

IS IT INTELLIGENT TO ACCEPT BELIEFS LIKE
ASTROLOGY, IF NO REASONING POINTS
TO A RATIONAL EXPLANATION?

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Weekly Parsha

PHARAOH'S ASTROLOGERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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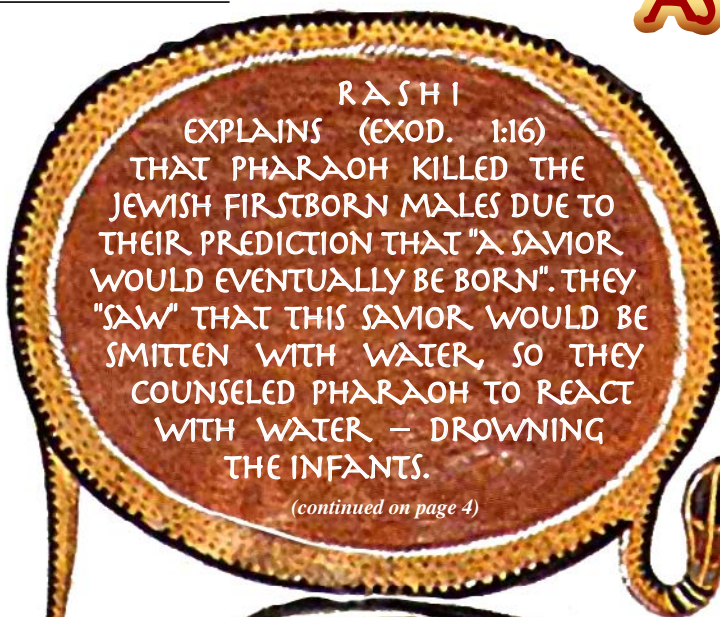
Weekly Parsha

Shemot

RABBI BERNIE FOX

"And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one who was named Shifrah, and the second, who was named Puah. And he said, "When you deliver

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RASHI
EXPLAINS (EXOD. 1:16)
THAT PHARAOH KILLED THE
JEWISH FIRSTBORN MALES DUE TO
THEIR PREDICTION THAT "A SAVIOR
WOULD EVENTUALLY BE BORN". THEY
"SAW" THAT THIS SAVIOR WOULD BE
SMITTEN WITH WATER, SO THEY
COUNSELED PHARAOH TO REACT
WITH WATER – DROWNING
THE INFANTS.

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(Shemot cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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the Hebrew women, and you see on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall put him to death, but if it is a daughter, she may live." And the midwives feared Hashem. And they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them, but they enabled the boys to live. And the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, that you have enabled the boys to live?" And the midwives said to Paroh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are skilled as midwives; when the midwife has not yet come to them, they have given birth." And Hashem benefited the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And it took place when the midwives feared Hashem that He made houses for them." (Shemot 15:21)

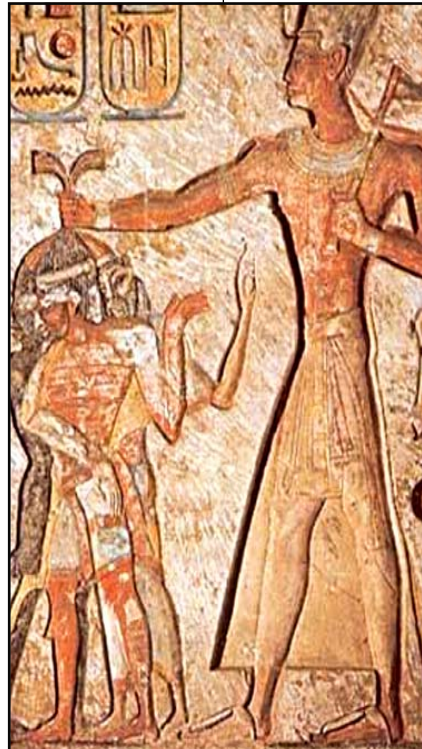
Sefer Beresheit describes the immigration of Bnai Yisrael to Egypt. Bnai Yisrael were invited to Egypt by Paroh. They were honored and valued by the Egyptians. Sefer Shemot describes the persecution of Bnai Yisrael in Egypt and their redemption from bondage. The opening chapters of Sefer Shemot explain the transformation in the attitude of the Egyptians towards Bnai Yisrael.

The Torah explains that this transformation was predicated on fear. The Egyptians observed the growth and vigor of Bnai Yisrael. Also, they did not fully trust the loyalty of Bnai Yisrael. With these two factors combined, the Egyptians were concerned that if their nation was attacked or invaded, Bnai Yisrael could not be depended upon to rally to the defense of Egypt.

The persecution of Bnai Yisrael had a specific goal. It was designed to break the nation and eliminate it as a threat. The persecution developed in stages. It began with the levying of taxes. It then evolved into outright persecution and bondage. Finally, Paroh attempted to put into place a program of genocide.

