

"The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible."

Albert Einstein

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Weekly Parsha

Beresheit

RABBI BERNIE FOX

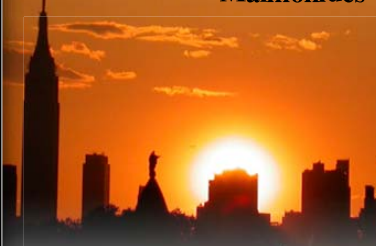
Hashem Consulted the Torah in Creating the Universe

In the beginning, the Lord created the heavens and the earth.
(Beresheit 1:1)

The term used in the pasuk for
(continued on next page)

the Sabbath

Maimonides



It is perhaps dear why the laws concerning Sabbath are so severe, that their transgression is visited with death by stoning, and that the greatest of the prophets put a person to death for breaking the Sabbath. The commandment of the Sabbath is the third from the commandment concerning the existence and the unity of God. For the commandment not to worship any other being is merely an explanation of the first. You know already from what I have said, that no opinions retain their vitality except those which are confirmed, published, and by certain actions constantly revived among the people. Therefore we are told in the Law to honour this day; in order to confirm thereby the principle of Creation which will spread in the world, when all peoples keep Sabbath on the same day. For when the question is asked, why this is done, the answer is given: "For in six days the Lord hath made," etc. (Exod.xx. 11). Two different
(continued on page 6)

Weekly Parsha

Creation, Sabbath, & Death to Violators

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

(page 6)

What is so vital about Sabbath observance, that a violator is punished with death? Why must Sabbath be a weekly observance, while all other holidays occur just once yearly? What exactly are we to learn from God's act of "rest", as the Creator does not tire?

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(Beresheit cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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"the beginning" is resheit. The Midrash Rabbah explains that this term is an allusion to the Torah. The Midrash continues and comments that Hashem looked into the Torah in order to construct the universe.[1]

This teaching of the Sages must be carefully considered. The simple meaning of the Midrash defies understanding. Hashem is the source of all truth and wisdom. He does not need to consult any other source to determine His actions. Furthermore, the Torah is His creation. It contains His wisdom. There is no purpose in the Creator's seeking a blueprint within His own Torah.

The Midrash contains an important lesson in life. Many people are profoundly unhappy. The reasons for their unhappiness vary. Some complain that they are unable to balance their various responsibilities and needs. Others feel that they cannot discover any meaning to existence. Without meaning, their lives seem empty and depressing. It would appear that, for many, the pursuit of happiness presents insurmountable challenges. Why is there so much unhappiness?

Our Sages are responding to this issue. They are telling us that the world has a specific purpose, and it is designed to serve this purpose. Because of its design, we cannot expect to use the resources of our world in any manner that we choose. Let us consider an analogy. Imagine a ball of clay. This is a very flexible medium. The artisan has freedom to mold the clay as he or she pleases. The clay will assume the shape chosen by the artisan. By contrast, a hammer is not nearly as flexible. It is a tool with a specific design. In order for an artisan to use the hammer successfully, he must consider its design. The hammer can be used with positive results to drive nails into wood. Now, imagine a foolish person using a hammer as a toothbrush. We would not be surprised if this individual were unhappy with the outcome.

If the universe lacked specific design, it would be reasonable to assume its resources, and elements could be adapted to any purpose we would imagine. Each person could choose to mold his or her environment to correspond with individual goals and endeavors. Many different lifestyles would offer similar potential for happiness. Our Sages, however, are positing that a design does exist. In this sense, the universe resembles the hammer. It was created as an environment to support the way of life and the values outlined in the Torah. Like the hammer, it works well, if used within the parameters of its

purpose. However, if one attempts to use the world that Hashem created towards some other end that is not consistent with its design, frustration is inevitable. This is the meaning of our Sages in their comment that Hashem looked into the Torah in creating the world. He designed our universe as an environment to support the life of Torah. It is this life that is destined to bring us the greatest happiness.

This does not imply that a non-Jew cannot find happiness. The Torah includes a set of laws. These were given to the Jewish people. However, the Torah also includes universal values and a unique outlook. These aspects of Torah are appropriate for all of humanity. They serve as a key, available to all, for finding happiness and fulfillment.

