

**The notion of a “superior Jewish soul”:  
rejected by the Rabbis in this week’s “Patriarchs”.**

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## Weekly Parsha

Chayeh  
**Sarah**

RABBI BERNIE FOX

**Avraham's Purchase of a  
Burial Site and the  
People's Acceptance of  
Him as Prince of Hashem**

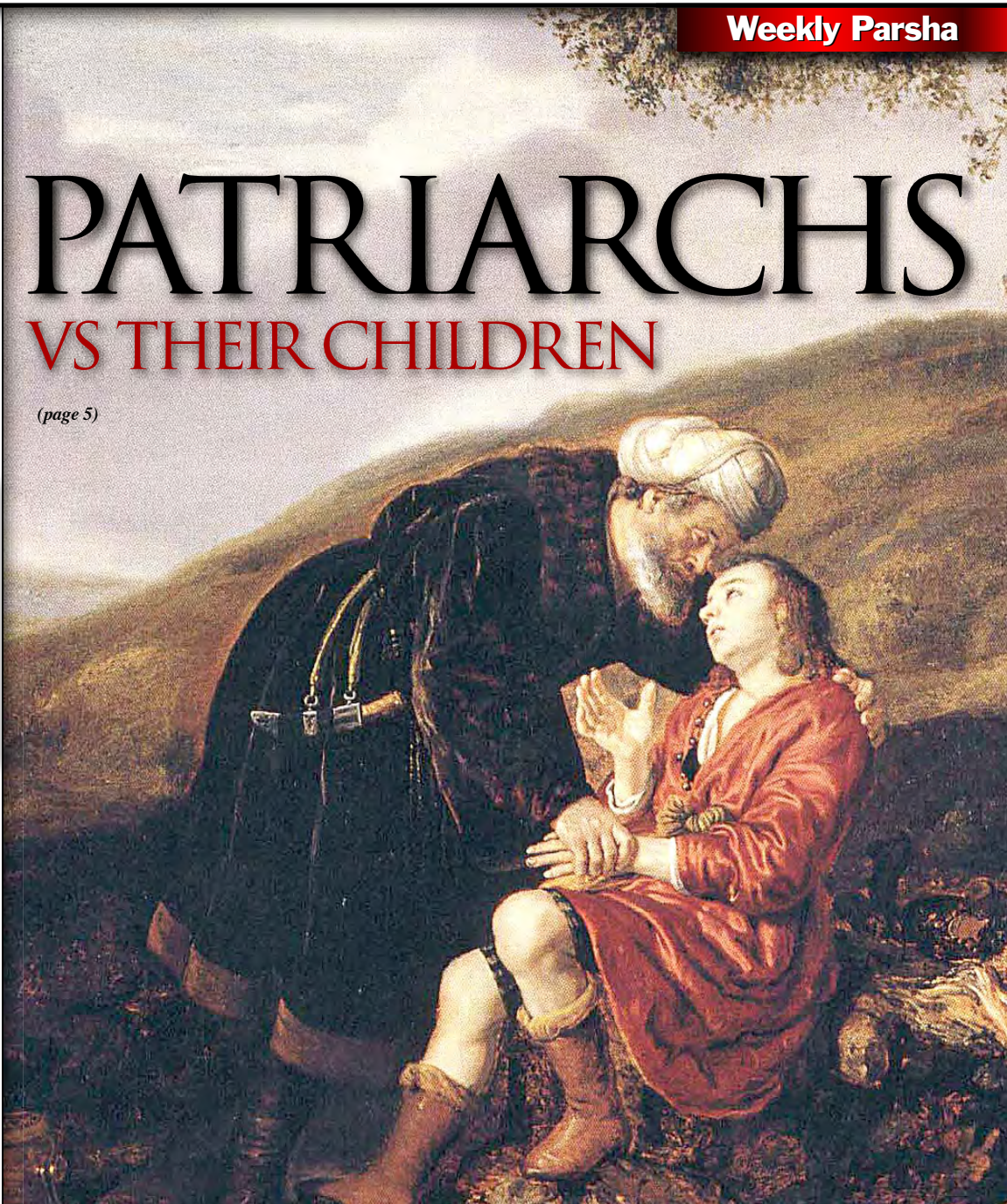
*"Listen to us, Master. A Prince  
of the L-rd you are among us. In  
the best of our burial places, bury*

