

PART II

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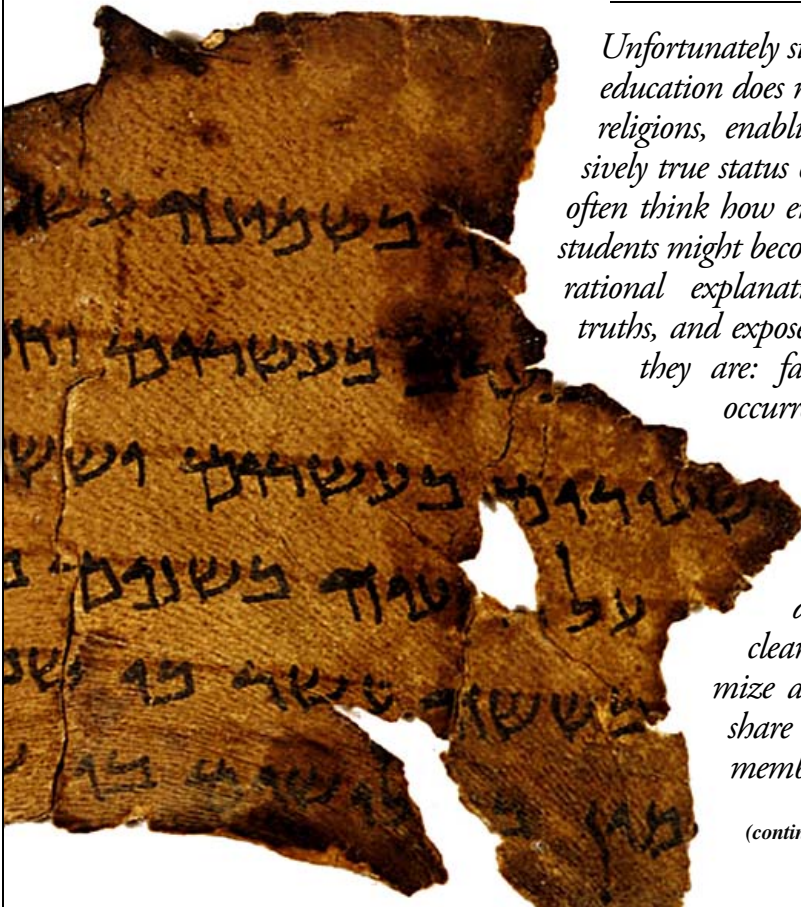
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SINAI

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Unfortunately still viewed as a taboo, Jewish education does not expose the fallacy of other religions, enabling the unparalleled, exclusively true status of Judaism to shine bright. I often think how enthusiastic our children and students might become, were they to possess clear, rational explanations that prove Judaism's truths, and expose all other religions for what they are: fabricated events that never occurred, and beliefs in ideas that contradict reason. I feel the following points might work as a good spring-board into your further discussions. I have tried to be clear and concise, so as to minimize any misinterpretation. Please share these with your children, members and students.

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Weekly Parsha

Kitavo

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“And it will be, when you come into the land which Hashem your G-d gives you for an inheritance, and possess it, and dwell therein. And you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground,
(continued on next page)

(Kitavo cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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which you will bring in from your land that Hashem your G-d gives you. And you shall put it in a basket and go to the place which Hashem your G-d will choose to cause His name to dwell there. And you shall come to the kohen that will be in those days, and say to him: I profess this day to Hashem your G-d, that I have come to the land which Hashem swore unto our fathers to give us. And the kohen shall take the basket out of your hand, and set it down before the altar of Hashem your G-d. And you shall speak and say before Hashem your G-d: A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. And we cried to Hashem, the G-d of our fathers, and Hashem heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. And Hashem brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. And He brought us into this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Devarim 26:1-8)

One of the mitzvot discussed in our parasha is the mikre bikkurim – the recitation accompanying the bringing of the first fruit. In order to discuss the mitzvah of mikre bikkurim, we must first review the mitzvah of bikkurim – the first fruit. This mitzvah only applies in the Land of Israel. We are required to bring the first fruit of each year's crop – the bikkurim – to the Bait HaMikdash. The bikkurim are then given to the kohanim. The mitzvah of bikkurim does not apply to all crops. We are only required to give bikkurim from the seven species that are associated with fertility the Land of Israel.