Human Beings are Created in Hashem's Likeness

And the L-rd said: Let us make humankind, in Our image and in Our likeness, and they will rule over the fish of the ocean, the fowl of the skies, the beasts and all of the earth, and over all that crawls upon the earth. (Beresheit 1:26)

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno offers an interesting interpretation of the phrase "in our likeness." He explains that humans partake of the "likeness

of G-d" through the unique characteristic of freewill. Beasts respond to stimulus without the ability to choose. Only the human being has the capacity to make choices. In this sense, the human being is like G-d. Sforno goes on to explain that although the human being chooses between good and evil, sometimes choosing the latter, Hashem always chooses the good.[2] The comments of Sforno seem difficult to understand. How can he say that G-d actually has free choice, but at the same time, argue that G-d can only choose the good?

Sforno's comments contain a deep insight into the concept of freewill. Sforno maintains that freewill does not mean the ability to select a course of action from among alternatives. This definition does not apply to Hashem. Hashem is perfect and His actions must be consistent with His perfection. Instead, freewill means to be the cause of one's own actions. In other words, freewill is to be able to act free of any outside the influence or external causes.

The human being is unique in this ability. We

(continued on next page)

have the volition to raise ourselves above negative surroundings and choose to follow the path of righteousness. Similarly, we bear responsibility for freely choosing evil. We are responsible for this choice because we have the ability to be the cause of our own actions. Although Hashem only chooses the good, He is uninfluenced by and free of any influence outside of Himself. He alone, is the source of all His actions.

Why isn't the Universe More Perfect

And the land brought forth vegetation, plants bearing their own kinds of seeds, and trees producing fruits containing their own kinds of seeds. And G-d saw that it was good. (Beresheit 1:12)

This passage describes the emergence of vegetation on the third day of creation. The passage tells us that one element of this vegetation was fruit bearing trees. Rashi comments that the earth was not obedient to Hashem. Hashem had commanded the earth to bring forth fruit trees with flavored wood or bark. According to Hashem's design, the wood was to share the taste of the fruit. The earth did not obey. It produced trees with flavorful fruit. However, this taste was not characteristic of the wood.

Rashi further comments that the earth was subsequently punished for its disobedience. When G-d punished humanity and exiled Adam and Chava from Gan Eden – the Garden of Eden, He also cursed the earth. This curse was in response to the disobedience alluded to by our passage.[3]

Rashi's comments present obvious difficulties. How can the commands of Hashem be defied by the earth? Only humanity is endowed with freewill. All other elements of creation must respond to the commands of Hashem! It is also difficult to explain Hashem's reaction to this disobedience. Why punish the earth? The earth is not responsible for this deviation from the command. Furthermore, it is devoid of intellectual understanding. What is achieved through punishing the earth? It is clear that Rashi is presenting an allegorical lesson. What is the message?

Hashem wished to create a perfect universe. However, His will also dictated that this universe should be governed by natural law. Therefore, Hashem did not instantaneously create the present-day universe. Instead, He designed the building blocks of the universe and developed the universe from these building blocks. In other words, Nature was His tool in the process of

creation. He worked through the laws of nature to produce the universe that exists today. This was a step-by-step process. The Torah's account of creation is a synopsis of the basic developmental steps.

This scenario results in a conflict. Every tool has its limitations. Nature sets limits. Working with the laws of nature as a tool imposes restrictions on the design of the universe. Therefore, Hashem's will to work within natural law resulted in a universe consistent with these laws. It also produced a universe that was somewhat compromised in its perfection. An example will illustrate this point. Assume I want to draw a square. The perfection of my drawing will be determined by the tools used. A sharp pencil will create a more defined image. A straight-edge will allow for more precision. A decision to restrict myself to a dull pencil and to not use a ruler will impose limitations on the perfection of the final product. Hashem chose to impose a restriction upon Himself. He would design the universe using natural law. This limited the perfection that could be achieved.

We can now understand Rashi's comments. In the abstract, a tree with flavored wood would be more perfect than the trees that actually vegetates the earth. Rashi explains that the earth could not produce this more perfect tree. This was a result of Hashem's decision to work within nature. The tree that nature produced was less perfect than the ideal.

Rashi's comments regarding Hashem's punishment of the earth are more difficult to interpret. It seems that Rashi feels that Hashem would not have cursed the earth had its perfection been more complete. In other words, Hashem would not have cursed a creation that reflected the ideal perfection. However, the earth did not meet the ideal of perfection. Its trees reflected limited perfection. Therefore, Hashem was willing to curse the earth.

