

[4] *Deut. 27:15*

## Weekly Parsha



# Ki Tavo

RABBI DR. MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

## Thanks for the Fruit

Every year, when the first fruits appeared, the landowner would bring them to the Temple in Jerusalem and make a special declaration (26:1-10). “And it will be when you enter the land that God your Lord gives you as an inheritance . . . then you shall take of the first of every fruit of the earth that you bring forth from your land that God your Lord gives you . . . Then you shall call out and say before God your Lord, ‘An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather [Jacob]. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, strong and numerous . . . and now behold I have brought the first fruits of the ground You have given me, O God.’” This declaration is known as Vidui Bikurim, the Confession over the First Fruit.

The question naturally arises, what is so monumental about this offering that it should call for such an elaborate recital?

The Talmud states (Rosh Hashanah 43b) that

upon seeing the first blossoms of a fruit tree in the spring we must bless God “who did not leave anything lacking from His universe, and created in it good creations and good trees with which to cause pleasure to mankind.” Once again, we encounter an unusually elaborate blessing over fruit. More curiously, the blessing acknowledges God as the source of the pleasures we will have from the fruit tree only much later. Why did our Sages institute the blessing well in advance of the benefit we will derive from them? In fact, our Sages generally require that there be no interruptions between a blessing over a pleasure and the experience of the pleasure itself.

Of all naturally existing foodstuffs, fruit is unique in that it provides pure palliative pleasure. Even when our hunger is sated, we still find room for a fruit because of its delicious taste. In this sense, fruit represent a pleasure that is not necessary for our basic sustenance, a bonus from God that attests to His benevolence. Upon seeing the first bud of a fruit tree, we are reminded of His benevolent nature. We recognize that He created a world that provides not only our needs but also contains objects that exist only for our pleasure. And we bless Him for it.

Likewise, this reality underscores the Temple declaration over God’s enveloping benevolence<sup>3</sup>our redemption from Egypt, the gift of His holy Torah, the gift of the land of Israel. Appropriately, we express these thoughts when we bring the first fruit. This is when we should feel the greatest surge of hakaras hatov, recognition and appreciation of God’s benevolence. ■

## Gaze Down Blessings

After the third and sixth years of the seven-year agricultural cycle, the Jewish landowner made a declaration that he had fulfilled all his obligations for agricultural tithes. He then petitioned God for His blessing (26:12-15). “When you have finished tithing every tithe of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithes, you shall give to the Levites, to the proselytes, to the orphan and to the widow, and they shall eat in your citadels and be satisfied. Then you shall say before God your Lord, ‘I removed the holy things from the house, I have given it to the Levites, to the proselytes, to the orphan and to the widow, according to whatever commandments You have commanded me . . . Gaze down from Your holy abode, from the heavens, and bless Your people Israel and the earth you have given us . . .’”

Although the expression “gaze down” seems innocuous, it is really quite ominous. Rashi

comments (Genesis 18:16), “Every mention of ‘gazing’ (hashkafah) in Scripture connotes something bad, except in the verse ‘gaze down from Your holy abode . . . for so great is the power of giving to the poor that it transforms God’s anger into mercy.’”

Granted that the word gaze in this case has been transformed into an expression of mercy, as Rashi indicates, still, why did the Torah choose to have the landowner ask for God’s blessing with that particular word? Why not petition for a “looking” with no negative connotations?

The Midrash comments that the account of creation begins with the exclusive use of Elohim, the Name that refers to God’s attribute of din, strict justice. Only afterward is the Tetragrammaton, the Name that refers to His attribute of mercy, attached to it. The Midrash explains that God initially intended to create the world according to din. When He saw that man could not withstand such a high standard, He added the quality of mercy (rachamim).

Ultimately, then, the world was created through a combination of strict justice and mercy. In His infinite wisdom, God determined that man would benefit most from fulfilling His will according to the letter of the law (din). In this circumstance, man is most responsible for his actions and thereby gains the most benefit to his soul through free-willed moral choices. However, man is unable to attain this ideal potential; therefore, God introduced the attribute of mercy (rachamim) in the equation of man’s judgment. The result of this combination of attributes is that God tempers His judgment, delaying or meting out punishment piecemeal in order to allow penitence to modify the judgment. According to our Sages, mankind in the messianic era will reach a level of existence high enough to live according to the attribute of din, which is the ultimate divine kindness in that it maximizes the benefit man can attain through his free choices.