Initially, this genocide was designed to be covert. Paroh met with the Jewish midwives

who served Bnai Yisrael. He directed them to murder any Jewish males they delivered. The midwives did not carry out these instructions. Instead, they continued to perform their duty as midwives and applied all of their skills to successfully deliver Jewish children. Paroh challenged the midwives and asked them to explain their refusal to fulfill his instructions. The midwives explained that they had no opportunity to obey Paroh's instructions. Whenever they were called upon to facilitate a delivery, they discovered that the child had already been delivered by the mother. Any opportunity to covertly murder the child was lost.



Paroh seems to have accepted this explanation. Hashem rewarded the midwives. The description of the reward is vague. The Torah tells us that Hashem made houses for them. Rashi quotes the Talmud in explaining this reward. He explains that the "houses" to which the Torah refers are the families of the Kohanim, Leveyim, and the family from which David descended.[1]

As a consequence of this failure, Paroh implemented a new plan. He instructed the Egyptians to implement genocide. He authorized and instructed his own people to seize and kill all newborn Jewish males.

There are many interesting elements in this narrative. First, it is notable that Paroh seems to have accepted the midwives' excuse for their failure. It is surprising that he did not suspect them of undermining his plan. We would expect that rather than accepting their explanation, he would have punished them. Why did the midwives believe that their explanation would be accepted? Why did Paroh accept this explanation?

In fact, the passages are somewhat vague in describing the midwives' explanation. There are two elements to their explanation. The second element is clearly stated; the midwives explained that they had no opportunity to carryout Paroh's instructions. When they came to the home of the expectant mother, the child had already been born. However, the

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first element of their explanation is less clearly stated. The passages tell us that the midwives told Paroh that Jewish women are not like their Egyptian counterparts. They are “chayot.” The meaning of this term in this context is not obvious. Certainly, it is meant to describe some trait of Jewish women that enabled them to birth their children without the assistance of a midwife. However, what is the precise trait to which the term “chayot” refers?

The above translation adopts the position of Rashi and many others. According to Rashi, the midwives explained to Paroh that Jewish women are skilled midwives; they do not require the services of other midwives in order to deliver their children.[2]

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra suggests a more literal explanation. The root of the term “chayot” is chai – life. According to Ibn Ezra, the midwives explained to Paroh that Jewish women are endowed with a tremendous life-force or vigor. Because of their strength and vigor, they do not require the services of a midwife.[3]

Based on Ibn Ezra’s explanation, we can understand the midwives’ reasoning in offering their excuse. The midwives presented an explanation that perfectly corresponded and reinforced Paroh’s own prejudices regarding Bnai Yisrael. Paroh and the Egyptians feared Bnai Yisrael. Their fear was based upon the perception that Bnai Yisrael were different than themselves. They believed that Bnai Yisrael were stronger, possessing more vigor and energy. The midwives appreciated the power of this perception and they constructed their explanation to perfectly correspond with the Paroh’s perceptions. Paroh may have been disappointed in the failure of his plan. But undoubtedly, he was pleased that his perceptions regarding Bnai Yisrael were confirmed.

Another issue that should be considered is the reward received by the midwives. Hashem’s rewards are not arbitrary. They correspond with the act or virtue that they acknowledge. What is the connection between the reward received by the midwives and their efforts on behalf of Bnai Yisrael?

This question can be answered on two levels. Geshonides suggests a simple explanation. The midwives were devoted to their people. They were willing to risk their lives in order to protect and assist Bnai Yisrael. This devotion is an essential quality of a leader. The leader must be dedicated to the welfare of his nation. In other words, the devotion of the midwives was an inspiring

example of a trait required in a leader. Therefore, the midwives were rewarded by being selected as progenitors of the leadership of Bnai Yisrael.[4]

However, Gershonides’ explanation takes on a deeper significance if we consider an important insight provided by our Sages. Rashi explains that Paroh’s implementation of a program of genocide was motivated by a specific concern. He had been told by his astrologers that a redeemer was to soon be born to Bnai Yisrael. Paroh knew this redeemer would be a male. His plan of genocide was devised to deprive Bnai Yisrael of their redeemer.[5]

Based on Rashi’s comment, Gershonides’ explanation is even more compelling. The midwives were specifically instrumental in undermining Paroh’s plan to deprive Bnai Yisrael of leadership. They were rewarded by being chosen as to be the progenitors of Bnai Yisrael’s leadership.

The most disturbing element of this narrative is that it seems that the courageous efforts of the midwives were a failure. As a result of their refusal to carryout Paroh’s instructions, he implemented a general, public policy of genocide. He ordered the Egyptians to murder all newborn Jewish males. It seems that the refusal of the midwives to participate in Paroh’s plan only resulted in a more widespread and intensive program of genocide.

