



Mishna: Rosh Hashannah 29a: "Create for yourself a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. And it will be that when anyone bitten will look at it, he will be live". But did the serpent kill, or did the serpent heal? Rather, this teaches that as the Children of Israel were gazing upwards [at the serpent] subjugating their hearts to their God in heaven, they were healed...and if not, they pined away." Our inner world makes a difference to our fate, not even Moses' hands, and not the serpent commanded by God. Objects are powerless. Perfection is what concerns God. Therefore, cease from checking your mezuzas when one is sick, or from any activity possessing no natural relationship to your wishes. If someone is ill, barren, single, poor, or distraught for any reason, follow the Torah. I thank my friend Ari Fischbein for showing me this Mishnaic source last year:

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Weekly Parsha

Bo

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die, from the firstborn of Paroh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the servant woman who is behind the millstones, and every firstborn animal." (Shemot 11:5)

(continued on next page)

What happens before birth, & after death?
Is Judaism the only true religion?
Why must I be observant?
How does God exist?
Is there proof?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Who is quoted in the title: an adult, or a child? Or both? But definitely, one of those two asked those questions.

I say "Definitely", because maybe one of those questions is still unanswered in you, and it hits you with profound interest. So why haven't **you** pursued these questions until now? Regardless, let the questions resonate for a few more moments...think about what is being asked...do you sense a complete focus right now, a curiosity that shifts your attention from all else? Forget about what the answer might mean to your practical life. Just consider the intrigue of the questions...wait a moment...

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(Bo cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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Moshe warns Paroh that if he continues to refuse to release Bnai Yisrael, Hashem will bring upon him and his nation the plague of the firstborn. Moshe describes to Paroh the scope of the plague. All of the firstborn will be killed. The plague will extend from the most exalted households in the land – Paroh's own household – to the most humble households – the households of servants. Even the firstborn animals will not be spared.

Rashi comments on this passage: "...to the firstborn of the captive." Why were the captives smitten? So that they would not say, "Our deity has demanded [vengeance] for their [our] degradation, and brought retribution upon Egypt." Rashi is explaining the reason that the families of captives in Egypt were included in the plague. He explains that the captives were included in order to assure that the significance of the plague would not be misunderstood. Like Bnai Yisrael, these captives were also afflicted by the Egyptians. These captives might be tempted to attribute the plague to their own deities. Perhaps, they would assert that their deities had brought the plague upon the Egyptians in order to avenge their suffering. In order to negate this fallacious claim, even the firstborn of these captives were killed by the plague.

There is an obvious problem with these comments. The passage actually makes no mention of the inclusion of the firstborn of the captives in the plague! The Torah does indicate that these firstborn were included in the plague. However, the passage that describes their inclusion is in the next chapter.

"It came to pass at midnight, and Hashem struck every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Paroh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who is in the dungeon, and every firstborn animal." (Shemot 12:29)

This passage describes the actual events of the plague of the firstborn. The passage confirms the scope of the plague. It extended from the household of Paroh to the households of captives in the land of Egypt. In this passage the captives, to whom Rashi referred, are mentioned.

In this passage, Rashi again discusses the inclusion of the households of the captives in the plague. Rashi makes two points: He explains that the servant woman mentioned in the earlier passage is not the same person as the captive described in this latter passage. In other words, "servant woman" and "captive" are not alternative

descriptions of the same person. Rashi also returns to the issue of the inclusion of the captives' households in the plague. Why were these households included? Rashi recounts the explanation he offered earlier: The inclusion of these households in the plague assured that these captives could not attribute the plague to their own deities. However, in this instance, Rashi offers a second explanation for the inclusion of the captives' households. He explains that these captives rejoiced in the subjugation and affliction of Bnai Yisrael. In order to punish them for this mean-spirited, baseless hatred, their firstborn were included in the plague.

This raises a second problem: In Rashi's initial discussion of the inclusion of the captives in the plague, he offered a single explanation. They were included in order to preclude any attribution of the plague to their own deities. However, in Rashi's subsequent treatment of the issue, he offers a second explanation for their inclusion: They were included as a punishment for their baseless hatred of Bnai Yisrael. Why does Rashi not include this second explanation in his initial treatment of the issue? Why does Rashi introduce this second explanation only in his subsequent return to the issue? In order to answer these questions, we must consider a further comment by Rashi.



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(Bo continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

“Moshe said, “So said Hashem: Near midnight, I will go out into the midst of Egypt.” (Shemot 11:4)

In this pasuk, Moshe reveals to Paroh the hour at which the plague of the firstborn will take place. The commentaries dispute the exact translation of the passage. Rashi suggests that the proper translation is that “near midnight” the plague will befall the Egyptians.[1]

Rashi recognizes that this translation presents a problem: It is odd that Moshe described the moment of the plague’s onset as “near midnight.” Certainly, Hashem would initiate the plague at the exact moment He desired! In fact, in the next chapter – in describing the actual events of the plague – the Torah tells us that the plague began at precisely midnight. Why did Moshe tell Paroh that the plague would begin “near midnight”?

Rashi responds that Moshe was reluctant to specify the precise moment of the plague’s onset. Paroh’s astronomers might attempt to calculate the exact moment of midnight. If their calculations were marginally imprecise, the plague would either precede or follow the moment they had calculated as the time for its foretold onset. These astronomers would not consider the possibility that their calculations were in error. Instead, they would claim that Moshe had not been correct in his pronouncement. In order to avoid this accusation, Moshe declined to indicate the precise moment of the plague’s onset, and instead, provided an approximate time. So, if the astronomers incorrectly concluded that the plague began a few moments before or after midnight, this would not contradict Moshe’s prophecy or undermine his credibility.[2]

Let us consider Rashi’s comments more carefully. According to Rashi, Moshe introduced an approximation – near midnight. He did this in order to assure that there would be no mistake regarding the accuracy of his prophecy. But why was this important? Why did Moshe feel that it was imperative that Paroh and the Egyptians recognize that his prophecy was completely accurate?