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## Weekly Parsha

# PATRIARCHS VS THEIR CHILDREN

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(Chayah Sarah cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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*your dead. No man from among us will prevent you from burying your dead.*" (Beresheit 23:6)

The opening passages of Parshat Chayah Sarah describe Avraham's successful efforts to purchase a burial place for his wife, Sarah, in the Land of Israel. Nachmanides is troubled by the inclusion of a detailed description of this episode in the Chumash. Hashem constructed the Chumash very carefully. Every word, indeed every letter, must teach a lesson. Why is an entire chapter devoted to these events?

Nachmanides offers a number of responses to this question. One of his explanations is that this chapter illustrates the fulfillment of one of Hashem's promises to Avraham. In Avraham's first prophecy, Hashem promised him that, although he would be traveling to a new land, he would achieve fame and earn the respect of the inhabitants. The inhabitants would regard his presence as a blessing.[1]

However, this explanation does not seem compelling. It seems that Avraham's success in earning the admiration of the people of the Land was already demonstrated by the Torah. In the previous parasha, the Torah describes an encounter between Avraham and Avimelech – King of the Gerar. Avimelech observed Avraham's success. He witnessed Avraham's defeat of mighty armies. He was impressed that in her advanced years, Sarah had birth Yitzchak. He regarded these events and other incidents in Avraham's life as miracles. He had himself received a vision from Hashem confirming His special providential relationship with Avraham. In response to these observations and his appreciation of Avraham's special relationship with Hashem, Avimelech invited Avraham to enter into a treaty of friendship. Avimelech was a mighty King. His determined effort to secure Avraham's friendship and to forge an alliance, clearly demonstrates the fulfillment of Hashem's promise to Avraham that he will achieve fame and secure the admiration of the people of the Land. In fact, Avraham's encounter with Avimelech is even more impressive than his successful negotiations in this parasha. Our parasha demonstrates that he had earned the admiration of the common people. They spoke to him with respect and they agreed to provide him with a burial plot for Sarah. However, the encounter with Avimelech demonstrates that even powerful rulers were impressed with



Avraham's providential relationship with Hashem to the extent that they sought his friendship and allegiance.

In order to understand Nachmanides' comments, it is important to more closely explore the events of our parasha and Nachmanides' perspective on these events. His analysis begins with a careful examination of Avraham's initial request of the people. Avraham needed to bury Sarah. Why did he need the assistance of the Land's inhabitants in order to bury his wife? Nachmanides explains that the custom of the Land was for each family to develop a family burial plot. These ancestral plots were reserved for families that were the original settlers of the area. Foreigners who resettled in the Land were not generally permitted to develop family plots. Instead, the community set aside an area for the burial of all foreigners and their families. This custom had

the effect of distinguishing the native families of the area from newcomers with no historical roots in the community. Avraham asked the people to allow him to develop a family plot. In other words, he asked the people to acknowledge his right to live in the Land and to be its citizen.

The above passage relates the people's response. There are three elements to this response. The people agree to Avraham's request. They tell

Avraham that he can have any land he chooses – apparently without payment. The people refer to Avraham and as Prince of Hashem. In other words, the people told Avraham that they would abandon tradition. Not only would they allow him to establish a family burial plot, they would provide any land he selected for use as a plot. Why were the people so eager to accommodate Avraham?