Gershonides offers a brilliant insight into this issue. He explains that the nurturing of a child from among Bnai Yisrael who would develop into a redeemer of his people was not a simple proposition. Bnai Yisrael were a nation of slaves. They had been humbled and humiliated by servitude. Their pride and self-image had been destroyed. How could one of their offspring be expected to rise above these attitudes and develop the courage, knowledge and self-confidence required to achieve prophecy and assume a role of leadership? How could a member of this oppressed nation ever challenge the authority of Paroh?

The redeemer – Moshe – was able to become a prophet and leader because he was raised in the household of Paroh as the king’s adopted grandson. How did this occur? Moshe’s parents attempted to hide and protect Moshe from the Egyptians’ program of genocide. Eventually, they could no longer hide him. They placed him in a basket among the reeds at the shore of the river. Paroh’s daughter discovered Moshe. She realized that he was a Jewish child. She was overcome with compassion for this innocent child and she took him under her protection and raised him as her own.

This is a markable series of events. However, it is clear that Paroh’s own efforts to subject Bnai Yisrael to a program of genocide were the antecedents of these events and laid the groundwork for their occurrence.

Paroh’s genocide program forced Moshe’s parents to place him in the river in the hope that he would be discovered and sheltered by a compassionate Egyptian.[6]

However, it should be noted that the refusal of the midwives to participate in Paroh’s program was also essential to the unfolding of the events that led to Moshe’s development. Paroh attempted to enlist the cooperation of the midwives in order to conduct his program covertly. His preference was to not publicly declare a policy of genocide. This suggests that he recognized that some Egyptians would not condone or support this program. Furthermore, those members of the society that were the most intelligent and open-minded would be the most likely to oppose Paroh’s efforts.

Paroh’s daughter was one of these intelligent and open-minded individuals who could not accept Paroh’s program. She was overcome by compassion for this Jewish child who was destined to be murdered for reasons she could not accept. She acted on this compassion and saved the innocent child. Paroh could not oppose or refuse his own daughter. He allowed Moshe to be raised as a member of his household.

In short, the resistance of the midwives forced Paroh to publicly declare a policy of genocide. This cruelty evoked the compassion of his daughter. She acted on this compassion, rescued Moshe, and raised him in the king’s household. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 1:21.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 1:19.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 1:19.

[4] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 3.

[5] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 1:16.

[6] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), pp. 6-7.

Later (Exod. 1:22), the astrologers said the savior was born "today", but they weren't sure if he was a Jew or an Egyptian. This, Rashi explains, is why Pharaoh changed his decree from killing the Jewish male infants, to killing both Jewish and Egyptian infants.

There are a number of questions we must ask:

Why did the astrologers change their advice?

Why didn't Jews – a higher level nation – have any astrologers with their own forecasts?

Why didn't Rabbi Elazar (Sotah 12b) feel there is truth to forecasters? Rabbi Elazar quotes Isaiah's critique of astrologers saying they "chirp and snort [make sounds as if prophesying] but know not what they say".

What is the plain reading of the verses? Pharaoh is concerned that the Jews outnumber the Egyptians, and that they will revolt. He commands the Jewish midwives to commit genocide to preempt this possibility. When he saw the midwives refused his decree, he then instructed the Egyptians to kill the male Jewish infants. This is also Unkelos' understanding of the word "his people". Unkelos says this phrase means that Pharaoh redirected his decree to kill Jewish infants from the midwives, to his own people. Rashi interprets this phrase to mean Pharaoh decreed death literally on "his people". Unkelos clearly rejects Rashi's interpretation. But let's better understand Rashi.

I don't feel we need to accept that the Egyptian astrologers possessed clairvoyance. I say this based on both Maimonides' and Rabbi Bachya's teachings. They both teach that man is to accept as truth only three matters: 1) what he experiences in reality through his senses; 2) what his mind sees as truth; 3) and what intelligent persons transmit. Astrology does not fall under any of these classes, and Maimonides actually rejects astrology in his Letter to Marseilles. Abiding by Rabbi Elazar, I offer this following possibility...

Pharaoh is clearly concerned of the Jews' numbers. The verses openly say this, and the astrologers see this. They wish to remain in their posts, since they originally obtained their posts through their own ego desires. They cannot risk predictions that can clearly be refuted, exposing them as liars. This is why they formerly told Pharaoh that his dream of seven fat and emaciated cows represented Pharaoh's eventual seven daughters, whom he will bury. This can happen at any time in the future. Even fifty years later, without having yet had these predicted daughters, Pharaoh cannot condemn the astrologers on this predic-



tion, for they can respond, "You will 'yet' have these daughters."

