

Abraham was so perfected, he received prophecy. Yet, that prophecy was to perfect his shortcomings. We, who receive no prophecy, are all the more in need of correction. We must abandon our denial of our flaws and accept this lesson. Where do we violate the Torah's prohibition of idolatry? What imagined powers do we project onto Strings, Walls, Mezuzahs, and Rabbis?

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## IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: LECH LECHA	I-3
PARSHA: SANCTIFYING GOD	I,4
PIRKEI AVOS	4
MERITS: IN SAFE STORAGE?	5,6
MASTURBATION/IDOLATRY	7

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Houston	6:30	Phoenix	5:33
Jerusalem	5:45	Pittsburgh	6:17
Johannesburg	5:58	Seattle	5:58
Los Angeles	5:57	Sydney	5:52
London	5:42	Tokyo	4:44
Miami	6:32	Toronto	6:12
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## Weekly Parsha

# Lech Lecha

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“And Hashem said to Avram, ‘Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your

(continued on next page)

## Lech Lecha

# Sanctifying God’s Name & Abram’s Identity

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by a student

The Medrash states that Terach informed on Abram, his son. (God had not yet changed his name to “Abraham”) Terach reported to Nimrod that Abram was a societal deviant, not adhering to the philosophies of the masses. We learn from Maimonides’ history of Abram, (Laws of Idolatry 1:3) that Abram realized and educated many on monotheism. Abram exposed the flaws of idolatry to the masses. These included the entire generation in which Abram lived. Understandably, Abram was not particularly liked, and his father too did not tolerate him. Terach then informed on Abram to the current leader Nimrod. According to Medrash, Abram was then cast into a furnace, but was miraculously saved.

Informing on his son, Terach did not display normal, parental behavior. It is normal for a child to rebel against the father, but not the reverse. However, later on, Terach had a change of heart and took Abram and his nephew Lote from Ur Kasdim: (Gen. 11:31) “And Terach took Abram his son, and Lote, son of Haran, son of his brother, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, wife of Abram his son, and they exited with him from us Kasdim to travel to the land of Canaan. And they came to Charan, and they dwelled there.”

(continued on page 4)

Abram’s era was permeated with idolatry. With reason alone, he recognized God. He then reached out to mankind. This is still the Jew’s obligation: to reach and teach gentiles. Why don’t we? Let’s start.





(Lech Lecha cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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name, and [you shall] be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you?" (Beresheit 12:1-3)

Our parasha begins with our forefather Avraham's first nevuah – prophecy. In this nevuah, Hashem commands Avraham to abandon his homeland and to travel to a land that He will later identify. Hashem promises Avraham that He will protect him and bless him.

Nachmanides notes that these passages are unusual. Avraham is introduced and Hashem promises to protect and bless him. But who was Avraham? How did he earn this promise and blessing from Hashem?

**"And He said to him, 'I am Hashem, Who brought you forth from Ur Kasdim, to give you this land to inherit it.'" (Beresheit 15:7)**

Our Sages respond to this question. They explain that Avraham had previously demonstrated his complete devotion to Hashem. The pasuk above alludes to the event through which Avraham demonstrated this devotion. In this pasuk, Hashem refers to Himself as the G-d who brought forth Avraham from Ur Kasdim. This phrase, "Who brought you forth," implies that Hashem was involved in Avraham's exodus from Ur Kasdim. What role did Hashem play in these events?

Our Sages explain that Terach – Avraham's father – reported Avraham's monotheistic innovations and his campaign against idolatry to the king. The king was alarmed with Avraham's revolutionary behaviors and ideas. He commanded that Avraham be thrown into a fiery furnace. Avraham emerged from the fire unscathed.

We can now understand the above pasuk. Hashem brought forth Avraham from Ur Kasdim. He saved him from the furnace and redeemed him from death.