The Purpose of Creation and the Purpose of Prayer

And all the trees of the field were not yet on the earth and all the plants of the field had not yet sprouted, for Hashem had not caused it to rain on the earth and there was no humanity to work the land. (Beresheit 2:5)

Why do we pray? Probably, most people would respond that we pray because we have needs and we turn to Hashem in order to secure these needs. Unfortunately, this motivation often ends in disaster. At first, the motivation leads the petitioner to pray with intensity and sincerity. The

assumption of the petitioner is that if one prays properly, Hashem will respond. True, everyone knows that many prayers seem to go unanswered. But the hopeful petitioner initially assumes that this is because these unanswered prayers were not appropriate or that they were not offered properly or with adequate sincerity. This leads to the conclusion that if one is sure that the request is worthy of a response and the prayer is offered properly and sincerely, Hashem will answer.

But this is where the problem arises. Often, the petitioner feels that he or she has fulfilled these requirements. The prayers the supplicant offers are sincere, proper, and appropriate. Yet, the petitioner can detect no response from Hashem. At this point, frustration sets in and the person who recently prayed with fervor and sincerity becomes disillusioned. Prayer becomes much more difficult or even impossible. Prayer is replaced with resentment. Where did things go wrong? How can Hashem expect us to pray with sincerity if so many of our most sincere prayers seem to go unanswered? Why does Hashem command us to pray and then seemingly disregard our supplications? The answer is not simple and requires extensive discussion. But some simple observations may be helpful.

We know that prayer is an act of service to Hashem. Maimonides, in defining the mitzvah of prayer, formulates it as "to serve Hashem daily through prayer." [4] This formulation suggests that we must revisit the common motivation for prayer. If we pray in order to secure our needs, we are focused primarily upon ourselves. It is impossible to reconcile this essentially self-centered motivation with the concept of service to Hashem. Consider an analogy. You ask a friend to do you a favor and pick up a sandwich for you at the deli. Is it possible to describe the act of making this request as an act of devotion to your friend? Of course not! You are asking your friend to show devotion to you. So, if the purpose of prayer is to secure Hashem's assistance in satisfying our own needs, prayer is self-serving and not an act of selfless worship. The implication of this analysis is that although it is appropriate to petition Hashem for our personal needs in our prayers, this is not the primary purpose of prayer. Prayer is a form of worship. The central figure in the act of prayer must be Hashem – not us.

Based on Maimonides' characterization of prayer, we can certainly understand the elements of praise and the expressions of thanks that are included in the prayers formulated by our Sages. But despite these elements of praise and thanks that are included in the daily prayer services, it is difficult to reconcile the characterization of prayer as worship with the overall format for prayer established by our Sages. The central component

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of our daily prayer is the Amidah. Most of the blessings of the weekday Amidah consist of requests. We ask for knowledge, health, redemption, restoration of the Temple, and many other needs. We are urged by our Sages to personalize these requests and insert into the proper blessing personal needs. For example, in the blessing for health, we are to add a special prayer for specific individuals that are ill.[5] How can we reconcile for this emphasis on requests with the characterization of prayer as a selfless act of worship?

In order to answer this question, we must begin with an analysis of human nature. If we are honest with ourselves, we will realize that human nature is fundamentally self-centered. We work towards being sensitive to others and being empathic, but we cannot easily overcome our fixation with ourselves. Each of us must deal with the challenge of self-centeredness. We see ourselves as the central figure of our own universe and must struggle to make room for the needs, wishes, and desires of others. This phenomenon of human nature makes it difficult to be aware of G-d. We take for granted His kindness and benevolence. We feel entitled and must struggle to appreciate Hashem. An even greater battle is required to recognize Hashem – and not oneself – as the true center of all reality.

Yet, the Torah regards this struggle as an essential element of human perfection. We are expected to break out of our self-centeredness. We are required to respect the rights of others as being on par with our own rights. More fundamentally, we are required to recognize Hashem as the pivotal element of all existence and the true center of the universe. To our Sages, one of the basic measures of human perfection is the degree to which a person breaks out of the personal, self-centered, subjective reality, and grasps the objective, G-d centered reality of the universe. How can we make this transition from the self-centered to the G-d centered view of reality?

Part of the solution is outlined by our Sages in their comments on our parasha. These comments are quoted by Rashi in his commentary. The Torah explains that although Hashem created vegetation on third day of creation, the vegetation remained dormant until the sixth day. On the sixth day Hashem caused it to rain and the dormant vegetation sprang to life and covered our world. Our Sages asked: Why did Hashem wait until the sixth day to fully develop the lush covering of the Earth? The Sages respond that before the sixth day, humanity did not exist. No human being had yet been created who could appreciate the wonderful blessing of rain. On the sixth day, humanity was created. Adam realized that the trees and plants needed rain, and he prayed for rain. In response to Adam's prayer, Hashem

brought forth rain and the vegetation sprang to life.[6]

Why did Hashem wait for Adam's prayers? Why did Hashem not create humanity in a world that was already fully developed? The message of our Sages is that Hashem wanted to help humanity gain an appreciation of Hashem's kindness, benevolence, and our dependence upon Him. In order to accomplish this, Hashem granted rain in response to Adam's request. Adam was required to first ask – to recognize his dependence upon Hashem. Only then did Hashem respond with the rain that Adam had realized he needed to exist.