Nachmanides explains that the answer is contained in the people's reference to Avraham as Prince of Hashem. This is not a mere accolade. It was a sincere assessment of Avraham's stature and their relationship to him. Avraham had never asserted that he was a Prince or a ruler. Nonetheless, the people had concluded of their accord, that Hashem had appointed him as His prince and empowered him as ruler of the Land and its people. Consequently, they assumed that Avraham had the right to create a family burial plot and had the right to demand any parcel of land he wished.[2]

(continued on next page)

What is the specific message communicated by the Torah's account of Avraham's encounter with Avimelech? Avimelech sought Avraham's allegiance. He acknowledged the providential relationship between Hashem and Avraham. In response to this recognition, he wanted Avraham as an ally and not as an adversary. He recognized that Avraham and his descendants would continue to occupy the Land and Avimelech was determined to ensure that his descendants would not be dispossessed. In short, Avimelech was responding to fear. He was resigned to Avraham and his descendants taking possession of the Land and he responded to this reality. However, in Avraham's encounter with Avimelech, one aspect of blessing that Hashem bestowed upon Avraham was absent. Avimelech accepted Avraham's presence in the Land. However, he did not regard this presence as a blessing.

In contrast, our parasha demonstrates that, in his lifetime, his neighbors regarded Avraham as Prince of the Almighty, and ruler over the Land. Throughout the chapter, the citizens of the city treat Avraham with the respect appropriate for a King and a prophet. They assure him that he may bury Sarah wherever he wishes. In both substance and tenor, their response communicates respect, love, and appreciation. This incident does demonstrate fulfillment of the last aspect of Hashem's blessing. The people of the Land welcomed Avraham's presence and regarding it as a blessing.

### Reliance upon Omens and Signs

*"And the girl, to whom I shall say, 'Tip your jug and I will drink,' and she will say, 'Drink and I will also water your camels,' she is the one you have designated for your servant Yitzchak. And through her I will know that you have done kindness with my master."* (Bereshit 24:13)

Avraham sent his servant, Eliezer, to Aram Naharayim. There, he is to find a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer arrives at Aram Naharayim and prepares to fulfill his mission. He must find a wife who is appropriate for Yitzchak. He devises a test. He will stand by the town's well. The girls of the town will come to draw water for their families. Eliezer will approach each. He will ask each to share some water with him. The girl who offers him water and also offers to water his camels will be destined to be Yitzchak's wife.



The Talmud discusses this incident in Tractate Chullin. The Talmud explains that it is prohibited to act on the basis of omens. An example of following an omen is a person who drops his staff. He considers this to be an ill omen and stays in his house all day.[3] A person also may not establish signs, which will serve as omens. The person predefines a certain "test" as meaningful. The test is then performed. The person acts on the basis of the outcome. The Talmud offers an example of this type of behavior. The example given by the Talmud is the test devised by Eliezer to choose a wife for Yitzchak.[4] Eliezer devised a test. He assumed the outcome to be meaningful. He then acted on the basis of the outcome. Maimonides explains that these behaviors are superstitious. We are commanded to guide our lives by wisdom. Therefore, these behaviors are prohibited.[5]

How is it possible that Eliezer the servant of Avraham violated this prohibition? It is also remarkable that Hashem would help Eliezer in his superstitious behavior!

Rabbaynu Nissin, in his commentary on Tractate Chullin, answers this question. He explains that the Talmud does not intend to accuse Eliezer of acting foolishly. Eliezer's test did not involve superstition. He realized that Yitzchak's wife should embody kindness. He devised a test, which would identify essential behaviors and attitudes. This test was based on wisdom not superstition. What was the Talmud's purpose in using Eliezer's test as an example of supersti-

tious behavior? The Talmud is explaining that in order to violate the prohibition, the person must regard the foolish omen with the certainty that Eliezer demonstrated. Eliezer demonstrated his absolute certainty in the efficacy of his test by acting upon its outcome and selecting Rivkah as a wife for Yitzchak. Similarly, the prohibition of relying on signs is not violated until the person actually acts upon the sign demonstrating reliance upon it. This reliance on signs defines superstitious behavior. The fool treats an arbitrary sign as if it were a scientific indication of reality. The fool acts with the certainty appropriate for a meaningful test – such as the one devised by Eliezer.[6] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 23:19.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 23:4-6.