This is directly relevant to Nachmanides' observation. Who was Avraham? Why did Hashem select him to be his prophet? This incident explains Avraham's qualifications and the basis for his selection.[1]

However, this information does not completely resolve the issue raised by Nachmanides. This incident is so well known that it is generally

assumed that it is included in the text of the Chumash. However, it is not. The incident is noted by Rashi and is derived from the midrash.[2]

Nachmanides asks the obvious question: Why is this important incident not included in the text of the Chumash's narrative? This incident provides us with essential background material. It explains Hashem's selection of Avraham as His prophet. Without this incident, the Chumash's narrative seems incomplete! Nachmanides notes that based upon this consideration, Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra suggested that the incident should not be understood literally. Ibn Ezra's reasoning is simple. This event – if it occurred – would be a significant miracle. Why would the Torah conceal such an impressive event? Ibn Ezra concludes that the Sages' comments should not be understood in the literal sense.[3]



Nachmanides disagrees with ibn Ezra's conclusion. He insists that the Sages' comments can be understood literally. The event did occur and Avraham was miraculously saved from the fire. But if the event did occur, why is it excluded from the Torah's narrative?

Nachmanides responds that although the king and people of Ur Kasdim were impressed by Avraham's emergence from the fire and his rescue from death, they did not change their attitudes towards his religious ideology. They released Avraham but remained skeptical of his claims. They believed that perhaps he was a wise and skilled magician and somehow managed to escape death. But, they did not feel that his rescue provided conclusive proof of his claims. The Torah does not record miracles and wonders that are likely to provoke debate and ultimately prove inconclusive. In other words, recording this miracle could prove counter-productive. Some readers will be impressed. Others may ponder why this wonder had so little impact on the observers and recognize that it was less than conclusive.

Nachmanides acknowledges that his position raises an obvious question. He asserts that the Torah does not record miracles that proved less than completely convincing. Yet, in describing Moshe's confrontation with Paroh and his advisors, the Torah clearly departs from this policy. The wonders initially performed by Moshe did not convince the Egyptians of the legitimacy of his claims. They did not produce any change in the Paroh's attitude toward him or

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Avram leaving  
Charan with Sarah,  
Lot and the  
residents whom  
Avram taught  
monotheism

toward Bnai Yisrael. Why are these miracles included in the Torah?

Nachmanides responds that ultimately the Egyptians did acknowledge the authenticity of Moshe's miracles and declared that they were expressions of Hashem's providence.[4]

This response requires some further explanation. It seems that Nachmanides has not completely explained the Torah's treatment of Moshe's early miracles. It is true that ultimately Moshe performed wonders that overcame the skepticism of Paroh and his advisors. We can understand the inclusion of these latter wonders in the narrative of the Torah. But why are the earlier, less impressive miracles included?

It seems that according to Nachmanides, the Torah is making an important point about Paroh and his advisors. They were not a group that could be easily impressed. They were skeptics and doubters. Moshe's initial wonders were rejected. The Egyptians observed these wonders and dismissed them. This response indicates their attitude and demonstrates that they could not be easily fooled or awed. This means that their eventual acknowledgement of Moshe's authenticity and the authenticity of his miracles is even more impressive! Moshe convinced a group of committed and dedicated skeptics! This demonstrates the powerful impact of his wonders.

In summary: The Torah treats the wonders performed by Moshe differently than Avraham's escape from the furnace. Moshe's wonders are described in detail. Avraham's rescue is only referred to by allusion. The reason for this distinction

is that Avraham's escape may provoke a skeptical response. Moshe's wonders overcame intense doubt and skepticism. The ultimate triumph of Moshe's demonstrations is evidence of the power of these wonders.

Nachmanides' analysis expresses an underlying theology. Rather than dismissing skepticism, the Torah respects and responds to doubts and questions. We are not expected to be influenced or moved by inconclusive data. We are expected to respond to concrete and clear evidence.

This is a unique characteristic of Torah Judaism. This attitude distinguishes Torah Judaism from other religions. Other religions condemn and dismiss the doubter. The Torah respects a healthy sense of skepticism and responds to doubts.

A recently published best-seller discusses the attitude of religion to doubt and questioning. The author unfortunately groups Judaism with other religions and fails to recognize this fundamental distinction. In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris mounts a general attack on religion. He explains that religious beliefs are unique and different from other beliefs. Other beliefs represent an attempt to form a conviction regarding reality in the absence of complete knowledge. For example, when I wake up in the morning and listen to the forecast I form a belief regarding the weather. I do not, however, know it will rain. But, I listen to the forecast. I know that the weatherperson has every reason to provide his or her best forecast of the weather. I decide that the evidence at hand justifies a belief that it will rain. I have used the available data to form a belief regarding a reality

that I cannot ascertain with certainty. The validity of this process can be tested. Beliefs formed in this manner are generally accurate and conform to reality.