These comments provide a moving insight into the purpose of prayer. When we turn to Hashem to make our requests, we recognize our dependence. We cannot know whether we will be answered, or even what form an answer might take. But we submit to Hashem and acknowledge His central role in providing all that we have. We are forced – if we pray with sincerity – to recognize that His gracious kindness is not an entitlement. We are required to – at least for a few moments – see the universe as it really exists and not through the lens of our innate self-centeredness.

There is another astounding comment of our Sages on this week's parasha that further develops their remarkable perspective on human nature and the fundamental definition of human perfection.

And the heavens and earth were completed and all of their components. (Beresheit 2:1)

This passage describes the moment at the advent of the first Shabbat. The passage is the first verse in a set of passages we recite each Friday night before reciting the Shabbat kiddush. Our Sages comment that when a person recites this set of passages, one becomes Hashem's partner in the work of creation.[7] How does the recitation of a few passages from the Torah make a person Hashem's partner?

First, let us consider the content of the passages. Essentially, the passages acknowledge that Hashem created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. This seventh day, He blessed and sanctified the Shabbat. In reciting these passages, we acknowledge Hashem as creator. We affirm the sanctity of the Shabbat as a memorial to creation.

If through making this acknowledgment we become Hashem's partners in creation, then we can deduce an amazing insight into the purpose of creation. Of course, we cannot fully understand Hashem's motives for creation. His motives are an expression of His unfathomable divine nature. But we can derive from the comments of our Sages some limited insight into their understanding of the purpose of creation. If our acknowledgement of creation elevates us into a partnership with the Creator, apparently an element of Hashem's design was to create a universe in which human beings would perceive Him. Our Sages are telling us that when we recognize Hashem as the Creator and center of all existence, we realize an element of the divine plan in creation.

This outlook once again indicates the fundamental importance of prayer. Just as when we recite this paragraph, so too in prayer we acknowledge our dependant relationship upon Hashem and recognize His centrality in our universe. ■

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[1] Midrash Rabbah, Sefer Beresheit 1:1.

[2] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 1:26.

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

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Tefillah, Introduction.

[5] Mesechet Avodah Zarah 8a.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 2:5.

[7] Mesechet Shabbat 119b.

Letters



Letters

from our

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Letters

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Jews for Jesus

by Joshua Plank

Introduction

While Christianity is of course antithetical to Judaism, Christians practicing among themselves do not inherently disturb Jews in their Judaic practice. However, Jews for Jesus crosses the line and Christian support of those missionaries out to convert Jews is unacceptable. Therefore, I applaud Joshua Plank's response to those churches and pastors, asking their disengagement from Jews for Jesus. I reprint his fine arguments, from which all our readers will benefit. I ask all Rabbis to join me in signing this letter as we present it to Christian supporters of Jews for Jesus.

—Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Author's Note: Christianity is a false and idolatrous religion which is prohibited to both Jew and non-Jew alike. Christian groups like "Jews for Jesus" commit intolerable acts by specifically and aggressively attempting to seduce Jews. "Jews for Jesus" regularly visit Christian churches to raise money for their missionary activities. I encourage the following letter to be distributed to churches that support "Jews for Jesus". I only ask that the text not be altered except to plug in the name of the church, the name of the missionary, and the date in the appropriate locations. I also encourage you to add your own name as a cosigner if you wish.

To the pastor(s) and members of [church name]:

It has come to my attention that you have invited [missionary name] of "Jews for Jesus", to speak at your church on [date]. I ask you to reconsider.

As you know, the Jews are a unique people. God selected them from all the peoples and gave them His Torah.