When the farmer brings the fruits, he is required to fulfill the mitzvah of mikre bikkurim. He recites a specific portion of the Torah that is included in this week's parasha. In this recitation he describes the tribulations experienced by our forefather Yaakov. He recounts his descent to Egypt. He describes the suffering and persecution our ancestors experienced in Egypt. Then, he briefly recounts our redemption by Hashem from

bondage. He acknowledges that Hashem has given us the Land of Israel and that this produce is the product of that land. In short, the farmer describes the fruit he is presenting as a manifestation of Hashem's redemption of Bnai Yisrael and an expression of His providential relationship with the Jewish people.

Why is this recitation required? Sefer HaChinuch responds that mitzvah is based upon an important principle that underlies many mitzvot in the Torah. The Torah requires that we accept specific truths. For example, we must recognize that Hashem is the creator. We must recognize that He exercises providence over Bnai Yisrael. However, it is not sufficient that we merely accept that these ideas are true. We must incorporate these ideas into our actual world-view and everyday thinking. We must live by these ideas.

In order to understand the significance of this principle, it is important to recognize that we do not always live by the ideas that we know to be true. A smoker knows that his habit endangers his health and wellbeing. He does not deny that this is true. However, his challenge is translating this knowledge into action. His trial is to live by his knowledge. This may seem like an extreme example. But we can all identify areas in our lives in which we experience this dichotomy between our



knowledge and our actions. Life would be much easier if we could easily do all of the things we know are correct and reasonable. In our own individual ways, we all struggle with this challenge. According to Sefer HaChinuch, the Torah is not only interested in teaching us the truth. It is also concerned with assisting us in meeting the challenge of living by these truths.

This principle provides a solution to a well-known discrepancy in the writings of Maimonides. The first mitzvah of the Decalogue is conviction in the existence of Hashem. In his Mishne Torah, Maimonides defines the commandment as an obligation to know that there is a G-d who is the cause of all that exists.

Maimonides also discusses this commandment in his Sefer HaMitzvot. Maimonides wrote this work in Arabic. The standard translation of the Sefer HaMitzvot was composed by Moshe ibn Tibon. The first mitzvah in Sefer HaMitzvot is affirmation of Hashem. In Ibn Tibon's translation, the

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(Kitavo continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

mitzvah obligates us to believe in the existence of a G-d that is the cause of all that exists. Why does Maimonides here describe the mitzvah as a requirement to believe in Hashem but in his Mishne Torah he tells us we are commanded to know He exists?

There are numerous approaches to understanding Maimonides' differing formulations of this mitzvah. However, one simple explanation is that the two formulations are simply dealing with different issues. In his Mishne Torah, Maimonides is explaining the substance of the required conviction. His objective is to precisely outline the truth that we are required to accept. In his Sefer HaMitzvot, Maimonides is describing the relationship we must have with this idea. It is not adequate to know that Hashem exists. We must achieve a stronger relationship with this truth. We must believe in this truth. Believing a truth is to wholly and unequivocally accept it. In other words, we do not fulfill this mitzvah by merely accepting Hashem's existence as an abstract truth. This truth must be the fundamental to our world-view. We fulfill the mitzvah through achieving complete conviction.[1]

Sefer HaChinuch explains that the mitzvah of mikre bikkurim is an example of one of the many mitzvot designed to translate ideas into meaningful convictions. How does the Torah assist us in meeting this challenge? Sefer HaChinuch explains that there is a reciprocal relationship between our thoughts and our actions. We all recognize that our thoughts and convictions influence our actions. Sefer HaChinuch points out that our actions influence our thoughts and convictions. If we wish to transform an idea into a meaningful and moving conviction, we must express the idea through actions. By acting on an idea we know to be a truth, we strengthen our conviction in this truth.