Harris claims that religious beliefs derive from a completely different process. They are not based upon an objective consideration of the available data. In fact, the true believer will often disdain and reject objective data that contradict his beliefs. Instead, religious beliefs are generated from within the individual and projected upon reality. The believer believes that which he chooses or feels compelled to believe and disregards evidence contrary to his conclusions.

This process is akin to the fantasies projected by a person whose grasp on reality is weakened by a mental or psychological disorder. We recognize that this person's convictions are not likely to correspond with reality and we are not surprised when he meets with disaster. Yet, we imagine that religious beliefs – derived through the same process – do correspond with reality.

Harris asserts that the beliefs of all major religions are nothing more than wishful thinking and deserve no more credibility than the fantasies of a disturbed individual. He further asserts that it is completely unwarranted for the practitioners of one religion to condemn the beliefs of another religion. All religious beliefs are equally flawed and unfounded!

Harris' analysis reflects a basic misunderstanding of Torah Judaism. It may be true that many practitioners of Torah Judaism form their belief systems in the manner Harris describes. But this is not the method suggested by Nachmanides and our other great thinkers. Without exception, all of the classical Jewish thinkers proposed basing our beliefs upon a careful analysis of the available data. They respected skepticism and encouraged questioning. They believed that this was the unique characteristic of Torah Judaism. They maintained that this approach is the basis for our claim that the Torah is truth. It is our reason for asserting the validity of our convictions. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 12:2.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 11:10.

[3] The comments of Ibn Ezra quoted by Nachmanides do not appear in our editions of ibn Ezra's commentary. Some editions actually present a different view. In these editions ibn Ezra quotes the comments of the Sages and suggests that they should be accepted in the literal sense.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 11:28.



Terach's remaining in Charan - not continuing on to his initial destination of Canaan - teaches that Terach's goal was not so much to reach Canaan, but rather, to leave Ur Kasdim. In Charan, he decided he was far enough out of reach of Ur Kasdim.

Abram's influence in Ur Kasdim was tied to his identity as a citizen of Ur Kasdim, who was a revolutionary in religion. The authorities considered him an irreligious person, who had renounced the religion of the state. He was nevertheless influential. People came to him to hear his ideas. After his conviction and miraculous escape, he assumed another identity: an exile, who had convinced his greatest adversary, his own father, to stand along side him. Terach did not really repent; he did not really embrace the ideas of his son's new religion, but was sorry for acting against him. He felt guilty as a father for wronging him, and took him out of Ur, together with the son of his deceased son who died at the hands of Nimrod. Although Terach

acted out of guilt, to the world, it appeared that Abram's former prosecutor was converted to his supporter. This was Abram's new platform for the world. People would no doubt be curious to meet with such a person; a former rebel against the state, who had escaped miraculously, and had won over his greatest adversary, his own father.

Abram expected to use his new identity as a means to influence people and teach them the true idea of God. At this point, God intervened through prophecy and told him to leave his land and all the attachments he had to it, and to leave the house of his father. He would concern himself only with attaining his further perfection by breaking all attachments and emotional ties to his roots, and emerging as a totally independent individual - not only intellectually, but emotionally as well. As to his identity and public platform, which would be lost due to his travels, God would supply this for him. "...I will bless you and make your name great." (Gen. 12:2)

This injunction freed Abram to work only on the world of his inner perfection, while the platform for his success would be supplied by the Almighty.

Why does the Torah not reveal anything about Abram's greatest accomplishments, his own discovery of the true idea of God, the Creator of the universe? The Torah is not a book about personal accomplishments. It is a book about the sanctification of God's name, by making Him known to the world. This could only be accomplished through God's assistance and constant providence. As great as Abram's personal accomplishment was, it would have vanished in time, were it not for God's intervention, which began with the injunction, "Lech Lecha" ("Go forth") to Abram, and found its culmination in the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people.

Thus, the Torah introduces us to Abram under the injunction of "Lech Lecha" - the means through which the eternal sanctification of God's name became possible. ■

## God's Providence

# Pirkei Avos Rejoicing at an Enemy's Downfall

YAAKOV TRACHTMAN

Pirkei Avos, chapter 4 mishnah 19:

*"Shmuel Hakatan would say 'Do not rejoice at your enemy's downfall and with his destruction do not gladden your heart, for God will see and it will be bad in your eyes and He will remove his anger ('Apo') from upon him'." (Mishlei 24:17-18)*

The Rambam's edition of Pirkei Avos adds: it does not say "Charon Apo" but rather "Apo".