The Jews were slaves in Egypt. Then God sent His prophet, Moses, of whom it is written, "Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses" (Deut. 34:10). He led them to Mount Sinai, where the entire nation witnessed events unlike any others in history. As it is written,

"Gather the people to Me and I shall let them hear My words, so that they shall learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and they shall teach their children." (Deut. 4:10)

"These words the Lord spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain, from amidst flames, cloud, and thick darkness, a great voice never to be repeated, and He wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me." (Deut. 5:19)

"For ask now regarding the days past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and from one end of heaven to the other: Has there ever been anything like this great thing, or has anything like it been heard? Has a people ever heard the voice of God speaking from amidst fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has God ever miraculously come to take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, with trials, with signs, and with wonders, and with war, and with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great awesome deeds, as all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt in front of your eyes?" (Deut. 4:32-34)

The above verses are clear: No other nation has ever experienced such a national revelation. No other religion can even make such a claim. God designed the events of Sinai to serve as proof of the God-given nature of Judaism. As He said to Moses, "Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak to you, so that they may believe in you forever." (Exod. 19:9) The entire nation, approximately 2.5 million people, were his witnesses and have passed down this history to their children to this very day. Christianity also accepts this proof and the validity of the Jewish scriptures.

God says some very specific things about His Torah. For example,

The Torah is permanent.

"The things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever, to keep all the words of this Torah." (Deut. 29:28)

"It shall be an everlasting statute, for all your generations" (Lev. 23:31, Num. 15:15, etc.)

The Torah is not to be altered.

"All this word that I command you, you shall keep and do. You shall not add to it and you shall not subtract from it." (Deut. 13:1)

This same Torah warns the Jews against missionaries. See Deuteronomy 13:7-12,

"If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or your beloved wife, or your friend who is like your own soul will entice you secretly, saying: 'Let us go and serve other

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Letters

gods,' which you have not known, you, nor your fathers; of the gods of the peoples that are round about you, near to you, or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; you shall not consent to him, nor listen to him; neither shall your eye pity him, neither shall you spare him, neither shall you conceal him; but you shall surely kill him. Your hand shall be first upon him to kill him, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And you shall pelt him with stones and he shall die; because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. And all Israel shall hear and fear, and shall not again do such an evil thing in your midst."

What does this have to do with Christianity?

Does Christianity worship the God who brought the Jews out of Egypt or "other gods" which they have not known? To answer these questions, we must examine what the bible says about the God of the Jews.

The God of the Jews is the Creator, the First Cause of all that exists. See Genesis 1:1

God is One.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4)

God is not like one flock of geese that contains many individuals, nor like one apple that can be divided into many parts. He is a unique One that cannot be divided and is not composed of any parts. As the prophet says, "'To whom will you liken Me? To what am I equal?' says the Holy One." (Isaiah 40:25)

God is not physical in any way.

If God were physical then He would resemble other physical things (see Isaiah 40:25, above). The Torah teaches this in Deuteronomy 4:15, "But you shall greatly beware for your souls, for you did not see any image on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb, from amidst the fire."

It has always been understood by the sages of Israel that the scriptures which speak of God in physical terms are only speaking metaphorically.

God is not a man.

"God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent" (Num. 23:19)

God does not change.

"For I am the Lord, I do not change" (Malachi 3:6)

Christianity is a new and different religion. Christians believe in a trinity, part of which became a man and died. This belief contradicts all that the scriptures teach concerning God. If one accepts the Hebrew bible, then one must agree that Christianity opposes the Jewish religion.

It is a great error to worship a false god, and also to entice Jews to do likewise. Such actions place one firmly in the camp of the enemies of Israel and of God. Some seek the physical destruction of the Jews, but those who wish to entice the Jews to idolatry commit an even greater sin, for they seek the destruction of their souls. I urge you to reconsider your actions, to retract your invitation to missionaries and withdraw your support from "Jews for Jesus".

Sincerely,

Joshua Plank
Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

(The Sabbath continued from page 1)

reasons are given for this commandment, because of two different objects. In the Decalogue in Exodus, the following reason is given for distinguishing the Sabbath: "For in six days," etc. But in Deuteronomy (chap. v. 15) the reason is given: "And thou shalt remember that thou hast been a slave in the land of Egypt, etc., therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee," etc. This difference can easily be explained. In the former, the cause of the honour and distinction of the day is given; comp. "Therefore the Lord hath blessed the day of the Sabbath and sanctified it" (Exod. xx. 10), and the cause for this is, "For in six days," etc. But the fact that God has given us the law of the Sabbath and commanded us to keep it, is the consequence of our having been slaves; for then our work did not depend on our will, nor could we choose the time for it; and we could not rest. Thus, God commanded us to abstain from work on the Sabbath, and to rest, for two purposes; namely, (1) That we might confirm the true theory, that of the Creation, which at once and clearly leads to the theory of the existence of God. (2) That we might remember how kind God has been in freeing us from the burden of the Egyptians.-- The Sabbath is therefore a double blessing: it gives us correct notions, and also promotes the well-being of our bodies. ■

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Maimonides – one of the most brilliant and honest thinkers of all time – explains that no rational proof exists for Creation or for the opposing view, the eternity of the universe. Thus, those seeking to arrive at some conclusion based on reason alone will "spend their days in research" never arriving at a conclusion. But we possess another means through which Creation is proved: Revelation.