Apparently, Moshe concluded that it was important that there be no confusion regarding the nature of the plague. Paroh and the Egyptians were to understand the plague as Divine retribution. Moshe insured that there would be no confusion regarding the providential nature of the plague by foretelling the event. However, Moshe recognized that his prophetic revelation of the plague would only be meaningful if it was completely accurate. If Moshe’s prophecy was perceived as inaccurate or flawed, Paroh and the Egyptians would be

tempted to deny the authenticity of Moshe’s prophecy. They would argue that a flawed prediction could not be actual prophecy. If Moshe’s prophecy was discredited, then the providential nature of the plague could also be denied.

Now, we can answer our first question. We noted above that Rashi initially discussed the captives on a passage 11:5. But, the passage does not mention these captives. The inclusion of these households is first noted by the Torah in the following chapter. In order to answer this question, it is important to appreciate that Rashi’s initial comments regarding the captives directly follow his explanation of Moshe’s use of the phrase “near midnight.” This juxtaposition provides a context for Rashi’s comments regarding the captives.

It appears that Rashi includes these comments at this point in order to respond to a question. Moshe provided an approximate time for the onset of the plague in order to assure that the plague would be recognized as Divine retribution. How did Moshe know that it was important to communicate to Paroh and the Egyptians that the plague was providential? Rashi is responding to this question. Moshe knew that the plague would extend to the households of the captives. He understood the reasons for their inclusion in the plague. They were included in order to preclude any misunderstanding regarding the origin of the plague. These captives would not be able to attribute the plague to their own deities. Only Bnai Yisrael would be protected from the devastation. Only Hashem – the G-d of Bnai Yisrael – could be the source of this punish-

ment. Moshe concluded that a fundamental element of the plague was its manifest origin. Moshe understood that his prophecy was another means of demonstrating the Divine origin of the plague. Therefore, he constructed his prophecy in a manner that conformed to this objective. Through this adaptation of the prophecy, he assured that its credibility would not be undermined.

Now, let us consider our second question. In Rashi’s second treatment of the inclusion of the captives in the plague, he offers two explanations. Only one of these explanations is included in his first treatment of the issue. The above analysis suggests a simple solution to this problem. In his initial comments, Rashi’s intention is limited to providing an explanation for Moshe’s actions. Rashi wishes to explain Moshe’s basis for introducing an approximation into his prophecy. Rashi is not interested in enumerating all of the factors that dictated the inclusion of the captives in the plague. The captives were included in the plague for two reasons: First, Hashem wanted the origins of the plague to be manifest. Second, the captives deserved the punishment. Only the first of these reasons informed Moshe’s decision to introduce an approximation into this prophecy. The second reason was not relevant to Moshe’s decision. Therefore, Rashi does not include this second reason in his initial treatment of the issue. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 11:4.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 11:4.



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(continued from page 1)

The universe could not
create itself.

God exists.

He made man, and gave
us all one thing He gave
to no other creation:
intellect. He desires
that we use it. Just as He
made foods taste good,
and designed our bodies
to function properly;
and gave us materials to
make homes and cloth-
ing, and placed in us
good feelings? His plan
that we observe His
Torah must also be
equally beneficial, and
enjoyable.

One might feel the sense of amazement with study might wane with time. "How can one vocation of study remain fresh and interesting?" people think.

That's true in relation to possessions, but not to wisdom: the more wisdom is unveiled, the greater the desire to push on. Einstein locked himself in his labs for weeks. King David called God's Torah a "plaything", and rightfully so. For what other image captures the sheer enjoyment of a child with his toy? A child totally focused has no other concerns...and heaven help the one who takes his toy! The child's involvement is pure, 100% engrossed, as he is transfixed on his object, with his imagination...nothing else matters in the universe; this is truly everything to the child. Don't you remember this yourself?

As adults, with numerous concerns and anxieties, we crave such pure pleasure. "Youth is wasted on the young" our minds echo. Can you remember the last time you were 100% engaged in an enjoyment that captivated you so thoroughly, that you lost sense of all time and cares? Or is your every pleasure associated with some distraction or imperfection: travel plans rained out, new cars' dented fenders, promotions with poor staff, etc.? Do you think that a child's level of pure happiness cannot be recaptured? If you read just about any Talmudic portion, you would discover that the Rabbis exemplify this unbridled excitement to a tee. But they do not hold a monopoly on happiness. Nor does one need to be a Rabbi, or even close, to experience what "thrilling" means.

All other pursuits do become old and boring: King Solomon's sentiment in Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing new under the sun". Evidently, he was responding to a human need for exactly that: new and novel experiences. They are what keep man excited about tomorrow, and his life. Physical pursuits become tiresome. After a few years, the "new" car grows old; the same "old" job; new outfits tease us with promises of high esteem only to fade out of style; and sadly, couples divorce due to the same "bored" emotion. In all cases, man is seeking happiness in the wrong area, the physical and the psychological alone. And therefore, he finds frustration. This continued frustration with toy after adult toy leads adults and teens to drugs: a new state of mind. "Yeah, this will make me happy". But we know the sad ending.

God specifically designed the physical to age, to rust, become boring, dry-up, and disintegrate. As a wise Rabbi taught, God told Adam, "Thorns and thistles will sprout for you". This means that as a punishment for Adam's overestimation of the forbidden fruit, God created a

corrective measure that the very objects – the physical – which man sought out for pleasure, would now yield problems, i.e., "thorns and thistles" are metaphors for all problems, not just vegetation. "Thorns" are meant to deter man from overindulging in the physical pursuits, steering him back to wisdom. As man finds frustration in his pursuit of physical pleasure like possessions, intercourse, eating, and empire building...he will soon find emptiness, pain, envy and not what he planned. He will not experience that "new toy" emotion...the "enduring" quality he sought evades him. This is all by design...God's design: itself, a marvelous lesson, and a fitting segue to the next point.