What is the mistake that one makes?

What is the difference between "Apo" and "Charon Apo"?

Why should the person's sin of rejoicing save the evildoer from punishment?

I would like to propose, based on the Ralbag's explanation of the verse in Mishlei, that the difference between "Apo" and "Charon Apo" is that Apo means that the person is not under personal divine providence; but rather, subject to chance. The Rambam explains in the Moreh Nevuchim that most people do not merit Divine providence in their daily life and are therefore under natural, physical laws. Most punishment falls under this class of "merely" being distant from God. For such a person, his evil only causes his removal from the direct relationship of supervision from God; the particular things which happen are not the result of his evil (except insofar as they are natural consequences). "Charon Apo" on the other hand is when God



is "actively" punishing the person. Rejoicing in our enemy's downfall, we succumb to the fallacy that God is actively punishing this person. We think that because of our righteousness, God is punishing our enemy. Since the enemy does not actually deserve punishment, he is rescued in order to punish the rejoicer - us. This is a direct consequence of one thinking that God's providence is in direct response to his own personal desires. In order to correct our idea of divine providence, God punishes "Measure for Measure" by actively rescuing our enemy with divine providence because of our rejoicing.

Why is this verse located in Mishlei, which normally takes up practical consequences? Even though this verse takes up philosophical ideas, the nature of this motivation is not a philosophical recognition, but rather not wanting "consequences" that go against our personal desires. Hence it is practical advice, as opposed to deep philosophical investigation, and properly located in Mishlei. ■

Yaakov Trachtman authors the website [www.Maimonides.info](http://www.Maimonides.info)

## God's Justice



# Our Merits: IN Safe storage?

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

**“Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s oil; a little foolishness outweighs wisdom and honor”. (Koheles, 10:1)**

Two weeks ago we explained this to mean that one’s values and actions are relative. One might have obtained honor and wisdom, but if at the present, he selects the life of sin, he may forfeit all he has done. It appears as an imbalance: one might live a Torah life 70 years, and if in his final few years he disregards Torah, and abandons God, he forfeits all his prior good deeds. Why is all the good he has done lost? How is a person judged, in that this results in such tragic loss?

Reexamining the verse above, there appears to be an inconsistency between the first part and the second part. The first part discusses two things that coexist in one point of time: the dead flies and the oil. In this case, we understand how flies might come in contact with the oil creating a putrid batch: they coexist. But how is this parallel to the second case, where I have done so much good over passed years, and ‘now’, I sin?

How do my current sins contaminate my ancient merits, which appear in safe storage, and out of reach of my sins today? They appear not to coexist, that one might affect the other. Let’s review another verse.

Ezekiel 18:24 states that a righteous person, who turns to sin, might lose all prior merits. Quoting the Rabbis, Metsudas Dovid qualifies this truth, as true only when the righteous person who now sins is remorseful on all his previous good deeds. How do we understand this? What is the difference between people who turn to sin, whether or not they regret their prior good? Both people are currently sinning! How do we distinguish between the natures of both individuals; when remorse exists, and when it does not?

## God’s Evaluation of Man: Current Attitude, not Previous Deeds

The person who does not regret his previous good actions supports Maimonides’ position, that all man’s deeds are weighed on Rosh Hashanah. Meaning, although he has sinned in the latter half of the year, for example, his good deeds from the beginning of that year are not lost...they are “all” weighed. Thus, his good deeds are “intact”. But if one is remorseful of his good, how does this remorse forfeit all he has done?

My actions must be understood, not in terms of a storehouse of all deeds in “safe keeping”, but as a reflection of my core values and beliefs, which define me now. And there is always only one “me”: my current state.

It appears that God evaluates a person as a summation of his current values: what does he value now? If a person regrets his life of mitzvahs, then those actions for all those decades do not stand behind him in defense. The person as he is “now” defines him. Metsudas Dovid states that his entire prior good was not sincere. This is why it is of no value. And this is sensible, for if one can turn to sin in his latter days, all his good could not have been truly good: it was lip service, and he was never truly convinced of what he did. But one who sees truth, cannot ignore it, and will not abandon a life lived correctly. This explains why we see the great Rabbis dying in their convictions, and not veering from the truths they beheld. This is equally applicable to the Einsteins, Newtons and Freuds of the world. Those who witness truth, are awed by it, and never abandon its rapture. If however, one turns to sin, but does not regret his prior good deeds, this is a reflection of someone “caught in the moment”. A Rabbi once taught that one who sins does to a sudden impulse, or

an overwhelming emotion, is not judged as severely as one living this way on a daily basis. The former is not corrupted in his thinking, but rather, in his momentary control over his urges. He has not completely abandoned what he holds true.