At the end of the three-year agricultural cycle, the Jewish landowner declares that he has properly used the physical bounties God has bestowed upon him, that he has fulfilled his obligations of kindness and generosity to his fellow man. Within this framework of correctly fulfilling God’s purpose in creation, man is entitled to ask for God’s further blessing even according to the highest level of existence, which is strict justice, din. By saying “gaze down” he invokes the attribute of strict justice and demonstrates that he has transformed his own existence and earned the right to God’s kindness. ■





# Segulos

Rejected by Common Sense, and God



The belief in segulas endorses the law of “Cause and Effect”, as the performance seeks desired “results”. And results cannot occur without a cause. However, Cause & Effect applies only to those causes that produce identical results, without fail. For example, it is true that fire “causes” heat, as this always so. But it is false that medicine “causes” healing, since this result applies only to living beings. Certainly, it is false that objects with no medicinal properties cause healing. Similarly, baking keys in challas cannot “cause” pregnancy, nor can Rachel’s immersion in water following a pregnant Sarah, “cause” Rachel to become pregnant, as some foolish people imagine. Segula practices are contradictions, for they both endorse, and deny Cause & Effect, in a single action. Be mindful that God prohibited Nichush: the heathen belief that objects and events might alter reality. ■



# Secret Sins

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Why did Moses command the Jews to bless and curse each other[1] at the moment they were to enter and inherit Israel? We must first clarify that “curses” do not have powers. They are mere verbalizations of disdain. As Parshas Re-eh states, “The curse is if you do not listen to God’s laws and stray from the path...” [2], and nothing more. That defiance of Torah itself is the definition of curse. A cursed life is the greatest loss, for the life of Torah is most pleasant, while all other lifestyles are filled with frustration. So the statement that one is “cursed”, means nothing more than one is leading a corrupt life.

Now, these curses included those who commit idolatry in private, encroaching on another’s property, degrading parents, smiting people privately, sexual prohibitions, and distorting justice. In other words, these curses embodied hurting someone else either verbally, by taking advantage of those less fortunate or by misrepresentation; physically in one’s property or body; or mentally, by offering misleading information. (Saadia Gaon teaches that all commandments are of only these three categories, since man’s acts can either be verbal, physical or mental.)

But the commentaries state that all of these curses are of a private nature, and the two mentioned here that also lend themselves to public performance, are herein specified in only their private form: “one who creates an idol and hides it”, and also, “one who hits his fellow in private”. Why were these curses in connection with only those violations performed secretly, and against another person?

Perhaps the inheriting of Israel by each tribe and individual focused those Jews on the self. Man identifies his monetary success with his self-image. When wealthier, man feels better about himself, since accomplishment is often one’s barometer of his true value. The Talmud states, “Man’s wealth stands him on his feet.” Wealth literally satisfies man by removing all of his concerns.

Obtaining land is a great conquest, driving energy to one’s sense of self. So too, violations against another person performed in private express one’s overindulgence in the self. “Others are not impor-



# Torah Stones

tant” one feels. The act of “privately” violating Torah indicates that one feels his subjective actions are a value, and what the masses follow is of no concern. This is all the more relevant at this precise moment in history, as the Jews were now to become a people, no longer individuals, responsible for each other’s Torah violations upon entering Israel[3]. This is the definition of a nation: shared responsibility. To counter such egocentric feelings that might arise when obtaining the land, Moses commands the Jews to publicly curse those sinful activities that share this same personality flaw. By denouncing specific sins performed privately and which heighten self-aggrandizement, Moses curbed this ego emotion before it initially took hold, prior to the Jew’s inheritance of Israel by commanding the people to publicly curse such private violations. The desired outcome is that people will fear these violations and will strive to live as a union under God’s laws. ■

[1] Deut. 27:15-26

[2] Deut. 11:28

[3] Deut. 27:9

What purpose was achieved by writing the Torah in 70 languages on three sets of 12 stones (36 stones total)? According to Talmud Sota, 35b, which opposes Rashi on the Chumash, one set was erected in Moav, one in Gilgal, and the third set in the Jordan itself. What is to be learned from these three sets of stones and their placement? I believe a significant idea is borne out of this one-time enactment.

God promised Abraham He would give the land to his descendants. Question: Are Abraham’s “descendants” defined biologically? Is the “biological” definition that which God intended by, “I would give the land to your (Abraham’s) seed?” Meaning, if the Jews would abandon the Torah, would God still give Israel to them since they descended from Abraham?

To demonstrate that 1) God fulfilled his promise, and that, 2) these were in fact Abraham’s true descendants, i.e., those who follow Abraham’s teachings, it was necessary that the recipients of God’s promise to Abraham demonstrate that they do in fact follow the same ideology as Abraham. Being a descendant was no guarantee of receiving

*(continued on next page)*



## Weekly Parsha

Israel. Sharing genes is insufficient. Abraham's children and grandchildren are defined as those who hold fast to Abraham's teachings. Their writing of the Torah on these stones prior to their entrance to Israel displayed their entitlement.

But why have such testimonial stones erected at three separate locations: One set in Moav (Trans-Jordan), one set in Israel in Gilgal, and one set in the Jordan river?

These three sets, I believe, prove that God was solely responsible for bringing the Jews into Israel. By erecting 'road signs' on both sides of the Jordan River, shows from where the Jews journeyed, and where they arrived. Placing one more set in the Jordan River itself, we discover how the Jews entered the land, i.e., through a miraculous event of the splitting of the Jordan. It would be impossible for anyone to erect and cement such huge stones while immersed in the river. The stones therefore delineate the starting point, the end point, and the path. Such a path of entrance is only possible via a miracle, and therefore enacted by only God Himself. God thereby eliminates all possible explanations of the Jews entering the land, bereft of His divine intervention. God fulfilled His promise. I believe this to be the reasoning behind the miraculous conquest of Jericho as well: an indisputable proof of God's essential involvement and fulfillment of His age-old oath to Abraham. Deuteronomy 27:3 reads, "And write on them (the stones) all the words of this Torah when you cross over, in order that you come to the land which Hashem your God gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as God - the God of your fathers - spoke to you." The verse testifies that the writing on these stones is connected with God's promise.