Does frustration exist in all, repeated activities? No. There is one area immune to the expiration of novelty: the pursuit of knowledge. No new idea replicates a previous one. In the arena of study, our initial perplexity is followed by new discovery and answers...refreshing answers, and a most enjoyable activity. It is also self-perpetuating, as new ideas give rise to our wonder, "Now, how does THAT work?" "How did that get here?" "How does God exist?"

Questioning is an activity that engages the entire person: our minds, our excitement, our curiosity, our imagination...all the components that capture 100% of our energies. And it is this "complete" involvement that we call "pleasure". When our attention can be completely directed towards something, this is when we find the most pleasure. Does that make sense to you? Think about your happiest moments: hitting that homerun in second grade; answering a tough question in class that others missed; riding the roller coaster for the first time; a first date with that guy or girl you admired so; learning how to ride a 2-wheeler; your 7th birthday party; that fantastic childhood gift...your honor at the business or Temple dinner. You had those moments, when all stood still...you enjoyed some total involvement. But it was so short-lived. So you agree...you have the capacity for complete happiness. And your age has not removed that capacity.

You owe it to yourself to discover how to spend your life, how to be happy. No one lives your life but you. And don't follow the masses as your method for living...few of them have taken the months and years necessary to study the human psyche and philosophy, that their lifestyles should hold any worth. In your search to be happy, you must study philosophies. You must study psychology...and you must study yourself.

Should you follow fame, fortune, act as a

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sophisticate, party, lounge, or travel as “the” answer to happiness? King Solomon experimented with these lifestyles, but concluded that the life of Torah was the greatest...that “this is all of man”. Does that have an affect on you, that one of the world’s wisest men made this conclusion? If so, why not read his words?!

But if you aren’t observant now...why is that? Have you truly examined various lifestyles including Orthodox Judaism? Maybe some religious person turned you off to Judaism years ago, or recently. Maybe you never got the answers from teachers that made sense, so you felt disinterested. You left Judaism. Those are good reasons. Really. Good reasons...“to be disinterested”...but not valid reasons to remain ignorant of the truth. You were presented with a false view of Judaism. Unfortunately, you were robbed of the truth. But that’s temporary.

Maybe avoidance or procrastination has kept you from spending some quality time with a good teacher, or someone knowledgeable of Judaism. Maybe you don’t want restrictions in your life, so you haven’t inquired what Judaism has to say. You like freedom on Saturdays. You enjoy crabmeat. Don’t let these poor excuses prevent you from living the one life you have, to the greatest degree of happiness. Don’t let yourself down, and fail to inquire about the only form of Judaism...the authentic, first form.

But maybe you’re still fighting it...maybe you feel other religions and forms of Judaism can’t be all that bad. How can so many people follow Christianity, and be wrong? Well, according to that reasoning, how can two religions which oppose each other, have so many followers?! Christianity opposes Judaism, and vice versa. Now you can’t say they’re both right, since they both have masses of followers.

And what about how you got here...ever bother to think “why” you are here. Is there a design...a reason? Have you felt accepting God is a belief, or that proof exists? Do you seek to avoid knowing the proof; maybe it will trap you into some painful lifestyle? Be honest.

And if you who are reading this are observant, have you reached out to non-observant Jews to help them live the life God desires? There is much we all can do, if we care about ourselves, and others.

If you’re starting to wonder, and would welcome an opportunity to get answers...email us, use our search feature to locate answers to the very questions you have, which others asked. If you are observant, share this article and your time with someone non-observant.



The universe could not create itself. God exists. He made man, and gave us all one thing He gave to no other creation: intellect. He desires that we use it. Just as He made foods taste good, and designed our bodies to function properly; and gave us materials to make homes and clothing, and placed in us good feelings...His plan that we observe His Torah must also be equally beneficial, and enjoyable.

To sustain your interest and maintain a sense of importance, stay mindful of what we said: The greatest individuals found a life of study to be most pleasurable. Do not pay attention to the masses that chase success, fame, and self-aggrandizement. For they are never satisfied, nor will you be, if you duplicate their actions. We don’t mean to say “never travel or enjoy a good meal, or parties with friends”. But the focus of your life should be what the Creator taught is the most gratifying. If our central component – our intellects – is inactive, then a large part of us is unsatisfied. We only fool ourselves that what we need is more possession, or another vacation. What we need is to engage our soul in a quest for answers...and they will come. Believe me.

Take the first step, since everything cannot be written here. Determine whether you have any reluctance. Be aware of your resistances, and that this resistance is foolish, since you cannot resist that which you know nothing about. And if you have not received answers to your questions, then you have a partial picture, at best.

Get the whole picture...finally.

If you are observant, share it. If you are not observant, you owe it to yourself to make at least one honest search. Don't wait. Time runs out. Email us. Better yet, join us live online this Sunday Jan. 28, 12:30pm EST and ask your questions in our interactive and audible sessions: www.Mesora.org/TalkLIVE Shabbat Shalom

God



MOSES' MISSION & PHARAOH'S FREE WILL

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

I thank my friend Abe for raising this issue last Shabbos, Rabbi Reuven Mann for his insights, and Rabbi Pesach for directing me to essential sources on this matter.

Two Purposes of the Plagues

Exod. 7:1-5:

"And God said to Moses, 'Recognize, I have positioned you as a judge to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet. You speak all that I command you, and Aaron your brother will speak to Pharaoh to send the Children of Israel from his land. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, [1] and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I will place My hand to Egypt and I will take out My hosts, My people the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt with [2] great judgments. And Egypt will know that I am God when I stretch forth My hand on Egypt and I take out the Children of Israel from their midst.'"