Earlier, we read, “Bichol aise, yyihyu bigadecha levanim”, “At all times, let your clothing be white”. (Koheles, 9:8) This means that one should constantly review his actions to insure he is not carrying any sin. The Rabbis teach that one should view himself as always “on call”: perhaps the King will summon him (God will terminate his life). Therefore, one should not live improperly, lest he be summoned (die) and be found guilty, since he dies in a state of sinning. (What a crucial lesson) This implies that one’s status is regularly summated, stamping the person with a current evaluation as “righteous” or “wicked”. We learned similarly that Ishmael was saved “Ba-Asher Hu Sham”, “As he was there”. He was evaluated “at that moment” as righteous. The angels inquired of why God sought to save Ishmael, who would eventually become a destroyer of Jews. God’s response was that right now, Ishmael was righteous, and justly saved from his severe thirst.

God judged Ishmael at some point in the year. It appears He will do this with all others, regardless of what day it is. We therefore ask what practical worth or significance is a yearly judgment on Rosh Hashanah? In fact, Talmud Rosh Hashanah 16a records the 3-way argument as to when man is judged: whether it is each moment, each day, or each year. This teaches that no single position held that God judges man “both” yearly, and daily: it’s either or. This makes sense, for why should man be judged under more than one framework? “Judging” means that God assesses each person’s level of perfection and corruption. What more is there to judge? We can therefore suggest that although God saved Ishmael mid-year, this was not a “judging” of Ishmael. Ishmael was already judged for the whole year, and now, God was merely carrying out that judgment in a single case. This of course complies with only one of the views recorded in the Talmud.

We might venture an initial explanation of the dispute as to “when” man is judged. This dispute might be unveiling how man takes stock of himself, and thus, how he is held responsible. Is man responsible minute-to-minute: can we operate with such a high level of self-awareness, with such sustained focus? Is man judged daily: meaning that a shorter interval is an unjust assessment, since man needs a full day to review

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his actions and retune his thinking? Or, is man too feeble to withstand judgment, except once yearly?

Now, according to the Rabbis who say that we are judged daily or every moment, how do they understand the existence of Rosh Hashanah? Why is there a second judgment? We might suggest that mankind is gifted with a yearly judgment day to force us back to a proper lifestyle. This judgment for good or bad can be changed throughout the year, but a Rosh Hashanah that focuses man on God's role as King, helps steer us back to a proper path.

Rabbi Reuven Mann suggested the following: according to the view that man is judged daily, Rosh Hashanah is not a "judgment day", but merely a day to reflect on God's role as King, without any judgment whatsoever. And the view that holds man is judged each moment simply means that there is no real "judgment" per se, but that man receives God's providence based on his current state, which is Maimonides' view in the Guide for the Perplexed. And the view that holds man is judged yearly can be understood as cited above, that man requires a yearly focus on the truth that God assesses our actions. This does not mean that we cannot change our decree later in the year, but it does mean that it is more difficult after the decree was pronounced.

Rabbi Mann's words are supported by this Talmudic portion as it continues (17b-18a) with distinctions in God's judgments between a individual, or the nation; one who is focused in prayer and one who is not; whether before or after God's "Gzar Din" – His final decree. So although a decree is set on Rosh Hashanah to guide us once yearly, it is not a decree that is set in stone. Just as Ishmael was judged "as he was there" mid-year, we too are judged based on our current values.

