

"Against your will you are born, against your will you live, against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give a judgement and accounting before God". (Pirkei Avos, 4:22)



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Weekly Parsha

Vayeche

RABBI BERNIE FOX

Yaakov Bows to Yosef

And he said, "Swear to me."
And he swore to him. And Yisrael
bowed towards the head of the
bed. (Beresheit 47:31)

Yaakov realizes that he is
approaching death. He summons
his son, Yosef, and asks him to

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

All Torah lessons are meant to avert us
from misconception towards truth, or
teach new principles in areas yet
undiscovered by our minds.

Regarding the first type, we have
tendencies towards stealing and
physical aggression, so we are taught
not to give in. We are tempted to
satisfy our instincts and lusts, so we
are taught to control them. Possess-
ing insecurities and
desiring protection and
success, we are taught not to
cater to our fantasies by
creating or worshipping idols,
or believing in "powers"
other than God, such as
witchcraft, horoscopes,
amulets and astrology, which
we imagine can improve our
futures. With this in mind, we
wonder: from what exactly
did Rav Elazar Hakfar
intend to avert us with
his statement below?
(Ethics of the Fathers,
4:22)

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Reality

No Escape

God's Plan for Man



(Vayeche cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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assure him that he will return him to the Land of Israel for burial. Yosef agrees. Yaakov asks Yosef to vow that he will fulfill this request and Yosef complies. Yaakov then bows. There are various explanations of Yaakov's bowing. Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra outlines the basic interpretations. One possible interpretation is that Yaakov bowed to Hashem. The other possible interpretation is that Yaakov bowed to his son, Yosef.[1]

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno adopts the explanation that Yaakov bowed to Hashem. He elaborates on the reason for Yaakov's action. The bow was an act of giving thanks to Hashem. Yaakov realized Yosef's influence would be required for the removal of his body from Egypt for burial in the Land of Israel. Yosef had achieved authority and influence to fulfill his father's wish through Hashem's providence. Through bowing to Hashem, Yaakov expressed his appreciation for His guidance over Yosef's life. This was appropriate. Yaakov was now benefiting from this providence.[2]

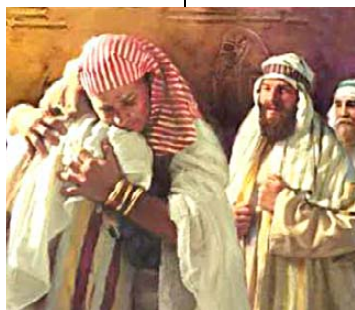
The second interpretation of Yaakov's bow is more difficult to understand. Why would Yaakov bow to his son Yosef? He was asking Yosef to perform a kindness. However, this was an appropriate request for a father to make of his son. In fact, respect for his father obligated Yosef to comply with his father's wishes. Why would Yaakov thank Yosef for performing his duty as his son?

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra answers this question through reinterpreting the intention of Yaakov's bow. He explains that Yaakov was not thanking his son. Instead, he was demonstrating respect. Yosef was the ruler of Egypt. Yaakov felt obligated to demonstrate his respect for Yosef's position of authority.[3]

Gershonides offers another explanation for Yaakov bowing to Yosef. He maintains that Yaakov was thanking Yosef. Why would Yaakov thank Yosef for performing his duty towards his father? Gershonides posits that there is a basic ethical lesson taught through Yaakov's action. Generally, we feel that we need not show appreciation to those who assist or benefit us in the course of executing their own responsibilities. We reason that the person has not acted on our behalves. He or she is simply fulfilling a duty. Gershonides explains that Yaakov's behavior demonstrates that our

reasoning is incorrect. We are obligated to appreciate any kindness done for us. Even if the person performing the kindness is compelled to act on our behalf, we are not relieved of the obligation to express our appreciation. Therefore, Yaakov was ethically bound to demonstrate his appreciation to Yosef. True, Yosef was only agreeing to fulfill an obligation of a son to his father, nonetheless, the kindness required acknowledgement.[4]

The lesson that Gershonides identifies as expressed by Yaakov's behavior is fundamental to our relationship with Hashem. The kindness that Hashem performs on our behalves is an expression of His nature. We cannot ascribe to Him any of the human motives that typically earn our appreciation and thanks. If we do not accept Yaakov's lesson that every act of kindness – regardless of motivation – requires our acknowledgement, then we will also dismiss our obligation to acknowledge Hashem's kindness.