God instructs Moses to speak to Pharaoh that he should free the Jews. God tells Moses that he knows Pharaoh will not free them, as He will harden Pharaoh's heart. God states the goal of hardening Pharaoh is to create wonders in Egypt, that Egypt will know God. One goal is for [1] Egypt's edification and hopefully, repentance. The verse also indicates that there is another goal, [2] "great judgments". What are these "judgments"?

(An important principle is spelled out by the Sforno on Exod. 7:3. He states that God's plagues are to allow Egypt to "recognize His greatness and goodness and repent in a truthful repentance". We must recognize God's kindness in such an act: Man sins, and is justly punished. However, before meting out punishments, God educates the Egyptians to their sin via the plagues. He does one more act to afford the sinners a path to repentance, and to circumvent any punishment. We learn that God works additional kindness and gives man opportunities to correct his ways, before receiving punishment, or the loss of his soul.)

Just prior to the eighth plague, the Plague of Locusts, the Torah reiterates these two goals:

Exod. 10:1-2:

"God said to Moses, 'Come to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order [1] that I place these signs of Mine in his midst. And in order to speak in the ears of your son and your grandson that which I have [2] mocked Egypt, and My signs which I have placed in them, and they shall know that I am God.'"

(Before proceeding, I wish to clarify the term "mock". When applied to, or used by God, we cannot understand it as God expressing human characteristics of derision. To "laugh at", or to "mock", in connection with God, means He is assured of the sinner's downfall. So "certain" is God, it is as if He laughs, like a human would when he warns another of a negative result, yet the other person does not heed the warning, and inevitably suffers. The one who warned will say, "I told you so", as if to laugh at the ignorance of the other. God is said to "mock" Egypt, as their downfall is inevitable. God's warnings and knowledge are absolute, so one is wise to follow God exactly. Egypt didn't, so their devastation was certain.)

Here we see a new point, a "mocking" of Egypt, explained as God's withholding Pharaoh from repenting - the hardening his heart. Rashi says this means a laughing of sorts. Ramban says, "I (God) laugh at him (Pharaoh) that I harden his heart, and do vengeance in him..." From these two verses, we learn two distinct purposes in the 10 plagues: Verse 10:1 teaches: [1] that God multiply His wonders for Egypt to learn of Him, and verse 10:2 teaches: [2] that the Jews repeat this to their descendants that God removes Pharaoh's (man's) ability to repent, and that He and His miracles are made known. Clearly, Moses continuously approaches Pharaoh, knowing all too well that Pharaoh will not free the Jews. But Moses is commanded by God to do so, as God's purpose is to [1] publicize His name and [2] demonstrate His justice as meted out in Pharaoh's inability to repent.

This 2nd point is not too well known. The plagues' spectacular nature attracts our emotions to the visual phenomena. However, as 10:2 states, God also wished to "mock" Egypt. He desired that this principle of withholding repentance become clear. The Torah commentaries state, (paraphrased) "...it is unusual that a man can face such plagues of Hail, Locusts, and the like, and still remain obstinate. Man's nature is to be terrified, not to maintain his stubbornness." Such a steadfast attitude, even after receiving blow upon blow, is not natural for man, and must be by God's word. Pharaoh's resistance is to be a prime focus of the plagues. Moses' mission is to bring out into the open this aspect of God's justice: when man is too far-gone, God will restrain him from repenting. The plagues are to demonstrate how God does not allow a terribly corrupt person to repent. Intuitively, we would think that any man who sins, should be afforded the ability to repent. Why then in such a deviant person, does God withhold repentance? What is the justice in this restraint?

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Questions on the Loss of Repentance

1) In his laws of Repentance, chapter 5, Maimonides teaches that man is always the cause of his free will. If so, what did God do to Pharaoh that prevented him from freeing the Jews and from repenting? How does God "harden" Pharaoh's heart?

2) If God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and therefore, Pharaoh does not free the Jews, is it just that God punish Pharaoh?

3) In his Laws of Repentance, chapter 6, Maimonides states that a person may sin a very evil sin, or sin many times, until the sentence from God will be to remove his ability to repent, and that the sinner die in his sin which he did knowingly with his will at the outset. Maimonides states that Pharaoh's stubbornness is an example of this principle. What is the justice in this principle of "removal of repentance"?

4) In law 6:3 of his Laws on Repentance, Maimonides repeats eight times that the sinner sinned "on his own". What is Maimonides driving at? Ramban too states in Exod 7:3 that Pharaoh was punished with the loss of his repenting ability, as he initially sinned with his "own free will". How does this help us understand God's justice?

5) Ramban offers two reasons for the justice of Pharaoh's inability to repent. One reason given is that Pharaoh's repentance would not have been genuine, but merely a tactic to remove the ever increasing pain of each successive plague. As the plagues progressed, Ramban teaches that Pharaoh became more inclined to free the Jews, and he would have, after the fifth plague. However, God removed his ability to repent, and he did not free them. We must ask: If Pharaoh's repentance would not have been genuine, then what is the difference if he does or doesn't verbalize his repentance? Why does God deem it necessary that Pharaoh not utter his repentance, if it would be meaningless, as Ramban states?

6) In law 6:2, Maimonides says that repentance acts as a "shield" against punishment. Does Maimonides' statement have bearing on this Ramban above? Is repentance an absolute protection against punishment, and therefore God "had" to prevent Pharaoh from uttering even ungentle words?