Sefer HaChinuch applies this principle to mikre bikkurim. Through the process of bringing the first fruit to Yerushalayim and reciting mikre bikkurim, we strengthen our conviction in Hashem's providence and benevolence. Through expressing these ideas in words and actions, we reinforce our conviction in the truth of these ideas.[2]

Don Yitzchak Abravanel offers a slightly different explanation of the mitzvah of mikre bikkurim. He suggests that mikre bikkurim is designed to address a basic human fault. When we are confronted with troubles, experience suffering, or pain, we recognize our inadequacies and frailty. In such situations we feel compelled to turn to a more

powerful being for assistance. We call out to Hashem and beg for His deliverance. But when we are successful and we achieve wealth and comfort, we easily forget Hashem and attribute our successes to our own wisdom, ability and efforts. It is especially at such times that we must remind ourselves that all of our bounty is ultimately derived from Hashem's benevolence and that our efforts cannot succeed without His support.

Abravanel explains that the harvest time presents a challenge. As we gather our crops and admire the bounty that our efforts have produced, we may forget that this bounty is a result of the blessings that Hashem bestows upon the Land of Israel. The mitzvah of mikre bikkurim is designed to remind us of the true source of our success. We are required to acknowledge Hashem's role – His providence and benevolence.[3]

It is notable that Sefer HaChinuch and Abravanel agree that this mitzvah is designed to foster within us a proper and realistic attitude. Sefer HaChinuch suggests that many truths must be reinforced in order to become strong convictions. Mikre bikkurim is designed to provide such reinforcement. Abravanel agrees that the mitzvah is designed to strengthen our convictions, but he explains that the mitzvah addresses a basic human

failing. We tend to take too much credit for our successes and to forget the role of Hashem.

Maimonides accepts this interpretation. However, he adds a subtle point. He explains that the mitzvah is also designed to foster proper character development. Personal humility is an important character trait. It is fundamental to human perfection. Our success can impair our sense of humility. Mikre bikkurim reminds us that our successful harvest is an expression of Hashem's blessings and benevolence. This helps us retain our sense of humility.[4] ■

[1] A similar interpretation is developed by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l (Al HaTeshuvah pp. 195-198). However, Rav Soloveitchik argues that Maimonides' formulation is his Mishne Torah reflects the requirement to achieve constant and uncompromised conviction whereas his formulation in his Sefer HaMitzvot is less rigorous.

[2] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 606.

[3] Don Yitzchak Abravanel, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 26.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 3, chapter 39.

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SINAI

HISTORY CANNOT BE CHANGED

If God did NOT give the Torah at Sinai as described, where is the “true” Jewish history of that time period? The fact remains: there is no other history of Judaism at that time period.

How could it be, that a “false” history (God's appearance at Sinai) would be accepted by all 2.5 million Jews, and no one at all would keep their “true” history? That cannot happen. We are forced to accept with 100% conviction that the Jews must have witnessed God giving the Torah as is described. This is the identical reasoning that demands we fully accept Caesar as Rome's emperor.

JUDAISM'S UNIQUE CLAIM

At no other time in world history did God communicate a religion to masses. No other religion makes this claim, that God revealed Himself to their people. This is because no nation or culture could successfully convince everyone that they witnessed something, which never occurred. Try convincing a nation today that their history is all wrong. Will they listen to you? Will they abandon what their entire nation agrees to, and replace what they teach, with your new story? Of course not. Similarly, had the Jews NOT witnessed Sinai, and Moses attempted to convince them that they DID in fact witness it; they too would not accept Moses.

From the event of God's revelation at Sinai in 3321 years ago and throughout time, the entire Jewish nation has fully accepted and transmitted that event. It must be that God did NOT give any religion, except Judaism (Torah) to the Jews. This religion of Judaism has 613 laws for Jews, and about 60 for non-Jews (7 Noachide laws plus sub categories). God didn't abandon the rest of the world, but included in Torah a minimal system for gentiles, from which they might be imbued with an enlightenment to accept all 613 commands.

FALLACY OF OTHER RELIGIONS

It is crucial to recognize the baseless claims presented by Christianity and Islam, in contrast to those made by Judaism. Christianity and Islam transmit BELIEFS. For example, "BELIEVE Jesus died for your sins", or, "BELIEVE Jesus will rise from the dead", and "BELIEVE Jesus was chosen by God". Nothing proves he was chosen, even more, he was killed without doing anything. So regarding BELIEFS, there are no witnesses: you either believe, or you do not.

There is no proof. So why accept it?

And if we examine actual events, there is nothing within Islam or Christianity that makes either religion anything more than hearsay. Not one, single validation. In fact, Christianity's history of Jesus contains four conflicting Gospels. How can a rational person trust a history that argues with itself?