How vital it is then, that we should assess ourselves and determine whether we are carrying any sin, or worse, harboring wrong notions about God. It is most vital that each one of us consult with a wise individual to determine a path of Torah study as we forge ahead; a plan of study that commences with Torah fundamentals about what God is, how He works with man, and His intended perfections via the mitzvot. We must be diligent in the law to read the weekly Parsha twice and study a commentator. We must study the patriarchs and matriarchs and derive a clear understanding of their unique perfections, which earned them such a close relationship with God. The Torah teaches that those great founders of Judaism did not subscribe to the voodoo amulets of today's Jewish communities, like red threads, Rabbis' blessings, letters in the



Western Wall, checking mezuzot, segulas, or dressing differently than other Jews as seen in Yeshivish circles. Radak actually rejects the practice of donning distinct clothing as a means of presenting one's self as more righteous. Radak calls this "evil". (Zephaniah, 1:8 last "Yaish Omrim") And this is taken to such a harmful extreme where matches of young single men and women are rejected simply because of clothing and other prohibited nonsense. I say, "prohibited", as it is the sin of Sinas Chinam, baseless hatred. If one sees no flaw in a prospective match or shidduch, one must not reject them based on clothing style or other stupidities. And if one does reject based on clothing, then they are a fool, but they do perform one good: they save the young man or woman from wasting his or her time with superficial families. Yes, this area of social approval and egomania pervades so many Jewish communities, and completely ignores God's words and the perfections of our forefathers and matriarchs. The exact opposite is what Abraham displayed: a love for his fellow "human". Not the rejection of Jews based on garb, or the avoidance of "goyim", gentiles.

In the end, King Solomon's verse is consistent: just as dead flies coexist with the oil in the realm of "time" and thereby contaminate the oil...our former good deeds coexist with our current actions in the realm of "values". If we abandon a Torah lifestyle, we contaminate our former

deeds in as much as we clearly show our real values, and unveil former acts as lip service. In physical entities, contamination may only occur when there is proximity. But in the realm of human perfection, it matters none that we performed much good over the years. Koheles is correct in 9:18, "...one sin destroys much good".

We learn a valuable lesson: our merits do not stand by us if we regret them, but only if we still value all those earlier deeds. This means that man must seek understanding for the Torah's commands, for how else will we appreciate later in life, the good performed earlier? It is only possible if we grasp intellectually the many perfections of these laws. Similarly, abandoning our continued fulfillment of Torah law and study, relying on former deeds, will not insure God's continued favor. For this attitude clearly reflects that we don't value the ideas of Torah law, but simply feel that those actions have some magical power to preserve our reward. This cannot be further from the truth. This attitude unveils the notion that a lazy life of leisure without Torah obligation is more preferred than earnest study and performance. It unveils the true value we place on mitzvot, that being none at all. We simply want reward, and view mitzvot as a necessary evil to obtain that reward.

God judges us "as we are now". Therefore, it behooves us to continually improve our knowledge, which is the only path to realizing and valuing what is real and true, and thereby earn God's favor to insure the best life. We must abandon pop-Jewish cultural norms, and draw sharp distinctions and lessons when compared to our leaders. How did they act? This is how we must act. Forget about the foolish practices of today's religious Jews. Use your mind to dictate your values and actions; do not cower to your need for social approval.

The Torah system is not akin to a bank. We do not place mitzvot in storage, and increase our reward with every additional mitzvah, if we don't understand the mitzvah, or if we go through 'pain' performing them. If underneath, what we really want is to indulge in lusts, wealth, fame and hedonism, but go through the 'motions' of mitzvot, we are wasting our lives, and earn no reward. If you truly desire the ultimate reward, you must immerse yourself in Torah study, minimize all other pursuits, and sit at the feet of great teachers who will open your mind to amazing truths. Slowly, you will start to realize true joy, you will realize the foolishness of others, and naturally, you will desire nothing else but what is sensible...what God desires.

Then...you will earn the greatest reward. ■



MATT SCHNEEWEISS

# Masturbation, Going Back on One's Word, and Avodah Zarah



What do these three sins of masturbation, machalif b'diburo (going back on one's word), and avodah zarah (idolatry) have in common? Apparently, something essential - at least, according to the Sages in Masseches Kallah Rabasi 2:5:

*The Sages say: Anyone who masturbates or is machalif b'diburo - it is as if he is ovoid avodah zarah (worships idolatry), as it is stated: "Perhaps my father will feel me and I shall be as a deceiver (meta'te'a) in his eyes" (Bereishis 27:12) - and there is no te'a'te'a but avodah zarah, as it is stated: "They are vanity, the work of deception (ta'tu'im)" (Yirmiyahu 10:16, 51:18).*

Of the three, avodah zarah is more obscure and unfamiliar than masturbation or machalif b'diburo. Let's start with what we know and proceed from there.