The Plagues' Purpose: A Point of No Return

Despite Pharaoh's inability to concede to Moses' demand, Maimonides states that Moses' repeated approach to Pharaoh is to teach an important lesson: "In order to make known to those who enter the world, that when God holds back repentance from the sinner, he is not able to repent, but [rather] he dies in his evil that he

initially committed with his own will." We are taught a crucial lesson: Man can sin to the point of no return.

Part of our human design - our free will - allows us to steep ourselves in corruption, to the point that we can no longer extricate ourselves. This was God's lesson to the world through restraining Pharaoh from repenting. He is the prime example of man's ability to reach a point with no hope for repentance. God publicized Pharaoh's corruption as an act of kindness to "all others who enter the world", as Maimonides states. God teaches an invaluable lesson. If we forfeit this lesson, tragically, we can lose our eternal life.

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

There are a few ways to understand God's restraint on man's ability to repent: Man reaches the point of no return, so God merely "reflects" man's own corruption by withholding an ungentle repentance. Rabbi Mann suggested a second theory: that man can do some form of repentance, but God does not allow him, as God's mercy grants repentance to man, but only up to a point, and no further. Accordingly, man is punished for the sins he initially committed on his own. God is kind to allow man repentance, but God determines for how long repentance remains available. So we must look at God's ultimate restraint on repentance in an opposite light: It is not a cruelty that He removes repentance, but a kindness that He tolerates sinners for so long. According to theory #1, man sins to the point where he is completely and irrevocably corrupt. He has the ability to go through the motions of repenting to avoid pain, but God does not allow him this right. In this case, God mirrors the sinner's exact corruption - he cannot truly repent, so God does not allow the act of a useless repentance.

Ramban: Preventing Ungentle Repentance

Ramban indicates that repentance is a shield against punishments - the question is how. To reiterate, Ramban's second answer for God restraining Pharaoh from repenting is as follows: "Pharaoh's repentance would not have been genuine, but merely a tactic to remove the ever increasing pain of each successive plague." Therefore, he was not allowed to repent. Had he repented - even for this wrong reason - Ramban indicates it would have been effective in some manner. Thus, God prevented his repentance. How may we explain this Ramban?

Discussing this issue with Rabbi Mann, we agreed as follows: Had God allowed Pharaoh to repent an ungentle repentance, Pharaoh would justly deserve continued plagues, as the plagues'

purpose of Pharaoh recognizing God would not be realized. However, Egypt would see Pharaoh "repenting" and would have a gripe against God's justice. They would not know that Pharaoh repented a false repentance, and would feel God is unjust to continue plaguing Egypt. We may suggest this explanation for the Ramban: for this reason, God did not allow Pharaoh's false impression of repentance. Such repentance would be of no use to Pharaoh's perfection, but it mattered to others, to Egypt. Rabbi Mann stated that Moses too was concerned that if God justly killed the Jews when they sinned with the Golden Calf, Egypt would say that God failed and smote his people in the desert. Due to the concern that all mankind recognize God as just, Moses asked God, "Why should Egypt say, 'with evil He took them out of Egypt to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from off the face of Earth...'" (Exod. 32:12) Moses did not desire Egypt to possess a false impression of God. What perfection Moses displays...even after hundreds of years of bondage, Moses has concern for God's reputation in his oppressors' eyes. Moses teaches that we must be concerned that God's reputation be completely just. We care that all mankind obtain the truth.

Maimonides: Free Will and a Hardened Heart - a Contradiction?

Maimonides states in his Laws of Repentance, chapter 5, God never removes one's free will. He calls this a "great fundamental". This makes sense, as the Torah is a system where 'reward and punishment' is a cornerstone. Thus, man must always be the sole cause of his actions. How then do we understand Maimonides' theory on God hardening Pharaoh's heart? In his Laws of Repentance 6:3, Maimonides writes, "And it is possible that man sin a great sin, or many sins, until the judgment is given before the True Judge that the punishment for this sinner on these sins that he did with his will and his knowledge, is that repentance is prevented from him, and he is not allowed permission to return from his evil so that he should die and expire in his sin that he did...Therefore it is written in the Torah, 'and I will harden Pharaoh's heart.' Since he sinned initially by himself, and did evil to the Jews living in his land, as it says, 'come, let us be wise', Judgment was passed to prevent repentance from him, until punishment was exacted from him. Therefore, God hardened his heart."

If free will is a fundamental, how can God seemingly violate this principle by preventing Pharaoh from repenting?

Free will is always under man's control. But free will "to do what"? This is the key point: it is

(continued on next page)

(Free Will continued from page 7)

God

the free will to “select evil or good” that God places in man’s hand unconditionally. However, God will - in extreme cases - remove our free will to decide another matter: repentance. Eight times Maimonides stresses that man chooses to do good or evil, of “his own will.” He wished to clarify this point that free will is never taken away from man in this single area of choosing good or evil. Man will always be the sole cause of this choice. The Torah says this openly, (Deut. 30:15, 19) “See I place before you today, life and good, death an evil...and choose life.” Moses tells the people that they may choose between good and evil. This is the area where man is always in control. But in the area of repenting, if man already selected evil, and corrupts himself so grievously, God will prevent his free will from selecting repentance, “so he may die and expire in the sin that he did.”

There is no contradiction in Maimonides’ words. God gives man free will to do good and evil, and never removes this freedom. In one area however, God does compromise man’s free will: the area of repentance. Restricting Pharaoh from repenting does not equate to God making him sin. Pharaoh sinned of his own free will, and so grievously, that God’s justice demands he be removed from the system of repentance. Had Pharaoh been free to repent, he would avoid punishment he truly deserved. Maimonides argues with Ramban and Sforno on this point. Maimonides holds Pharaoh’s repentance would have been genuine. This brings us to our next question.