Revelation at Sinai proved to the nation of 2.5 million people that the audible source of Moses' laws and the sound of the shofar blast upon Mt. Sinai were not of this Earth. For nothing intelligent and created can exist in fire – which is from where the intelligent voice on Sinai emanated...nothing but the Creator who governs all laws and is unaffected by His creations, by fire.

It is impossible that Moses, or anyone, could have fabricated a story like Revelation and successfully convinced any people to abandon their history and replace it with a fabrication.

Creation is remarkable. We live after the fact, rarely "recalling", as we are dominated by our emotions pushing us to conquer, amass wealth, travel, have families and entertain ourselves...all acts that direct our attention forward, not back towards Creation. Where we are "going", what we are "becoming": these attitudes and values inhibit our reflection on "what God did" so long ago.

And did God truly "will" the universe into existence, or is it as Aristotle opines, that the universe is to God, as a shadow is to man...an accidental, unwilled result? Maimonides teaches the following (Guide, book ii, 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."

The fact the world possesses a singular account of the Jewish nation at that time is proof that Revelation took place. This is how we prove all historical claims: intelligible events witnessed by masses.

However, much of the Torah was not yet written at Sinai, since those events had not yet occurred. Additionally, many events like Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac were not witnessed by others, so how may we prove these to be truths?

Moses' face shined with light – a miracle – subsequent to his descent from Sinai with the Torah (Exod. 34:29). God would not have endorsed Moses via such a miracle, had Moses corrupted the Torah's text with his own ideas. This miracle of light was also witnessed by the nation, and not fabricated. Through this miracle, we learn that all that Moses transmitted and wrote in God's name, was true. The first matter Moses wrote of was Creation. It is through prophecy that we literally "know" that Creation is true, as God taught this to Moses (prophecy) as He taught all of the Torah.

Reason alone cannot conclude an explanation for the existence of the universe. But we do see more and more evidence for Creation, like the expansion of the universe, indicating an earlier

point in time where all matter was centrally located and a gargantuan force caused the current speed of expansion.

Einstein said, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible." He meant that for an existence – man – to possess the faculty of understanding the universe, is astonishing and incomprehensible. For nothing demands that any creature be able to reflect back on Creation and realize a Divine Mind at work. But, man does have this capacity. This is God's will. This is God's gift. Man did not have to exist. God – in His kindness – allowed a creature to exist that can reflect with intelligence and perceive truths, starting with the existence of the Creator. God desired that a creature exist that would enjoy studying wisdom. God made the universe in a manner that does not hide His handiwork, but overwhelmingly testifies to His existence.

"My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind." Einstein describes himself as humbled when pondering God with his frail mind. He expresses appreciation or "admiration" for this ability.

God desired a creature to enjoy the greatest existence, and that translates into human discovery. Nothing fills our hearts with joy more than that youthful act of understanding.

And as the greatest life is only realized through engaging our minds as God deemed so, the Sabbath becomes the most primary of all commandments. Sabbath is the religious enforcement of a lifestyle that man will enjoy the most. Some few men like Abraham, King David, Aristotle, Newton and Einstein, on their own, recognized the pursuit of wisdom as the greatest enjoyment. But Torah is necessary to guide all mankind. A religious path must be set and enforced so the world benefits...not merely the few. And something vital is worth repeating. Sabbath cannot be celebrated once a year.

God's very act of "resting" teaches us that this inactive state is of great importance. It is this idleness that is the objective of Creation. The universe does not exist for itself, but for the onlooker to observe and realize God's fantastic abilities. The universe is a museum of God's greatness. God's rest is to be mimicked by man as He commanded. God desired that His creations be observed and studied and that man continues to unravel new truths at every turn. This will imbue man with great pleasure. Restricting physical activity once a week, we

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are thereby enabled to partake in wisdom and study. We are able to take another step towards understanding God. We are encouraged to attain greater happiness and fulfillment.