I believe the astrologers heard Pharaoh's concern about the Jews' numbers. They fed on his concern fabricating the false prediction "a savior will be born." Pharaoh naturally gravitated to this view, as it substantiated his fears. So the astrologers' position was quite safe, and cunning, on their behalf. They solidified their standing with Pharaoh. But as time passed, the astrologers could not remain silent, lest they lose any purpose for Pharaoh. This is why they spoke up again, but changed their prediction to, "the savior is born today". Again, they play on Pharaoh's fears, solidifying their posts once again by duping Pharaoh into feeling they have seen "new" information. This is why the astrologers changed their position.

Psychology alone explains Rashi quite sufficiently. No need exists to accept any truth of astrology, certainly when we see no basis for it. Human intelligence has a method: one studies, and sharpens his mind. He observes causes in nature, and develops rational concepts of laws all based on a logical thought pattern. All thoughts that result in truths, must

follow a rational path. But as the future is not perceived by reason or the senses, man cannot know what it is unless God or a true prophet informs him. How then can we accept that gazing at the stars, listening to birds chirping, reading man-made cards, or conjuring with bones, has any ability to discern the future? If one cannot reasonably answer this question, one cannot reasonably defend astrology.

Furthermore, as my friend Howard suggested, such a prediction that a savior will be smitten with water rejects free will. Free will teaches that we must accept that the savior could at anytime repent, and be free of their forecast of a punishment by water. So not only is their prediction baseless, it contradicts what we know to be true.

I would also add that the astrologers' response follows their devious methods. They predicted water was to be the cause of the savior's downfall, and they counseled Pharaoh to therefore use water. This means that they wished to "fulfill" their false prophecy. Reassuring Pharaoh that they didn't simply offer him alarming news, but also a solution again solidified their positions. This method also catered to Pharaoh's belief in astrology, making him feel that his problem has been addressed through the mystical system of belief to which he adhered. Again, this substantiates his need for the astrologers, as the astrologers planned.

It is crucial to grasp that God created natural law, and the entire universe. Laws are those natural behaviors that repeat. This repetition is to allow man to recognize a pattern, and appreciate nature's Designer. For no pattern exists without a designer. If all was haphazard with no rhyme or reason, no laws could be observed, as no pattern exists. But as God created laws that do in fact repeat, He desires man to appreciate His existence by rationally examining His brilliance and perfection expressed in all corners of the universe. It is therefore a contradiction to God's plan that we accept as real, any phenomenon that does not follow reason. And even according to Rashi who says the astrologers "saw" the future, we can explain this to mean that they "said" they saw it, not that they actually did. Isaiah, Maimonides, Rabbi Elazar, and Unkelos are of this opinion: not one of these great thinkers gives credence to the astrologers. This also explains why a higher level nation – the Jews – had no astrologers. For higher level people act in accord with reason – or should – unlike the mystical and idolatrous Egyptians. ■

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Moses' 3 Signs

Exodus, 4:1-9: 1) "And Moses answered and said, 'They (the Jews) will not believe in me and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, 'God did not appear to you.' 2) And God said to him, 'What is in your hand?' and he said, 'A staff.' 3) And He said, 'Throw it to the ground', and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent. And Moses fled from before it. 4) And God said to Moses, 'Send forth your hand and grasp it by its tail'. And he sent forth his hand and he seized it, and it was a staff in his palm. 5) 'In order that they believe you, that God appeared to you, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' 6) And God said to him, 'Further, bring now your hand into your chest', and he brought his hand into his chest, and he took it out, and behold his hand was leprous as snow. 7) And He said, 'Return your hand to your chest', and he returned his hand to his chest, and he took it out, and behold, it returned to its flesh. 8) 'And it will be if they do not believe you, and they do not listen to the voice of the first sign, then they will listen to the voice of the second sign. 9) And it will be if they do not listen to also these two signs, and they do not listen to your voice, and you will take from the waters of the Nile, and you will spill it onto the dry land, and it will be that the water that you take from the Nile, and it will be blood on the dry land.'"

God instructs Moses on his mission to free the Jews. God then responds to Moses' doubt of the Jews' conviction in his divine appointment, by giving him three signs. These signs will prove God's appearance to him. A number of questions arise. Before reading further, take time to review the verses above, and discuss them with others. Simply reading on will remove your opportunity to engage in the process of learning and the use of your own thought. This process is how we become better Torah students, thereby refining our own thinking for future study. It is also an enjoyable activity. The Torah was purposefully written in a cryptic style so as to engage the mind in this most prized activity of analysis, induction, deduction and thought - our true purpose whose rewards are

unmatched, both here, and in the next world. Once you have spent due time reviewing the issues, feel free to read the questions enumerated below, and our possible answers.