**Prayer as Self-Judgment**

And Yisrael said to Yosef: I did not judge it possible to see your face. And behold the Lord has shown me your children also. (Beresheit 48:11)

Yosef brings his children to his father, Yaakov. He hopes that Yaakov will bless them. Yaakov tells Yosef that he had given up hope of seeing him again, but to his surprise, they have been reunited and he has also had the opportunity to know Yosef's children. Yaakov expressed himself with an unusual term. He said, "To see your face I did not pelalti." The above translation is based upon the commentary of Rashbam.[5] This translation indicates that Yaakov had not been completely certain that Yosef had been killed, but he had judged that it was unlikely that he would ever see Yosef.

The Hebrew term for the process of prayer is hitpalel. Rav Aryeh Lev Gorden Zt"l in his introduction to the Sidur – the prayer book – explains that this term has two interesting characteristics. First, the conjugation has a special meaning. It denotes an action performed upon oneself. In other words, the act of praying involves performing an act upon oneself. Second, the term hitpalel is a form of the same term used by Yaakov – pelalti. This means that in some way, prayer is similar to the process of judging.

(continued on next page)

Considering these two characteristics of the term hitpalel, Rav Gorden offers a novel insight into the nature of prayer. In order to understand his interpretation of prayer, we must first consider the process of judging. This will allow us to identify its similarity to prayer.

What is the activity of a judge? A judge is confronted with competing claims. The judge must carefully consider all of the facts. He sorts through the information and seeks the truth. This was Yaakov's intent in our pasuk. He had sorted through all of the information available regarding Yosef's fate. As a result of this analysis, he concluded that it was unlikely that Yosef was alive. In short, the process of judging requires the application of the judge's intellect to a confused body of information. The judge's objective is to introduce order to the collection of information and thereby uncover the truth.

Rav Gorden explains that some mistakenly assume that prayer is a spontaneous outpouring. They regard it as an expression of feelings and not as an intellectual activity. Rav Gorden argues that this is a misunderstanding of prayer. He explains that prayer is not spontaneous. It involves an intensive thought process. He observes that normally various concerns compete for our attention. Family, work, personal finances, community issues, and other problems demand our attention. Like the process of judging, prayer requires sorting and ordering of information or all of the issues and concerns that compete for our attention. In prayer, we recognize the many blessings we have received. We petition Hashem for assistance in dealing with our greatest needs. This requires that we sort through our various concerns and prioritize, and that through this process, we reaffirm the importance of our relationship with our Creator.

Consider the central prayer of the prayer service – the Amidah. It begins with praise of Hashem. It then continues with a set of petitions. These are ordered in a fashion that reflects a prioritization of our needs. We end the prayer by thanking Hashem for His many gifts. The Amidah is an excellent example of the process of sorting and organizing our various concerns.

The term, hitpalel, perfectly describes the process of prayer. Prayer is a process of applying the act of judging. This process is applied to our own mental world. In summary, it is a process of judgment performed upon ourselves – our needs and priorities.[6]



The Sin of the Hashmonaim

The scepter will not be removed from Yehudah or the scribe's pen from his descendants until the final tranquility. And to him will nations submit. (Beresheit 49:10)

Yaakov approaches death. He calls his sons to come before him. He shares with them his vision of their future. In this pasuk, Yaakov addresses Yehudah. He tells him that he is destined to be the leader of his people. Shevet Yehudah – the tribe of Yehudah – will provide the rulers of Bnai Yisrael through the “final tranquility”. This phrase is understood to refer to the Messianic age. The Messiah will be a descendent of Yehudah.

Nachmanides explains that the Hashmonaim sinned in assuming kingship. Despite their piety, they were severely punished for this action. The Jerusalem Talmud in Tractate Horiyot contains a dispute regarding their sin. Rabbi Yehudah Anturya explains that the Hashmonaim violated this pasuk, which awards kingship to Shevet Yehudah. Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba disagrees. He maintains that the assumption of kingship violated a different pasuk. This pasuk states: There shall not be to the Kohanim and Leveyim – the entire tribe of

Leyve – a territory or portion within the nation of Israel. The sacrifices of G-d and His inheritance they shall eat. (Devarim 18:1) [7]

Nachmanides explains that these authorities have different perspectives on the sin of the Hashmonaim. The difference of opinion is reflected in the pasuk each chooses to support his position. According to Rabbi Yehudah Anturya, Yaakov's final message to Yehudah included a prohibition against any other tribe assuming the role of kingship. In times of necessity, some other tribe may temporarily adopt a leadership position. However, such leaders are prohibited from claiming the title of king.