If Pharaoh’s repentance would be a genuine, why did God not allow him to repent? God allows others to repent! Perhaps it is possible that man sin with so much evil, that the normal repentance does not outweigh the evil. Let me explain: In normal cases, man sins, but then it is possible that his remorse for his evil is so genuine, that he is in fact not the same person who sinned. He has complete regret, and resigns himself to never sin this sin again. This is true repentance, when the new state of good in man completely erases any taint of the evil formerly held on to. As man learns the fault of his crimes, and sees clearly how hurtful his action was to himself or others, he now regrets his actions. In such a case, God completely forgives man, and “none of his sins will be remembered.” (Ezekiel 18) But it can also happen, that a person sins, and repents, but any repentance does not completely correct his evil. Repentance can only correct a person up to a point. Repentance can be an injustice, if someone sins so harshly, and would be let off. Just as free will to select good or evil is an

institution that God never compromises, so too repentance is always accepted before God. Maimonides states this in law 6:2. This being so, the only solution is to remove repentance so Pharaoh and those like him pay for their crimes. It would be unjust to allow Pharaoh to escape punishment through repentance. How odd it may sound, repentance is not just in this case. The basic concept is that God forgives man, but only up to a certain level of corruption. Man may exceed forgiveness - a point of no return.

Sforno

Sforno is of another opinion. He states that had Pharaoh desired to, he could have repented, as “there is nothing preventing him.” If this is so, how does Sforno understand the verse that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart”? Sforno explains this as God giving Pharaoh the ability to ‘tolerate the plagues’. As Sforno states, if God did not harden his heart, Pharaoh would have freed to Jews, but not out of a desire to subject his will to God, performing a true, complete repentance. Pharaoh would have freed the Jews only to avoid any further pain, “and this is not repentance at all” as Sforno says. Sforno differs from Maimonides and Ramban, in that he contests that God ever inhibits one’s path back to God via repentance. Sforno quotes Ezekiel 18:23, “Do I really desire the death of the wicked, so says God? Is it not in his repenting from his path and that he live?” Sforno proves from this verse that God always desires, and makes available, one’s repentance. God did not remove repentance from Pharaoh, as suggested by Ramban and Maimonides.

In summary, Moses’ mission was twofold: He was to assist in delivering the Plagues so Egypt and the Jews would recognize God. An idolatrous culture would be shown false, and God’s system of reward and punishment would be made clear. Additionally, some of our Rabbis teach that Pharaoh’s reluctance was publicized to teach mankind that we have the ability to sink into sin, so far, that we have no way of removing ourselves.

It is then so crucial that we all examine our ways, and not forfeit a true, eternal life, due to temporal emotional satisfaction, or false ideas.

For further reading of the original sources, see Maimonides’ “Laws of Repentance”, chapters V and VI; Maimonides’ introduction to Ethics of the Fathers, the “Shmoneh Perakim”, Chapter VIII, and sources noted herein. ■



DEATH OF THE EGYPTIAN FIRSTBORNS

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Chait said Death of Firstborns was unique: Every other plague came through an angel, i.e., a visible, physical force. For example, a great wind preceded the Plague of Locusts, and the first plague (Nile River turning into blood) involved producing some change in the water and so forth. Every plague expressed itself via a change in some visible physical phenomenon. However, Death of Firstborns was direct. There was no medium through which it expressed itself, that was apparent to the Egyptians. Until now all they saw was that G-d had some type of control over the physical forces of nature, but that He was limited, in that He had to operate through them. Thus, there was some measure of safety and possible escape. "He couldn't just will me dead with no apparent cause which I could not trace to some element in nature", the Egyptians thought.

Prior to the Death of Firstborns, G-d always operated within nature, so to speak. But in Death of Firstborns, He revealed an entirely new dimension - outside of nature - by which He can strike you down at will. Hence, the terror of that night was different than that which attended any other plague. This is my understanding and explanation of what I heard. ■

Collected from published news sources



WorldNEWS

JANUARY 26, 2007



Prehistoric Shark

A rare prehistoric shark, the Deep Sea Frill Shark, appears off the coast of Japan January 24. See video by clicking the link below:

<http://www.cnn.com/video/player/player.html?url=/video/world/2007/01/24/vo.japan.rare.shark.rtv> ■

The Health Benefits of Coffee

Studies have shown that coffee may have health benefits in relation to many serious diseases, including cardiovascular disease, Type II diabetes, Parkinson's disease and also in cirrhosis and liver cancer. Experts believe this may be because coffee has high levels of antioxidants and magnesium. ■

Ex-CIA Director: PA Arabs Don't Deserve State

by Hillel Fendel

James Woolsey, former Director of the CIA, told IsraelNationalRadio's Alex Traiman that a Palestinian state should wait "many decades" until they stop teaching their children to hate and murder.

Traiman asked about Woolsey's choice of terminology in calling the present conflict between the West and Islam as World War Four.

Woolsey explained that shortly after 9/11, "I saw an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal by Eliot Cohen of Johns Hopkins University where he wrote that the Cold War was World War III, and that the war against what I call Islamist totalitarianism is World War IV... We have a situation where democracies in the west such as Israel and the US, and Japan and others too, are at war with a group of Islamist totalitarianism ideologies and movements - very loosely analogous to the movements of the 20s and 30s - Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and Japanese imperialism..."

Woolsey said that it could take the West "decades to win this war; the Cold War took us four decades to win, and I see no reason to expect this one to be less than that." ■



Jewish Withdrawal from Judea and Samaria Back on the Table

by Hana Levi Julian

The government has agreed in principle to withdraw from most of Judea and Samaria ("Yesha"), in secret talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. So reports WorldNetDaily.

Egypt and the European Union (EU) have been mediating the negotiations, according to the World Net Daily (WND) news website. WND quoted high-level Egyptian diplomatic and intelligence officials, and an aide to EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, as saying they have been directly involved in the talks.