Judaism on the other hand transmits FACTS – not beliefs – based on masses that witnessed so many amazing and unparalleled events. Literally everything Moses predicted, came true. All 10 Plagues occurred in Egypt on the exact date and times Moses predicted. Moses predicted our Salvation

from Egypt...it happened. He predicted the miraculous, daily bread (manna) and meat (quails) that arrived in the desert. Receipt of the land of Israel also came true, through the other prediction, that we would conquer all our enemies.

EVERY one came true.

And of course, Revelation at Sinai. But Jesus didn't predict even one thing that came true. And he was killed.

Kind David's Moses' success could only be explained by the Creator's endorsement of his prophetic status. He was God's true emissary. Jesus failed, and did nothing, as is the case with Mohammed. Such failures must enlighten us to their status as false prophets.

We know all these Jewish events are true FACTS, as we said above: historical FACTS would not be transmitted throughout time, if there were really OTHER facts, and not these. A nation will not abandon what it knows is true about itself, and tell its children a false history.

A religion based on “belief”, thereby confesses to its lack of “facts”. It must be lies.

Historical facts that any nation affirms unanimously, must be true. This is because people will not suddenly change facts about what they know is true and lie to others. They would not be accepted if they did, and they would appear as fools.

But we will find fringe groups (Jesus' followers, many Chassidic followers) who wish to deify their leader, and make him into a saint, or a miracle worker...one who will rise from the dead as Messiah. They pray to such dead, deified leaders, which violates God's words. It is a crime that no one in the Lubavitch camp comes out and rebukes all those blind followers assuming the dead Rebbe is Messiah; or others, writing notes to him and placing them in his grave. Consulting the dead is idolatry, and unnecessary, since we can pray directly to God. But no leader in that camp has the true dedication to God, enough to openly denounce such beliefs, and halt their sinful practices...allowing this crime to perpetuate itself. It is this crime that God wished to avert by not disclosing Moses' grave, and why our forefathers wished not to be buried in Egypt, lest they too be deified in death. If a Rebbe is made out to be infallible, or worse, a messiah, no number of outposts undoes the harm...but in fact it spreads the disease.

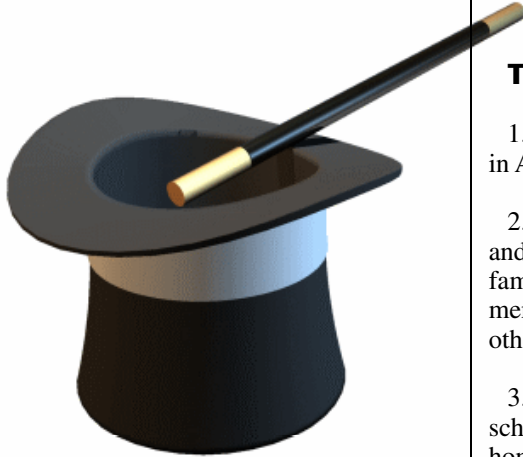
When minority groups spread such beliefs, we know they are in fact lies. And we never see any case in these groups where masses attest to witnessing miracles, except in authentic Judaism. Even in Christianity, the account of the supposed 5000 that Jesus miraculously fed, was not a story spread by those 5000, but it was spread by Jesus' few disciples. And they sought to protect their lie by claiming that miracle was many decades in the past. But the 5000 truly did not exist, and this explains why others spread the story. It was only much later that Jesus followers liked this story, so they “believed” it enough to spread it. That is how it exists today: as a belief, not as a witnessed event.

In contrast, the Torah cites names and families from the patriarchs through the Exodus and further. And these people unanimously transmitted Moses warning, “not to forget what your eyes have seen”. The Jews would not transmit those words, if they in fact didn't witness Sinai.

Of course, we do not base Judaism's proof on the Written Law, for that would be circular: to prove a document, from that very document. We base our proof on the unbroken chain of oral transmission, and the credibility used to validate all historical claims: mass witnesses of easily perceptible phenomena. Mass witnesses are absent in all other religions.