[3] Mesechet Sanhedrin 65b.

[4] Mesechet Chullin 95b.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:16.

[6] Rabbaynu Nissim ben Reuven (Ran), Chidushai HaRan, Mesechet Chullin 95b.



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# PATRIARCHS VS THEIR CHILDREN

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



*Our acceptance of the yoke of Torah was in a manner, "coerced", as if a mountain was suspended over our heads in threat.*

*Not so the Patriarchs. They arrived at a knowledge and service of God on their own.*

*This is much more precious to God.*

Rashi's commentary on Gen, 24:42. "Rabbi Acha said, 'More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah (commands) of their children, as we find Eliezer's account (describing his encounter with Rebecca) doubled in the Torah, while many of the central commands of the Torah are only given by way of hints.'"

This is a truly perplexing statement, as we are all of the opinion that that which is most central in the Torah are God's words. How then can a servant's words, even a servant of Abraham, be more precious to God? Was not the Torah given for the sake of the commands?

How do we approach such a question?

The first step is to note what is being compared, as the quote of Rabbi Acha is one of comparison. We find that "speech" is compared to "Torah", and "servant" is compared to "Patriarchs' offspring". In both comparisons, what generates our questions is that the latter appears obviously more important: Speech does not outweigh Torah, and servants do not outweigh Israelites, (in the capacity that Israelites must keep the Torah as the world's teachers.)

Rabbi Acha is teaching a central lesson. He intends to draw our attention to God's estimation of personal character. He first teaches, that which the Torah repeats is done so for emphasis of its importance. Based on this rule, Eliezer's words must be more important than the Torah's commands. But how so?

I believe the one difference between the Patriarchs and ourselves, is that they followed God out of an internal realization of God's truth, with no externally imposed system. Even the speech of the Patriarchs is replete with wisdom, and their attachment to God included no coercion. The Midrash says, "At Sinai, God held that mountain over our heads commanding us in the Torah's observance, and if we refused this obligation, He would

drop the mountain on us, and there would be our graves." This Midrash is of course metaphorical. But it teaches that the event of Sinai carried such clear proof of God's existence that His commands were undeniably emanating from the Creator, one Who we would be foolish to ignore. Our acceptance of the yoke of Torah was in a manner, "coerced", as if a mountain was suspended over our heads in threat.

Not so the Patriarchs. They arrived at a knowledge and service of God on their own. This is much more precious to God. The Megilla reads, "They arose and accepted that which they already accepted." This is referring to the Jews' re-acceptance of the Torah out of love, as opposed to their Sinai acceptance out of fear. Again, we are pointed to the concept that adherence has levels. Greater than one who is commanded, is one who arrives at the truth using his mind. True, there is a statement of the Rabbis, "One commanded is greater than one who is not." But this does not mean 'greater' in every way. This latter Rabbinical statement, once elucidated by a Rabbi, means that when one is commanded, he has more to conquer and is greater. He must fight the additional desire to rebel against "obligations". One with no obligations, but who observes Torah, is great. But such a person has not conquered his rebellious instincts. But here we discuss only the sphere of "conquering his instinct". A totally different question than our topic, "adherence to God".

"More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah of their children." This teaches that love supersedes fear. Our ultimate goal in life is not "fear" of God, but rather the "love" of God: the attachment to His knowledge through a true appreciation for the Source of all reality, an attachment to Him. This is love of God. ■

(continued on page 7)

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## Weekly Parsha

# SATAN & ABRAHAM



Talmud Sanhedrin 89b: "And it was after these things, and G-d tested Abraham." (Genesis 22:1 regarding G-d's command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac).