Negotiations have been quietly proceeding apace for the past two or three weeks, according to sources quoted by WND reporter Aaron Klein, after PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas suggested to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert late last month that the two men switch to "back channel talks" in order to avoid media coverage. ■



WorldNEWS

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Letters



Letters

from our

READERS

Internal World:
Idolatrous

Doug: If, according to Maimonides, sacrifice was initiated because the Jewish people were heavily exposed to animal worship in Egypt and the new Torah command of sacrifice served to redirect this energy to Hashem, what about when the Temple is rebuilt? We don't see that animal worship among the Jewish people is an issue today (at least as far as I'm aware), yet the commandments surrounding sacrifices will still stand. We do see other peoples that worship animals, but they're not Jewish and thus wouldn't be required to bring sacrifices.

My suggestion for an answer is that there are multiple reasons for the sacrifices, and the issue about animal worship in Egypt is only one of the reasons. Although that specific issue may not be a concern when the Temple is rebuilt, I wonder if the other reasons will still be valid, and therefore it made sense to have sacrifices as a permanent part of the law.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: I've thought about that. It is not the distorted act of animal worship as seen in Egypt, which demands a redirection towards God worship in the form of sacrifice. For if this were the case, then as you said, the future Messianic era including Temple, should omit sacrifice since animal worship has predominantly ceased. Why then is sacrifice to be resumed in the future?

The reason is because what requires correction

through sacrifice to God, is not the animal worship "act" per se, but the internal, human "inclination" towards animal deification. This inclination, which caused original animal worship always exists...and thus, must always be addressed. Man has not been changed, so the Temple's future sacrificial component addresses this very real, enduring tendency.

And other nations will bring sacrifices in future times, as they too share the exact human design as the Jew. Hence, we share the same perfections "in the same acts." ■

External World:
Harmonious

Reader: Dear Jewish Times: Could you please comment on the Mishna in tractate Shabbat, chapter 6, Mishna 10. This Mishna talks about types of healing. In Artscroll mishnayos, in the Yad Avraham, it says that things that have a medicinal purpose are permitted and are not prohibited because of ways of the Emorites. The Bartenura also discusses this.

—Nachum Rhodes

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Nachum, I am glad you raised this point. On this Mishna (Sabbath 67a) both Abaye and Rava agree:

"Whatever has medicinal value is not prohibited as an Emorite practice. Therefore, what has no medicinal value is an Emorite (prohibited) practice."

Rashi call Emorite practices Nichush. That is, the prohibition to engage in actions with the expectation of non-causative results. What we call magic.

We learn that the Torah does not contradict reality, but in fact, endorses it fully. Certain practices were validated as offering a curing value. Therefore, they were not prohibited as idolatrous, i.e., baseless actions. Those practices included roots of plants offering proven medicinal cures, and certain passages of text which offered psychological cures. Man is both physical, and mental, and therefore, only two areas of amulets were permitted...after a trial of three successes was validated.

However, all acts which were only assumed to have some effects, but were never witnessed, and contradicted natural law, are considered Nichush, and prohibited. This Mishna and the Rabbis' comments further demonstrate that Torah follows reason, supporting all that is proven in nature, and denounces all that contradicts it. When amulets were proven effective after three

successful applications, they were deemed permitted, and thus, not heathen practices.

We see that God's two creations – nature and Torah – are in complete harmony, and should be the case, since God does not contradict Himself. ■

Non-Existing World:
Segulas

Response to post on Jewish Community Email List:

"I continue to read your posts about challa baking to help the sick and the unfortunate. While your intentions are praiseworthy, the practices you endorse are not.

Instead of promoting practices prohibited by Torah, we should follow the Torah's prescriptions alone, and avoid violations like segulas. Do not assume practices common today are of value to God, simply because other misled Jews follow them.

Refer to what the Rabbis cited. Think about why the Torah prohibited Nichush. These practices do not work, and assume powers to exist, that do not, and prohibited by God. God instructs us in another path when we are in need, and His ways do not include baking challas, red bendels, checking mezuzas, or any other common practice today. The Matriarchs did not practice nichush, but prayed to God. Only perfection can remove someone's punishment...not some act unrelated to their flaw. When Chana finally dedicated her would-be son Shmuel to the Mikdash, only then did God remove her infertile state, and grant her a child. That is what you should teach, not challa baking, but the ways of the Matriarchs.

Otherwise, you are misleading people to false beliefs that will keep them barren longer, since you do not help them reflect on their imperfections, as did Chana and the Matriarchs.

Please teach others what God writes in His precious Torah, not the prohibitions that foolish people practice." ■

False World:
Christianity

Chaplain: Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Dear Sir, you can deny Christ as much as you want. Spreading your falsehood and denial, yet those who truly know God believes what the Holy Bible has to say. I love the Jews and support Israel completely. It breaks my heart how so

(continued on next page)

many has denied the mission of Christ. His mission was completed because He was obedient to His Father God. No matter how many times you convince yourself that Jesus is not your Messiah and mine, will by no means change the fact that it is true. The Bible clearly tells us in the Book of Daniel that the children of Israel will have a veil blinding their eyes until the time set by God will remove your blinders. It saddens me when I think how His own people helped crucify Him, yet I know this was a part of God's redemptive plan. Israel will continue to suffer until you all accept Christ as your Messiah. My prayer is for all Rabbi's to realize that Jesus was the greatest Rabbi of all! Why do you deny what the Book of Psalm, Ezekiel, and Isaiah prophesizes about Jesus? For your own sake and the sake of all other non-believing Jews, please wake up before it is too late. God clearly states that if you do not accept His only Begotten Son, then no matter how self-righteous you think you are and how long you pray, God will turn away from you on the Day of Judgment. I implore you to search your heart and ask God to take your blinders off before it is too late. I speak to you with love and all sincerity. I am not trying to offend you or disrespect you. I have as much faith in God as you do, we serve the same God and it is my duty to try and get you to understand the truth. We serve the same God so please do not be offended by this e-mail. You stated your opinion and now I have stated mine. Praise be to Almighty God, the Maker and Creator of heaven and earth. The God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, your God and my God.