Questions:

1. The sign of blood is said to be the ultimate proof of God's directive. How does this sign surpass the others? 2. If blood is more convincing than a staff turning into a serpent, or leprosy, why not instruct Moses to perform the blood sign first? Three signs would then not be necessary! 3. What are the ideas conveyed through each specific sign? Why were these three selected? 4. Why does God give Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the magicians? 5. What is meant by the "voice" of each sign? 6. In both cases, the transformation of a staff into a serpent, and Nile water into blood, does not take place until both objects reach the ground, as it says, "and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent", and "it will be blood on the dry land." What is the reason for this "miracle at a distance"? 7. Why do the first two signs "return" to their original objects? What need does this serve? 8. Why is Moses requested to "conceal" his hand in order for it to become leprous? God could certainly make him leprous without him concealing it. 9. In contrast to the sign of blood where God tells Moses what will happen to the Nile's waters before the sign's performance, why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? 10. What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as "the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"?

We must say the following: The reason for three signs is twofold; 1) God wished the viewer to be convinced of His appointment of Moses with minimal, emotional amazement; and 2) God wished this from everyone, as additional signs of less deniability accompany the first. God knows what the most convincing sign is, i.e., blood, but He desired it come last in the sequence. A Rabbi Mann teaches in this week's JewishTimes issue, God desires we use our minds.

Action at a Distance

It is for this very reason that additional features are found in these signs. I refer here to the fact that both the staff, and the Nile's waters transformed only once on the ground. It is not the ground that is essential here, but the "distance" between Moses' hand and the transformation. All magicians require tactile control of their manipulated objects. Without physical contact, they cannot create illusions through sleight of hand. However, Moses' objects did not transform, while in his hand, but only once distanced from his control. "Distance"

teaches that this was not sleight of hand - his hand was nowhere near the transformation! These signs could only be explained as true miracles, as God's actions.

Magic Does Not Exist

Sforno on Exod. 4:3 cites Talmud Sanhedrin 67b: (Responding to the plague of lice, and their inability to mimic it) "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'this is the finger of God.' This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size. [Strengthening this first position] Rav Pappa said, 'By God, he cannot produce something even as large as a camel! [So what does it mean that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn?] [It means] these that are larger than a barley corn, he can collect, and produce the illusion that he has magically created them." This Talmudic portion teaches that the human hand cannot control that which is too small.

Sleight of hand was known in the times of the Talmud, and in Egypt's times. All magic is illusory. What these Egyptians performed by hand was quicker than the eye, but only when the object was large enough to manipulate. Our Rabbis did not accept that any powers exist outside natural laws. God is the only One capable of altering natural law - only He created it, only He controls it. Saadia Gaon too stated that the Egyptian's blood trick was performed by the use of colored dyes, and the frogs leaped out of the Nile by their use of chemicals that frogs repel. Sforno also states that the Egyptian's snakes had no movement, i.e., they were not real. Moses' staff transformed into a "nachash", not the lifeless "tanin" of the Egyptians. The difference in terms indicates to Sforno, a difference in the two performances.

Blood

Blood is the source of life. When one sees water transformed into blood, one realizes that life itself is in God's hands. This strikes at the core of any person's greatest fear - death. Additionally, its creation from the Nile disputed the Nile's position of grandeur. But as God wishes we come to know Him by the use of our higher nature - our intellect - He did not order the blood sign first in sequence. God offers a person the chance to rise to a higher level by following his mind. With a minimalist performance, man has the opportunity to exercise his thinking, and derive truths concerning God's will (His appointment of Moses) and His very existence.

Creation: Arrived at Through Reason

I digress to focus your attention on a related and essential idea: God's position as the Creator is the

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most import concept of human comprehension. Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed", Book II, end of Chap XXV: "...Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe; and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent, and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it."

Maimonides teaches, "all depends on this question". What does he mean? I believe him to mean that by design, God wished that our conviction of this most central idea - God as Creator - must be arrived at through thought, and understanding, not through amazement at marvelous feats. In other words, our recognition of God as the Creator 'must' be apprehended through our reasoning. This is the highest form of recognition of God, and the preferred method to knowing Him, and His works. "All depends on this question," means that proof of Creation was purposefully left to the realm of the "philosophical", and not to "emotional" via astonishing, miraculous displays. It is easy to witness a miracle, and be convinced, but in such a case, our mind forfeits the exercise of reasoning - THE mark of man's perfection. It is fitting that man use his crowned capacity in the pursuit of this question, of God as the Creator. I now return to our topic.

The Serpent and Leprosy

Before resorting to blood, why did the staff transform into a serpent? On the surface, both the staff and a serpent have similar appearances, they are narrow, elongated shapes. Once transformed into a serpent, the viewer might second-guess what he saw, "Was it in fact a staff before hand, or was it a serpent in some stiffened state?" Control of one's emotions and clear thinking are required so as not to dismiss a miracle. Moses was given these signs for the very reason that the Jews were bent on disbelief in God's appointment of Moses. Hence, subsequent to a sign, the Jews might seek to explain away the miracle. To say the very minimum about this specific sign, we may suggest that it teaches that God controls life. He can turn a lifeless staff into a living organism. God's control of life would appear to offer the most impact on the Jews. Therefore God's signs were indications of His control of life. But this was yet animal life. More impressive, was Moses' hand becoming leprous. Here, God sought to teach that He controls human life. He does so in the negative (becoming

leprous) as well as the positive (healing of Moses' leprosy). The fact that Moses own hand was smitten, may serve to teach again that it was not Moses who created such a feat, as one would not risk self injury. Similarly, one would not create a dangerous serpent.