*"Rabbi Yochanan said in Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra's name, 'after these things' refers to 'after the words of Satan'. As it says, 'the lad grew and was weaned.' Upon which Satan said to G-d, 'Master of the world, this old man (Abraham) you graciously gave a child at 100 years of age. At all his feasts, did he not have one turtledove or one pigeon to offer to you? G-d said, 'Has he done this only for his son? If I would say sacrifice your son before me, he would do so. ' Immediately G-d tested Abraham saying take 'na' (please) your son....' Rabbi Simeon ben Abba said 'na' refers only to a pleaded request.' This is allegorical to an earthly king who fought many wars and was victorious through the help of a great warrior. In time, the king was faced with a very strong battle. He pleaded with the warrior, 'stand with me in this battle, so my previous battles won't be disparaged saying there were no previous successes'. So too is the case here, G-d pleaded with Abraham, 'I tested you with many trials, and you were triumphant in them all. Now, stand though this test so they should not say there were no real triumphs in your previous trials.'"*

Was does it mean that G-d pleaded with Abraham? What is the concept being taught that the purpose in Abraham's trial required sacrificing his son? It seems it is only a response to Satan. Who does Satan represent here?

Sometimes, Satan refers to the person himself, i.e., Abraham, his own instincts. But this is not the case here. Abraham was telling G-d something negative about himself. To whom can Satan refer? I believe it is the people of the land, those who seek to mock Abraham.

Upon Abraham "celebrating" his son's physical maturity, this raised suspicion among the people as to Abraham's true level of perfection. The people (Satan) harbored feelings that Abraham was not as great as he made himself out to be. Perhaps they were astounded at his ability to have a child at 100 years of age. The people of the land were jealous of G-d's divine intervention with Abraham. Why did this pose such jealousy? People saw someone as righteous as Abraham, being successful in all of

his trials. His trials were undoubtedly publicized as the allegory teaches, and such perfection in Abraham conveyed to them by contrast, their own lack of perfection. They were jealous and felt animosity towards Abraham.

Why jealousy and animosity? They sought to degrade his perfection, portraying him no better than they are. Belittling Abraham's triumphs over G-d's trials, they can now live with themselves. They no longer feel less than perfect, as Abraham himself is not perfect. They can say, "If Abraham couldn't pass the hardest test, he probably didn't pass the easier ones". The people, referred to here as Satan, harbored the notion that Abraham would not sacrifice Isaac and he could not achieve ultimate perfection. In order to substantiate to the world that man can indeed reach perfection, G-d commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. G-d's will is that His desired lifestyle for man be displayed as achievable, not something so lofty that no man can succeed. To teach the world that man can reach the heights of perfection, G-d instructed Abraham in this most difficult trial. It is recorded as G-d "pleading" with Abraham, to teach us that such a trial is essential for mankind to witness.

We learn that this trial of sacrificing Isaac was not only to actualize Abraham's own perfection, but it was also designed to teach us that G-d's desired perfection for mankind is within reach. When the world sees a man who can perfect himself to such a degree, it removes all rationalizations posed by weaker peoples, which justify their continued laziness and lack of perfection. But now that Abraham passed this test too, the world must admit that G-d's plan for man is achievable - by all mankind. Abraham's ultimate trial teaches such a valuable lesson; that G-d's will is achievable.

Our metaphor means that Abraham - the warrior - made G-d's system successful on many occasions. He followed and taught G-d's monotheism, and perfected his character traits. But people still felt if Abraham doesn't stand the toughest test, he is nothing. They sought justification for their immoral lives. G-d 'pleaded' with His warrior to help Him succeed in this great battle - sacrificing Isaac. G-d could not win the battle Himself, as the only victory (G-d proving His system as perfect and within man's reach) must be through mortal man and the use of his free will. Only by a man - Abraham - displaying such devotion to G-d, will G-d's system emerge victorious, and achievable. ■

(continued on next page)



# ELIEZER

## TESTING REBECCA



Eliezer was sent by his master Abraham to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son. His sworn task was to find a wife from Abraham's family. Eliezer reached Aram Naharayim and stopped at the well, one location where people meet. He prayed to God that He should send him a woman who would not only respond to his request for his own water, but a woman who would initiate hospitality in the form of watering his camels as well, without request.