Our freedom to make choices – ironically God's gift to us – fools us into thinking we know better than God. The reason Sabbath violation is met with death, is because one has no purpose living, if he does not live as the Creator determined. Our objective as created, intelligent beings, is to engage that intelligence. If we do not use our intelligence, and instead select a life that is not in pursuit of discovery, we forfeit our right to life. Therefore, Torah punishes the Sabbath violator with death.

Sabbath is a weekly call to all mankind to reengage the pursuit of wisdom by studying Creation. God included this lesson with His concluding "act" of rest in Creation, as this is the objective of Creation. This explains why God not only "concluded" (va-yachulu) but the Torah then says God "rested" (va-yishbose). If God already concluded His work, His second act of "rest" is redundant...unless we understand rest to mean a positive state: not merely the absence of creativity, but a positive involvement.

This rest, is God's lesson to us that we too are to rest from creativity, and engage in the appreciation of the creation, and the Creator. ■

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Plainview, New York—June 26-28, 2009

Noahide Conference

by Doug Taylor



Josh Plank, Doug Taylor, Kal Taylor, Jessie Fischbein

On June 26, Noahides and Jews gathered together at Congregation Rinat Yisrael in Plainview, New York for the first-ever Plainview Noahide Conference. The conference included Jews and Noahides joining together for Shabbat services and a weekend of Torah study, prayer, friendship, and hospitality.

Rabbi Reuven Mann – the rabbi of Congregation Rinat Yisrael, a well-known Torah scholar and a long-time supporter of Noahides – conceived the idea of the conference and spearheaded its development.

“We are very pleased to welcome all of our Noahide friends who have come to spend Shabbat with us and enjoy a weekend of Torah study, prayer, friendship and hospitality,” wrote Rabbi Mann in his welcome to the Noahide attendees. “As Jews, we identify with our forefather, Avraham, who was called the Ivri. The Rabbis define this term to mean ‘apart from’ explaining that all of the world is on one side and Avraham is on the other side. Avraham related to Hashem in a manner which was completely different from the rest of mankind.

“The Torah demands that we resist the pull of our ordinary religious impulses which lead us down the path of idolatry. Instead, we must use our minds in a search for the God of reality, the creator of heaven and earth. The objective is to put aside any emotional agenda and serve Hashem according to the way He has outlined for us in His Torah. This sets us apart from other people who reject Torah and seek to replace it with an alternative religion that conforms to their emotional desires but is not faithful to the divine word. We therefore feel a great kinship with all people, Jews and non-Jews, who embrace Hashem and acknowledge the authority of Torah according to the Written and Oral Laws.

“We have great admiration for Noahides who have the wisdom and courage to renounce man-made religion and, like Avraham, embark on a path which ‘sets them apart’ from friends and family,” continued Rabbi Mann. “We feel great affection for our Noahide friends for we share the most precious things: recognition of Hashem, belief in His Torah, and commitment to achieving its highest goals through study, good deeds, and ongoing self improvement.”

Noahides, as they are often called, are non-Jewish people who have accepted the Torah path of life and strive to keep the Torah’s seven Noahide laws. Although Noahides exist in many areas of the world, their communities are often small, and those who have the option often seek learning and fellowship opportunities in local Jewish communities.

“After leaving their former religious systems to follow truth, Noahides often feel isolated, both geographically and socially,” said Josh Plank, who flew from Indiana to attend the conference. “It is truly a privilege to learn and pray with like-minded others and to be so warmly welcomed by the Jewish community.”

The conference began with a welcome by Rabbi Mann on Friday afternoon, followed by an interactive learning session with Matthew Schneeweiss, who divides his time between yeshiva learning in Far Rockaway, New York, and his home near Seattle, Washington. Titled “How to be a Tzadik (a righteous person): by just Eating”, Mr. Schneeweiss’ presentation focused on Proverbs 13:25, which reads, “A righteous person eats to satisfy his soul, but the stomach of the wicked will lack.” (Artscroll translation) Citing sources from Psalms, the Radak and the Rambam, Mr. Schneeweiss showed how the verse guides us to a full understanding of what it means to eat properly. Eating is not just to satisfy one’s bodily needs or to provide good health. The true tzadik conducts all of his bodily activities – eating, sleeping, and the like – so that he can maintain strong health in order to be able to be involved in the service of Hashem.

All of the Noahide attendees then joined their host families for Shabbat dinner.