Another observation of the serpent and leprosy is that the transformation into a serpent displays God's control over the "matter" of creation, while leprosy displays His control of His "laws" of creation. Transforming a staff into a serpent displays God's control over matter itself. Disease has a natural process. Moses' leprous hand displays that God controls "how" things behave. These two, initial signs bear witness to God control of both aspects of Creation - of matter, and laws governing that matter.

Perhaps, in order to minimize the affect of "astonishment", God instructed Moses to first conceal his hand before it became leprous. For if a hand became leprous in plain sight, it would overwhelm the viewer, prohibiting his mind from fully functioning. This feat would startle him. Therefore, God told Moses to hide his hand. God also gave Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the Egyptians. And as Rabbi Mann taught, this was for our reason that the viewer use intelligence to discern true miracles of God, from man's sleight of hand. We may also suggest that the "voice" of each sign refers to the underlying "concept" derived by the mind, as opposed to the feat per se. God wished the viewer to understand each sign's message - its "voice".

Why did the first two signs return to their original forms? This may also be a practical issue, that Moses may once again perform these signs.

Why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? Mindful that God enabled these signs as a "response" to Moses' concern that he be validated, perhaps God did not inform Moses of the sign until it happened for good reason: God wished that Moses sense the effects of a these signs, just as would the Jews. By experiencing the sign without advance warning, Moses could identify with the perception and emotional impact afforded the Jews through these signs. Thereby, Moses' "first hand" knowledge gave him the security in these signs. God answered his concern in a primary fashion. He now knew how the Jews would react to these signs - that they were impressive. Had God told Moses what was about to happen, his expectation would lessen the emotional impact of these signs.

The Fulfillment of God's Promise

Our final question was, "What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as 'the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the

God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?" I believe this may serve to illustrate God's consistent kindness. As Moses was God's emissary for the Redemption, the Jews would be more inclined to accept this news and Moses' role, by recalling how God favored their ancestors, and not just on one occasion, but the lifetimes of many individuals. The Redemption was not a deviation, disbelieved by the Jews, but it was consistent with the manner in which God relates to His people - to His prophets' descendants. We learn from this that God saw it necessary even prior to the act of redemption, the Jews required a psychological conviction in God's forthcoming salvation. This state of mind was necessary, and God reassured the Jews of His unchanging kindness through this statement. ■



Jessie: Can you explain the Rashi in Exodus 4:24, where God seeks to kill Moses for not circumcising his son: "And the angel was made into a kind of snake and swallowed Moses from his head to his thighs, and returned and swallowed him from his feet up to the same place. Tzipora understood that this was happening because of circumcision."

I understand that the angel was hinting. Is there something to learn from the fact that the angel was made into a snake, specifically? My first association is lashon hara, or ungratefulness. I think God sent the snakes for this reason in Parshas Chukas (Numbers 21:6): "Let the snake to whom all tastes taste the same attack the ungrateful ones who didn't appreciate the versatility of the Manna."

Thanks,

Jessie

(continued on next page)

Mesora: One question is more general in nature, but great in importance: Why does God teach man by way of subtle indication, in place of outright clarity? “Hinting” to Moses via this snake procedure is effective, but not as effective and direct as communicating in words such as, “Moses, you have sinned by doing such and such.” I will treat this point in a separate article (“How God Teaches Man”), and address this specific account here alone.

What transpired? Moses desired to follow God’s command to descend to Egypt, delivering God’s words to Pharaoh and the Jews. Although presently obligated in circumcision on his newborn, Moses thought this would place his son in danger, prohibiting him from travel. Therefore, Moses opted to put off this command, favoring God’s other command to travel to Egypt. Moses started his trip to Egypt. The Torah reads as follows:

“And it was (as he was) on the journey, at a lodging place, God met up with him and sought to kill him.” (Exod. 4:24)

What was Moses’ sin? He was acting in line with God’s command to descend to Egypt! Either way, whichever command he selected first, (circumcision of traveling to Egypt) Moses would in fact be postponing the other command. There was no way for Moses to fulfill both simultaneously. How then can Moses be at fault, regardless of which command he selected to perform first? Is God saying that circumcision was a priority? And if so, what was its priority?