"And it was that he had even finished speaking (to God) behold Rebecca came out, born to Besualem, the daughter of Milka, wife of Nachor, the brother of Abraham and her with her pitcher on her shoulder". (Gen. 24:15)

Of course Eliezer had no knowledge of her lineage, but the Torah teaches how God prepares most efficiently for the righteous. The prayer was not even complete, yet the response was already at hand.

What happens next catches one's eye, "...she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended. And the servant (Eliezer) ran to greet her and said, 'let me sip please, a little water from your pitcher. And she said, 'drink my master', and she rushed and took down the pitcher from her shoulder and gave him to drink. And when he finished drinking, she said 'I will also draw for your camels until they finish drinking'. And she rushed and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and she ran yet again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels."

Allow me to focus your attention on a problem, "...she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended. And the servant (Eliezer) ran to greet her..." Pause here for a moment. What strikes you?

What strikes me as I read this is one question, "Why the delay?" There must have been at least ten minutes which passed as "she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended." It is clear that time passed; yet Eliezer did not budge. His latter

sentiment not to delay bringing Rebecca back to Isaac teaches that he was not wasting time. So if he saw her appear as he finished his prayer, why did he not approach her at that very moment? Why did he wait until "she went down to the well, she filled her pitcher, and then ascended?"

Let us better formulate the question: What was there to gain by waiting until Rebecca filled her pitcher? We can refine this question further, "In searching for a woman with the best qualities, what did Eliezer feel he would learn by waiting for Rebecca to fill her pitcher?" The answer is now apparent. Eliezer desired to learn how far Rebecca would go in her kindness. As Eliezer waits until Rebecca draws her own water, her offer is all the more gracious than if she would draw the water knowingly for another. When one works for herself, there is a connection with the object of their labor. To part with water drawn for herself, Rebecca would display a higher level of kindness. For this reason, Eliezer waited until she drew the water - for herself - and only then, asked for it. He intended to see if she would part with water she drew for herself. We see that not only did Eliezer respond to Abraham's request, but he thought into the best manner of responding to his master. Ironically, Eliezer's own perfection mirrors Rebecca's, as they both responded to requests as best they could. Simply responding to a request in kind is not reflective of a high caliber individual. The righteous are perfected. They see a need, and think into the best way to respond. This may very well explain why Eliezer formulated his approach to Rebecca as he did. He too partook of the very kindness he sought in a mate for Isaac.

Notice, Eliezer's request was "let me sip please, a little water from your pitcher". He asked for a little, and received much. Not only did Rebecca give of her own, but she gave more than requested of her, and she gave all he needed, even though it meant watering all his camels, and did so with speed, again, to accommodate as best she could. ■



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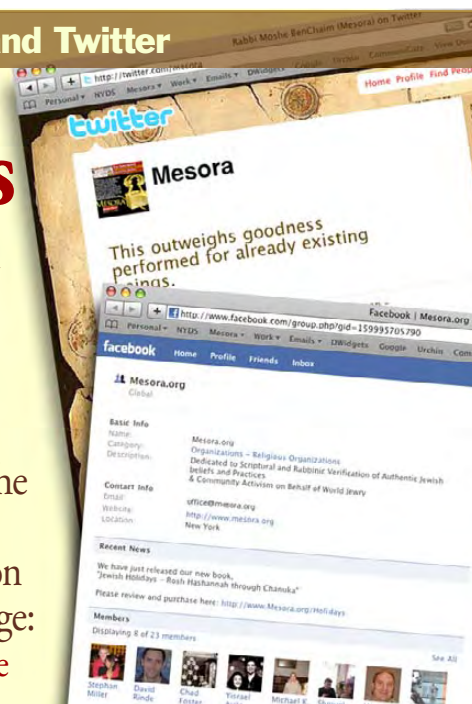
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