Morning services on Shabbat included a presentation by Rabbi Mann on kingship. Rabbi Mann discussed the laws pertaining to who can be king, and the discussion branched to how a person should deal with a situation where they know confidential information that would affect whether someone is qualified to be kinGod. The discussion included the important distinction as to whether this information arose before the person was declared to be king or after. The attendees also discussed differences between that situation and the situation where someone who is divorced wishes to marry a Kohen and (a) the fact of the divorce is kept secret by the divorcee, or (b) the Kohen withholds the fact that he is a Kohen so that the divorcee does not know.

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Noahides

The conference continued on Shabbat with a presentation by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim, the founder of "www.mesora.org and publisher of The JewishTimes. Rabbi Ben-Chaim spoke about religious equality between Noahides and Jews. He pointed out that Sabbath observance and certain aspects of Torah study were prohibited to Noahides only to allow the Jew to remain unobscured as the exclusive authority on Torah. The Noahides lack of cessation from labor is their way of endorsing the path set forth for them by God.

Later that afternoon, attendees joined for a presentation on prayer by Jessie Fischbein, author of the noted book on prayer, *Infertility In The Bible; How The Matriarchs Changed Their Fate; How You Can Too*. Mrs. Fischbein began by asking what the point of prayer is, if Hashem already knows what we're going to say. Further, how can Hashem change His mind as a result of our prayer, because didn't He take anything we might have to say into consideration before we said the prayer? Ms. Fischbein answered these questions by explaining that when we stand before the Creator and speak, it changes us. Through prayer, we recognize the Creator, we admit that we don't have control over the outcome of our situation, we prioritize, we make a logical argument to the Creator (as, she pointed out, Moses did), and as a result we realize how our wants and needs fit objectively into Hashem's plan for the world. Because this process moves us to a higher level, this can change how Hashem relates to us.

Shabbat concluded with a presentation by long-time Noahides Doug and Kal Taylor, who talked about what they've gained in their 20-year search for truth, community, and the true service of Hashem. Doug Taylor spoke about three key principles he has learned over his many years of study: (1) Ask questions, (2) Wisdom is the ability to see, and act on the basis of, consequences, and (3) Differentiation between facts and interpretations. He then walked the audience through a day in the life of a Noahide, showing how Torah affects his everyday activities both at home and in his work life. Kal Taylor shared her introduction years ago to the ideas of Torah and how her teacher Rabbi Morton Moskowitz had challenged her, "I can prove to you that the Torah life is the best life there is." After months of classes, she realized that he had done exactly that. Over the years, she used the ideas of Torah in raising and home-schooling her and Doug's two (now teen-age) sons as a basis for teaching them clear thinking and character development.

The evening continued with a showing of the movie "The Disputation," a dramatic re-enactment of the famous disputation of Barcelona between the Jewish rabbinic scholar Nachmanides and a Dominican Friar named Pablo Christiani, a convert from Judaism to Christianity. While Nachmanides clearly won the debate, it still created difficulty for the Jews, and Nachmanides was forced to go into exile. Discussion about the movie lasted well into the night.

Rabbi Pinny Rosenthal kicked off the Sunday portion of the conference with a fascinating presentation on the "evil eye." Using clear reasoning and examples from current day life, Rabbi Rosenthal showed that the evil eye is the powerful force of envy, and that one must never underestimate its power. Envy can bring real difficulty into our lives, and we must be careful in sharing information in order to avoid arousing envy in others. In addition, we need to ask ourselves why we need to share certain information with others at all. This is an important exercise in both self-awareness and self-control that can help us to live appropriately and humbly, and thereby avoid the envy of others.

The conference concluded Sunday with a presentation by Rabbi Mann on sacrifices. He expounded on the Rambam, who holds that people find it hard to accept that their sins can be forgiven. The purpose of the sacrifice is to provide people with a physical act to do to attain atonement, because without it they find it hard to accept the idea of forgiveness. Yet it's true. If we do repentance, then we are forgiven. And even though sacrifices are prohibited at this time because the Temple is not standing, a person should realize that he is forgiven completely through repentance.

"I self studied for five years but never met a Jew or a Noahide face to face in all that time," said Noahide attendee Francesca Donaldo. "I feel like the conference was an entire 360 degree package of learning, hospitality, and a model that took my independent studies to another level. It was the connection of the community, the classes, the food, shared prayer, the morning and late night talks, the laughter, seeing how people treat one another and how they live the Torah life in reality."

"It's hard to convey just how rich a time like this can be," noted Doug Taylor, a conference attendee and speaker. "The hospitality of Rabbi Mann, his family, and the Jewish community is something you have to experience to appreciate. These people are beyond wonderful. We are so incredibly fortunate to know them." ■

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