We read further:

“And Tziphora took a knife and cut the foreskin of her son, and placed it as his feet. And she said, ‘for you are a groom of blood to me’. (Her son’s circumcision played a role in causing Moses’ near-death.) And the plague ceased to attack Moses, then she said, ‘you are a groom of blood regarding circumcision.’” (Exod. 4:25,26)

We learn by Tziphora’s intervention, that Moses was debilitated by this divine plague, unable to circumcise his son himself. What was God’s purpose in debilitating Moses, to the point that his wife Tziphora had to step in to save him? Why is Moses’ debilitating illness required? Usually, a rebuke or lesson from God enables the sinner to reflect, and revamp his own values, correcting his flaw...himself. Not here though. This is significant.

The Use of Snakes

Ibn Ezra writes that Moses’ counsel was not proper. What does Ibn Ezra point to? What was Moses’ error in judgment? Perhaps then, to address one of your questions, a snake was a proper response. In Genesis the original snake attained his exclusive identity as an “evil counselor” (to Eve). Therefore, as Moses possessed a flawed counsel, he received a snake as punishment, thereby indicating that he shared something in common with the primordial snake. However, we must understand what was his flawed counsel.

Moses was Dispensable

A Rabbi once taught that God wished to teach Moses that he was dispensable. It would appear that Moses might have felt that he was indispensable for God’s redemption of the Jewish people, and thus, selected his mission to Egypt, prior to circumcising his son. This was a flawed assumption. God never said Moses was essential. God therefore taught Moses, through the precise act of debilitating him, that Moses was in fact incorrect. He was dispensable. This is borne out of God’s very words, “...and He sought to kill him (Moses).” The precise act of debilitating Moses taught him this very idea of his dispensability. This explains why such an experience was necessary.

Therefore, we need not explain circumcision as ‘more important’ than Moses’ mission to Egypt. This is not necessarily so. As we explained, Moses’ misconception of his indispensability had to be corrected. God’s emissaries must reflect God’s will. And in this matter, Moses required to be taught a new lesson. In truth, if Moses had any other command at that time – other than circumcision – and he had passed over that command too in favor of traveling to Egypt, he would have equally been plagued. Moses’ error was not in selecting a lower command before a higher one, but in viewing himself essential to this mission, when in fact, he wasn’t.

This may seem trivial, however, the Torah says the opposite. To teach Moses “God has many messengers to accomplish His goals” God created a situation in which Moses was “debilitated”. This was essential to drive home this very point that Moses was not essential to the equation. True, God desired that Moses approach Pharaoh, but not at the cost of Moses assuming a role which was untrue. As a leader, perhaps, this is why God was so demanding of Moses. Moses’ view of his role must be accurate. He would not fulfill God’s mission, had he possessed a wrong

notion about his mission: he was to teach mankind God’s ways. It was essential that Moses understand that God could achieve His objective of redeeming the Jews in many ways. This is not to say that Moses was haughty in any manner. We learn that Moses was the most humble person, “And the man Moses was extremely humble, from all men who are on the face of the land.” (Numbers, 12:3) Moses simply viewed his role as essential. This view was not accurate, and God corrected it.

We may now answer why it did not mitigate Moses’ own perfection, when his wife Tziphora performed the circumcision. As Moses’ fault was not his neglect of circumcision per se, his circumcising of his son would not address the flaw. Moses’ flaw was his view of his role. This was addressed by his ailment: it conveyed to him his dispensability. Moses now understood that although requested at God’s word, God’s appointment does not remove other possibilities for this mission’s success, should current strategies require alteration.

Man sees but a small, and therefore inaccurate picture of how and why events take place; what causes them; and what are their results. Based on this myopic view, man is far from possessing true foresight. God alone knows all factors at play in all situations, and thereby manipulates human events with exact precision, forcing His desired outcome. That which man views as ‘essential’ to a given result, must be inaccurate. This was God’s lesson to Moses.

Fatalism

But the more primary lesson to Moses, and to us, is a new insight into how God operates. We must not live life with a fatalistic view of things. I do not mean “fatalistic” in a negative sense, but in the sense of “absolutes”. Man usually views an event as either positive or negative. This need to “label” our experiences stems from insecurity: living with unknowns. However, Jacob was reluctant to make such determinations until the end of his life, when he ultimately saw how each event played itself out. Only at the end of our lives, will we be able to see whether an event that was disappointing – at that time – was truly a negative, or a positive. Many times, what we view as negative, years later turns out to be a blessing. Losing one’s job may pave the way for a far better opportunity. Joseph later realized his sale to the Ishmaelites – although depressing at the time – enabled him to provide for many countries, and his family. This is an important lesson, one, which can lift the weights of anguish which we place on ourselves without need. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



"Just Be Good"

Reader: Dear Mesora, I have this question. I just read your article on interfaith dialogue, that there is only one, correct religion and that G-d wanted there to be one religion among the world. How does this jive with the Jewish view of not doing missionary work? If you are trying to show people that Judaism is correct for everyone, is that not being a missionary? Do we not believe that people can be good human beings and that others have their responsibility, different from ours? *Thank you*

Mesora: You must know that God gave only one religion to the world: Judaism. Rabbi Israel Chait wrote a wonderful article explaining the proof. You may read it here: www.mesora.org/torahfromsinai.html. His article clearly demonstrates that there is only one Divinely-given system for all mankind.