-Chaplain RG

P.S. If you care to answer, show me beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was not who He said He was.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: One need not disprove that which is unproven. Jesus did not comply with the Torah's formula for who is the messiah. The Torah is the Jews' inheritance, and the greatest of Jews, such as Maimonides and other brilliant teachers and possessors of the Oral law outright denounced Jesus as a fraud. We do not look to alien religions to teach us what Judaism is. Similarly, Henry Ford did not look to the Dodge's when creating a Ford. Not only was Jesus never validated as messiah; Torah authorities unanimously denounce him as a fraud.

Furthermore, Jesus/Christianity says Jesus died for the sins of others. Thereby, he denies God's very words: "Each man in his own sin shall be killed". (Deut. 24:16) This unveils Jesus as ignoring God, not following him. Nothing could

be straighter to the point.

Christianity's concept of salvation, the "martyr" approach, completely denies God's Torah principles, and the teachings of all the true prophets. Moses' message was to follow God alone. There is no place in all of Torah where belief in a man is suggested. Just the opposite is true: all Torah leaders from Moses at Sinai, to Moses Maimonides teach the true Torah ideal: God is the sole focus, and belief in man is sinful. King David said this so well, "Do not trust in princes, in the son of man, who offers no salvation. His soul leaves him, he returns to his dust; on that day his plans cease. Happy is he, who has the God of Jacob at his side; who relies on God, his Governor". (Psalm 146:3-5) King David said "man offers no salvation".

Now, if you will ignore this part of Torah, why do you accept other parts to prove you faulty case? Either accept all of Torah, or none of it.

Jesus also denies Micha's words, "Let us search and examine our ways and return to God". (Lamentations, 3:40) Micha teaches that repentance is the only route back to God: not the belief in man...not Jesus.

This is sensible...this is Torah, and these are God's words and the unanimous view of all Jews. We do not need Christians to educate us on what we alone received, at the only mass witnessed revelation; long before multiple, conflicting gospels were 'voted' into history.

As for your interpretation of the Prophets, understand that you are bereft of half of the Torah: the Oral Law. This explains why you accept your fabricated, subjective distortions of the Prophets, making equally distorted conclusions.

If you trust the Jews to give you the "objectively" true Written Law and the Prophets, why do you abandon our Oral Law? ■

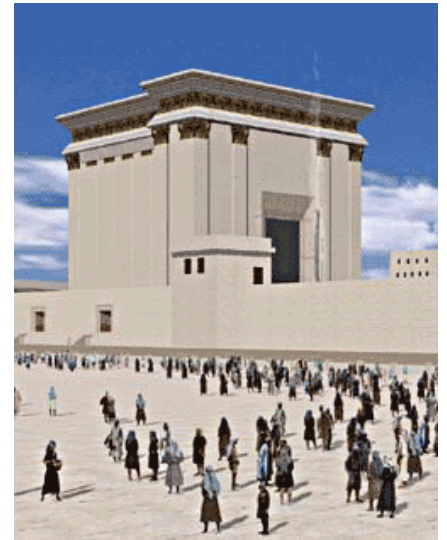
Please see this link for an example of one of the most famous Christian blunders in regards to Isaiah 53: <http://www.mesora.org/isaiah53.htm>

The Entire World

Reader: I am placing a prayer for them at the Kotel through virtualjerusalem.com where, according to the site, they place the prayers for us at the Wall.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: The end of parshas Yisro says, "And every place I permit you to call My name, I will come to you and bless you". (Exod. 20:21) God associated Himself with the Temple in a few locations, and those who seek Him out there, He responds to. (Ibn Ezra)

God hears equally well from all corners of the Earth. ■



The Future World

Reader: Each day before Yishtabach, we state, "And the saviors will ascend to judge Esav's mountain, and to God will be the kingdom." Who are the saviors? What are they judging? How will this judging give God the kingdom?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Good question, thank you. Ibn Ezra says the savior refers to the Jewish judges in the messianic era. They will bring justice to the descendants of Esav (Jacob's brother) for all the evil they caused us. The ascension is referring to Mount Zion where it appears Esav has a foothold, or some city according to the Targum. And when the world is rid of those who oppose the Jews – God's chosen nation – then the name of God and His kingdom will be recognized without the dilution or taint caused by opposition.

When a candidate runs for office, his reputation is tainted by the very presence of opposition. Why would one oppose the first candidate, if he were 100% fit? The fact that another candidate opposes him is a stain on his reputation...even if no stones are cast. So once Esav is destroyed, God's kingdom will be whole. For only then will the last of the opposition be gone, and will God alone reign unchallenged. This idea is rooted in the Chumash, when God says regarding Amalek that His throne is incomplete until Amalek is destroyed. His incomplete reign or throne is hinted to by the deficient spelling of the word throne. In Hebrew, throne is spelled KSA (Kaf-Samech-Alef). But here in the last verse of Bishalach, the Alef is missing. (Exod. 17:16) That is, God's throne is incomplete while Amalek's name survives. (Rashi) ■

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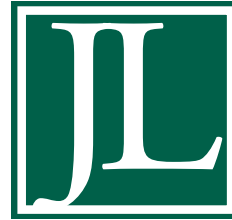
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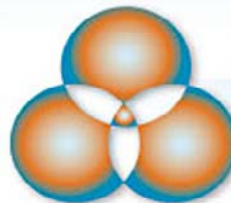
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