In Deuteronomy 18:9, Rashi teaches we must teach our children the fallacy of other religions. If we do not, they will be defenseless against the inevitable questions that will rise in their minds. ■

Eighth graders from an Orthodox Yeshiva in New York were recently asked to read this story at the Shabbos table for a homework assignment. After the story I will cite the Torah's actual, rational standpoint.



“Power” of Mitzvoth?

HOWARD SALAMON

The Story

1. Amazing true story that recently occurred in Ashdod.

2. The mother of the family passed away and for the elevation of the mother's soul, the family took upon themselves that each family member must say blessings of food aloud for others to hear in order to say Amen.

3. One day the daughter came home from school and felt terribly thirsty but no one was home to answer Amen to her blessing. She waited and waited till someone will come home and answer Amen to the blessing of the water. Although she felt extremely thirsty she waited two and a half hours till someone arrived home to relieve her.

4. That same night she had a dream and her deceased mother told her, “Know my daughter, the fact that you overcame your thirst and waited two and a half hours for someone to answer Amen made a tremendous impression in Shamayim. Because of your deed, it was ruled in Shamayim that a good decree will be bestowed. One of your classmates is very ill with the terrible sickness. In the merit of the good deed you performed it was decreed in Shamayim that your classmate would heal completely. The name of the classmate is _____.”

5. At 5 am the girl woke in a frenzy and rushed to wake up her father to tell him her dream. The father told her that in the morning he would look further into this matter since no one knew that this classmate was ill.

6. In the morning the father called the classmates father and casually asked him the wellbeing of his family. The classmate's father answered that everything is ok but wanted to know why he is asking. The widow father revealed to him that he knows that his daughter is ill.

7. The classmate's father was in shock because they kept this matter top secret. The other father told him the development of how this knowledge came about and told him that his daughter said that her classmate would completely heal.

8. The fathers belong to the same Hasidic sect. They immediately went to their leader in Yerushalayim to tell him the dream. The leader instructed that the ill girl be taken for a check up. On the same day the girl was scheduled for her first chemotherapy treatment.

9. The family was prepared for the miraculous result

10. The results of the exam came out totally clean without a trace of any illness!!

11. The power of stubbornly observing a Mitzvah can miraculously alter nature!
[The story ends here]

Herewith my comments

2. “For the elevation of the Mothers Soul”
There is nothing we in this world can do for the elevation of the mother's or any other deceased person's soul. The mother had, as all of us have, an opportunity to perfect our soul in this physical world: meaning elevating our soul by following the Torah. The Rambam says in Laws of Teshuva Chapter 9 Law 1, “Once the Torah made known to us the reward of the Mitzvoth and the good we will merit, if we follow the way of Hashem that is written in the Torah. This is the world to come as it says “in order for it to be good for you and you should lengthen your days”, and the revenge that is taken from the wicked that forsook their ways of righteousness that is written in the Torah is Karet; as it is written, “Your soul will be surely cut off to the one that sins in it”, i.e. the Torah. The Rabbis interpret the First verse as the World come from “In order that it should be good for you and you should lengthen your days, meaning the world that is all good and the world that is all long...a reference to the next world. If you do not follow the Torah you will be cut off from this eternal world.”

(continued on next page)

I do not see anywhere how the soul can be elevated if the person does not follow this prescription in this world, i.e. the Mitzvoth. This theory would also demand the inverse to be true, that if a person is wicked while alive, and then dies, and then someone does an act in favor of this person, he is benefited somehow. This would go against this formula.

Saying Amen from a Bracha

Rambam, Laws of Blessings, Chapter 1 Law 11. "Anyone that hears a Blessing from any Blessings from beginning to end and has his mind to fulfill his/her obligation, then he fulfills his obligation even though he doesn't answer Amen. And anyone that answers Amen after a Blessing its as if he made the Blessing himself, and that is only if the one that is making the Blessing is obligated in that Blessing." No mention that one must hear a Bracha and say Amen.

We also know that the word Amen means "true, I Affirm" meaning when someone says a Bracha and one hears it, he is to say Amen to say that he agrees, affirms, with this Blessing. This is only when a person hears the whole Bracha. However there is no obligation to hear it.

3. The idea that someone should pain themselves (Wait two and a half hours) in order to have a drink of water for someone to hear her Bracha.