You ask a few questions. Regarding missionary work, you are correct: Judaism does not endorse missionaries, as God desires man to engage free will alone, and not be coerced by any other source than his or her own reasoning.

But let's define "missionary". Missionaries are those individual who: 1) approach others

in a one-on-one fashion, and 2) attempt to convert them to their religion, at any cost. They don't seek truth, but the conversions of others. If you demonstrate to a missionary they are wrong, most times they will become angry, since they have no arguments with which to defend themselves. Therefore, all they have left to create a "justified" display of their position, is anger. In truth, anger, yelling, and all emotional responses are attempts by the missionary – and others – to feign their correctness, when all else fails. If an argument does not convey a truth, the right thing to do is abandon that position. But a missionary cannot do that, as he or she is not driven by reason, but by the objective of converting others.

Therefore, publishing an article is not acting as a missionary, certainly when the author would retract a position when shown wrong. And God does demand the Jew to make Torah available to those Gentiles who wish to learn their commands, and more, if they wish to observe more. Therefore, speaking the truth that only one religion exists is in fact God's will, and must be done.

You also asked whether people can be "good human beings". Apparently you mean 'without' Torah. The answer is no. God never asked man to simply be good. He gave 613 commands to Jews, and the Noachide laws to Gentiles. Those Noachide laws are part of the 613. So in essence, there is one system, part of which Gentiles must observe. And there is no other system "different" than ours, as you mentioned. Gentiles possess the identical laws we have, albeit fewer. So for any person, simply being good is not an option, since much more is required, and primarily because "good" must be God's definition.

And what exactly is being "good"? Does this mean man acts as his subjective morals tell him? In that case, the doctors who treated Arafat as he ebbed away were doing "good". They felt they were doing the right thing. But had they studied God's knowledge written in the Torah that murderers are to be killed, not healed, they would have acted differently. So it can be quite dangerous to the world, if man simply acts as he feels what "good" is. But man cannot conjure up a definition of good. This can only be defined by the Creator of morality. Therefore, without adhering to Torah commandments, a person will not be good. He cannot be good, as Arafat's doctors displayed. ■

Jewish Jealousy

Mesora: As the Gentile holidays roll around, it has become a Jewish phenomenon to dine out on Christmas, and celebrate the Gentile New Year. I wish to point out some subtle corruptions in this Jewish behavior.

There is – in all of us – the feeling of jealousy: we cannot tolerate that the entire world is celebrating a family holiday, while we have a typical day. The phenomenon of Jews dining out on Christmas might in some cases be simply a free day to get together. This of course is fine. But there can lurk beneath – in some of us – an emotional response to "compete". I mention this as a suggestion that we introspect on this point. Dismiss it if it is false in you. But admit of it and remove it if you sense some truth.

But the New Year's celebration is a clear corruption, beyond doubt. As Jews, we are not to celebrate Jesus' bris. We are not to imbibe alcohol to the point of drunkenness. Even on Purim, Maimonides teaches that we drink and go to sleep to fulfill the mitzvah.

As a wise Rabbi taught, over all else, our intellects are to remain in the state where Torah learning is possible. Getting drunk on New Years celebrates wrong ideas, it is an act of assimilation, and it is time wasted from Torah study.

Instead of drinking with idolatrous Gentiles – which itself is prohibited – make plans to study with your child, wife, parent, or a friend.

Do not think that my argument is foolish, since "so many Jews celebrate". You know this is a poor argument, since you do not join the masses and become Christian. If these arguments don't wash with you, then think about the statistics of how many people die in automobile accidents every single December 31st. Then consider that you can be one of these statistics. And even if you don't drink...don't drive. The highways this night are a free-for-all for all drunks. You are but a moving target for drivers who may not even be conscious enough to know you are directly in their headlights.

Stay home. ■

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Kidney Needed *(Reprinted from an email list)*

I am writing to appeal to all of you to help me with the following two items. My dad is in desperate need of a kidney transplant and I need everyone's help. One please keep Ephraim be Esther in your tfillot and if you say thillim please keep him in mind. The next item is harder and I am asking your help to post in shul or community email message boards. He needs a kidney donor with type A or O blood for a transplant. If you know of anyone who wants to donate a kidney or have any information at all that could help please contact me asap. The recipient will pay all expenses and lost wages associated with the donation. Please distribute this information as word of mouth is the best networking. I can be reached 24 hours a day by email or at any of the numbers below. Tizku lmitsvos.
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