What is the difference between sexual intercourse and masturbation? Physiologically they are almost identical; the body responds to them in the same way. Psychologically, however, they are very different. Masturbation is an act of total narcissism - an expression of and an indulgence in self-love. The masturbator is emotionally stimulated by his own imagination and fantasies; he is physically stimulated by his own actions; all of his sexual energy is directed towards himself. True, fantasy plays a role in sexual intercourse as well, but there is a fundamental difference: one who participates in sexual intercourse is relating to external reality. The sexual act, though selfish, at least requires a

minimal redirection of psychic energy away from the self to someone else in reality.

What is the difference between someone who keeps his word and someone who is machalif b'diburo? To go back on one's word is to disregard social reality. A purely internal resolution has no objective reality. For example, if I resolve to floss every day and then retract my decision, I have done nothing more than alter my internal whims. But if I promise to lend money to a friend or to volunteer my services for a project, that promise becomes reality in the social world. People will act on the assumption that I meant what I said and will govern their own actions in accordance with my word. To retract from such a promise is to maintain that my desires override the expectations of others - that my internal whims are more real than the social reality of my commitments. (Note that the Sages are referring to the transgression of machalif b'diburo not referring to someone who is machalif b'diburo for practical reasons; obviously, a person who doesn't fulfill his promise because he becomes sick or because of a death in the family is not guilty of the transgression of machalif b'diburo).

Now we are in a position to understand the common denominator of these three transgressions: **Each is an act of turning away from the external world and embracing one's inner world as the true reality.** Just as the masturbator turns to his inner fantasies for sexual stimulation, and the machalif b'diburo turns to his inner whims in order to shun social responsibility, so too, the ovoid avodah zarah turns to his own desires, insecurities, and imagination as the source of his

beliefs.

Indeed, the analogy carries over quite well. Avodah zarah may be described as masturbation of the soul - making recourse to one's inner world to derive certain pleasures and remove certain conflicts. Likewise, an ovoid avodah zarah is machalif diburo shel ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu - favoring his own whims over the word of God.

This statement of the Sages supports a definition of avodah zarah that my Rebbe once gave: **Avodah Zarah is relating to the products of the psyche as reality.** In other words, avodah zarah has no basis in the real world. All ideas of avodah zarah can be traced back to the human psyche - never to the rational truths of science and philosophy.

According to this interpretation of the statement in Kallah Rabasi, the underlying evil of all three transgressions is the same. Each of these transgressions reinforces the false notion that the self is the ultimate reality: masturbation in the realm of pleasure, machalif b'diburo in the realm of justice and society, and avodah zarah in one's relationship with God.

Moreover, each of these sins will remove a person from perfection in their respective realms. Masturbation prevents a person from the highest level of pleasure: ahavas Hashem (love of God), which requires a total redirection of psychic energy away from the self to the wisdom of God. Machalif b'diburo prevents a person from reaching the level of justice, for justice requires us to abandon feelings egotistical superiority and to recognize the common nature of all humans. Lastly, avodah zarah prevents a person from relating to God, as is evident upon reflection. ■

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## **American to save Israeli Solider: How you can partake in this Mitzvah**



This summer a 19 year-old Israeli Solider will get a new lease on life due to a selfless gift from Yosef Chiger, of Harrisburg Pennsylvania. Ayelet Katz, of Moshav Be'er Tuvia had been stationed in Tel Nof Air Force Base, where she worked as an assistant to the head of human resources, until she was forced to leave the IDF because of kidney failure and begin fulltime dialysis. Often Israelis in need of kidney transplants wait for years because of the shortage of organs; however with the help of the Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS) Ayelet will be fortunate to receive an altruistic donation that will allow her to resume a healthy life in a matter of months. Chiger, married and the father of a five-year old daughter, will be traveling to Israel to donate his kidney and thereby giving Ayelet the ability to resume a full and healthy life. It was especially significant to Chiger that she is an Israeli and a solider, and that the transplant means that she will have a long productive life ahead of her.

The transplant is being facilitated by the Halachic Organ Donor Society, which facilitates altruistic kidney donations and educates Jews about organ donation and halacha.

HODS is raising \$15,000 to bring Chiger and his family to Israel. Contributions can sent to the HOD Society at 49 West 45th Street, 10th Floor, New York, NY or via their website at [www.hods.org](http://www.hods.org).