The fact that the Torah is written in 70 languages upon these stones is to teach that the Torah is ultimately for all mankind. As we say in Alenu each day, "...and all children of flesh will call Your name".

These three sets of stones teach future generations of the miracles of the entrance into Israel - God entered the Jews into the land in accordance with His oath. For that ancient generation, it was a demonstration that they truly followed Abraham's teachings, and his monotheistic ideology learned from God. As God stated in Genesis, "Will I keep hidden from Abraham what I shall do (to Sodom)?" "And I know him, in order that he will command his son and his household after him, and they will keep God's path."

Another feature of these stones is that they contained carved Torah texts in 70 languages. This carved writing was to facilitate the plastering of these stones, literally forming a printing mechanism. When the plaster would dry and be peeled off the face of these stones, the plaster contained the Torah in raised text. When applied with ink and placed onto flat surfaces like paper or parchment, duplicate copies of the Torah were thereby created, in the 70 languages. The Talmud states this was to offer all nations the ability to study the Torah. ■

## Talmud

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## METAPHOR

**"Rava said, 'If one is righteous, he could create worlds [like God].' As it says, 'For your sins separate you from your God'[1]. Rava thereby created a man, and sent him to Rav Zeira. He spoke to him but he did not answer. Rav Zeira said, 'You are from the chavrei [sorcerers], return to your dust'. On each Friday evening Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah would indulge in Sefer Yetzira [book of Creation] and would create a third-grown calf and eat it.'"[2]**

That is some portion of Talmud! Over the years, we hear others recite such metaphors with literal acceptance. However, we know God is the only creator, so this dismisses any literal interpretation of this specific Talmudic portion. As always, we must ask what are the questions that can unravel metaphors.

What strikes us first, is that Rava "created" a human being, and others created an animal. Such stories must be metaphoric, and perhaps the Talmud commences with the most glaring impossibility, to set the tone that the entire story is metaphoric. Then, why did Rava send the man he created to Rav Zeira, and what was Rav Zeira's disapproval concerning? Also, what is the flow of the quote from Isaiah? What is the connection between the two acts of creation of a man, and a calf? And why were Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah apparently successful, as they enjoyed their creation, while Rava was not?

Comparing the two creations, we notice right off the bat, that the second one is animal, not a man, and that it had a positive outcome. My understanding of this story follows.

The Talmud cites a quote from Isaiah that might be misunderstood, "For your sins separate you from your God"[3]. It appears that only our sins separate us from God, otherwise, we would not be separated, and perhaps similar. But this is not so, as we recite numerous times daily that God is "Kadosh" - removed from our understanding. The Talmud then goes on to show how man cannot even understand human creation, let alone perform creation. But the Talmud does so in a metaphoric style.

Sabbath is the day of Creation. As such, the Rabbis were accustomed to study areas of Creation,

as they always studied "matters of the day". (On Succos they would study that holiday as well, etc.) On one such Sabbath eve, Rava studied man's creation, and felt he had a new understanding about how God created man, as if Rava "could create a man" himself. Rava did not send a "man" to Rav Zeira, but rather, he sent his findings from his studies, asserting he obtained a new insight. His sending must have been out of some doubt, so he desired his teacher's analysis. Rav Zeira asked a question to Rava, to which Rava had no answer. Rav Zeira said "return to the dust" meaning, return to studies about dust, and not man, an intelligent being. Rav Zeira was saying that we cannot know so much about how God created soul-filled beings like man: metaphysics is difficult. "Return to the dust" is Rav Zeira's ridicule that Rava should return to studying lower areas within his grasp, i.e., "dust". However, Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah studied matters of biology alone, well within their abilities. "Creating a calf" and "eating" it mean, "understanding biology" and "enjoying" it, respectively. But even in the more approachable area of biology, we read that Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah were only able to create a "third-grown" calf. This means that human knowledge, although grasping some amount, is still incomplete.

Perhaps also explained, is that Rava's independent studies resulted in errors, while Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah who studied together were successful. This illustrates how essential it is to test one's ideas on another, removing the possibility of errors generated by overestimation of the self and personal infallibility. Gaining a critique almost always minimizes mistakes, "...in a multitude of counselors there is safety." [4] And as a Rabbi once taught, the very first verse of Proverbs also teaches this idea: "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, King over Israel" was stated by King Solomon to teach that he had a great teacher, and the environment that fostered wisdom. The King wished to express that his work Proverbs was substantiated by great minds who influenced his thinking. ■

[1] Isaiah 59

[2] Talmud Sanhedrin 65b

[3] Isaiah 59

[4] Proverbs 11:14



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