As mentioned in item 2, nowhere does the Torah or Rabbis say anything about an obligation to say Amen to a Bracha unless being used to fulfill ones obligation of saying a Bracha, or affirming its meaning. Deuteronomy Chapter 28, Verse 47, "Because you didn't serve Hashem your God with Joy and good spirit from abundance of good". Hashem is saying you will receive all the curses if you do not follow the Torah with joy, of course you also did not follow the Torah. Waiting to drink water for two hours to make a Bracha for someone to say Amen doesn't seem to be a happy state. In addition the Torah is a system of Truth, a system that makes sense to any intellectual being. Some Mitzvoth maybe a little more difficult to do than others, but it's not about having pain. It may be difficult to daven with a Minyan everyday; it maybe a little easier to send away the mother bird from the nest. But other than Yom Kippur, there is no command to pain oneself to do a Mitzvah.

4. "Her deceased mother told her what was decreed in Heaven"

Do we have a case in the Torah where a dead person spoke? (Radak says Samuel was not literally raised, it was a vision) And I do not mean a parable, which perhaps the Talmud cites in Brachos. Did any of our forefathers that were on a prophetic level ever hear from a dead person? Any of our great Rabbis afterwards? There is another possibility. As we know from Dr. Sigmund Freud a famous psychologist, all dreams are manifestations of unconscious thoughts and desires. The Gemara also says "anyone who goes 7 days without a bad dream, is a wicked person". This means he is satisfying his lusts in reality, so he needs no dream to address his suppressed urges. Dreams allow controlled desires some relief. We can never determine whether God decreed an event on an individual basis. Only if something good or bad happens to the Jewish Nation, then its divine providence. So we cannot say for certain this dream story was God's doing. Maybe He did, maybe He didn't. But no one can ever be sure.

5. "The girl woke up the father in a frenzy"

She was scared so she ran to her father. This makes sense: bad dream, wake up the parents. It happened to my wife and myself with our kids many times. .

6. "The father called the classmates father"

There are many kids in the class. How did the father know which classmate's father to call? Such a claim suggests this can only be prophecy. But this cannot be since the Rabbis teach that prophecy has ended.

7. "The matter was kept top secret and the father told the other father that the daughter will completely heal"

If it was top secret how did anyone find out about this? How did the father know for sure that there would be a complete recovery? Prophecy has ended, so this is false.

8. "Both fathers belong to the same Hasidic sect and went to their leader to tell the dream"

I do not know what Hasidism and Yerushalayim have to do with this. Maybe this will make the story more believable.

9. "The family was prepared for the miraculous result"

Again, how were they so sure? From a dream? That is interpreted by a Rabbi? We see many cases in the Torah where our forefathers prayed to Hashem for Children. They never knew if Hashem would answer their prayers.

10. No illness! Nice ending.

11. "The power of stubbornly observing a Mitzvah can miraculously alter nature"

In a more general sense this story tries to convey the power of a Mitzvah; that somehow miracles will happen when we perform them, even though our Rabbis teach us "Do not rely on Miracles". Moshe Rabbeinu does not say to observe the Torah "for the sake of miracles". And Rambam openly teaches we are to perform Mitzvoth, for their OWN sake. Not for miracles. (Commentary on Mishna Sanhedrin, Chap. 10) This story endorses opinions that are contrary to our greatest minds.

The question is why do teachers teach our children ideas that do not make any sense? Where do these stories come from? It's not from Judaism. If this story were told over in a context of another religion, we would reject it outright. The reason such fables exist is because these teachers were also taught in the same manner and are just repeating over these errors.

They do not think before they teach. When it comes to religion...everything goes. You can say and believe whatever you want, and I cannot tell you that you are wrong.

Well this is wrong. Intellect must not take a back seat in religious issues.

We have to correct a fellow human being. The Torah commands, "You shall surely rebuke your fellow". This teacher may believe he is communicating a nice story from Torah and everyone will feel good, but it is totally false, and dangerous. The children sense this when they are reading the story. They will think Judaism doesn't make sense.

During this time of the year, this teacher and all of us should rededicate ourselves to asking questions and to study the Torah, seeking reason and truth. If we cannot do it on our own, we must find a proper teacher that has the knowledge to teach true, reasonable Torah, and the ideas of the great Rabbis that interpreted it. ■

I welcome all comments, questions and suggestions: howard@salamonbrothers.com