Rebbi Chiya Bar Abba did not understand Yaakov's words to include an absolute prohibition applicable even in desperate times. Instead, Yaakov intended to assure Yehudah that the kingship of Israel would not permanently pass to another tribe. At times, there may be kings from other tribes but ultimately, rulership will always return to Shevet Yehudah. However, the Hashmonaim were Kohanim – Priests. Priesthood is a special position of holiness. The Kohanim and Leveyim must always demonstrate appreciation of their sacred role. They may not seek or accept kingship. They must serve as priests and remain totally devoted to the service of Hashem. According to Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba, this is the prohibition that the Hashmonaim violated.[8] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 47:31.

[2] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 47:31.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 47:31.

[4] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag/Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 254.

[5] Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 48:11.

[6] Rav Aryeh Lev Gorden, Siddur Avodus HaLev, Introduction, part 1.

[7] Talmud Yerushalmi, Mesechet Horiyot 3:2.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 39:10.

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(No Escape continued from page 1)

Reality

"Those who are born will die, and the dead will live. The living will be judged, to learn, to teach and to comprehend that He is God, He is the designer, He is the creator, He is the comprehender, He is the judge, He is the witness, He is the plaintiff, and He will judge, blessed is He. For before Him there is no wrong, no forgetting, no favoritism, and no taking of bribes; and know, that everything is [judged] according to an exact accounting. Let not your inclinations trust that the grave is your escape; for against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live, against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give a judgement and accounting before the King, king of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."

"Those who are born will die, and the dead will live."

This teaches that our time here is limited. But also, that if we choose wisely, we can enjoy the afterlife. Rav Elazar Hakfar intends to reject that thought in our minds, that we live forever. Yes, the immortality fantasy is necessary. To function as God wishes, to work, build homes, start families, and feel happy...man must have a sense that his labors are not in vain. He must feel he will live for a number of decades. However, many people do not accept that they will ultimately die. This world is all they know. Furthermore, our minds are bribed by the secular and even religious masses following lives of fame, wealth and lusts. "How can they be wrong?" we think. If we live the lie, we forfeit our lives. We lose that one chance to obtain the real good, the eternal life. Rav Elazar Hakfar teaches us to be real. Life does come to an end...on Earth that is.

What is the first step on the path of reality? It is this...

"The living will be judged, to learn, to teach and to comprehend that He is God, He is the designer, He is the creator, He is the comprehender, He is the judge, He is the witness, He is the plaintiff, and He will judge, blessed is He."

Abandoning a life of denial and understanding reality, begins with grasping the "Cause" of reality. That being our conviction in God's existence: 1) His role in the universe and 2) His role in our lives.

All that exists is due to the will of a Single Being; He alone is the only being not requiring creation. He created and formed all things. As

such, as He created all people, we are taught that He is the comprehender: He knows all of our speech, actions and thoughts. Therefore, He alone can judge us, bear witness for or against us for our actions, and He will pronounce our sentence when we answer to Him once we die.

But as all is in His hands, how are we to know we will receive a fair trial? Therefore know this...

"For before Him there is no wrong, no forgetting, no favoritism, and no taking of bribes; and know, that everything is [judged] according to an exact accounting."

All wrong and error is due to ignorance, and ignorance is only possible for a human. Thus, God is not ignorant of anything. He also does not possess the human flaw of forgetfulness. All of the good and evil we perform is met with His reward or punishment. Also, God does not favor a great person: if he sinned, he too pays the price just like a lesser soul. God takes no bribes, as the Rabbis teach: God does not consider so much good one has performed, so as to dismiss some few evil actions. Each good and evil act is recorded, remembered, measured, and finally, an unavoidable but completely just sentence is delivered to each person.

"Let not your inclinations trust that the grave is your escape; for against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live, against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give a judgement and accounting before the King, king of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."

Finally, Rav Elazar Hakfar teaches us that there is no escape. Just as our existence is compelled without our choice, as is our death...so too are we forced into giving an accounting before God when we pass away.

Rav Elazar Hakfar wishes to close off any possible thought of us denying the full range of our existence, from birth, to death, to accountability before God. Rav Elazar Hakfar desires only the best for each of us, as do all of our great sages. He understood how men and women get caught up with the distractions and fantasies of our Earthly lives, and become enamored and fooled by this temporal existence. We feel it won't end. So he wishes

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(No Escape continued from previous page)

Reality

to make us face and accept the undeniable truth that we all die. But he is not morbid. His intent is that we immediately abandon the foolish pursuits we all follow, and invest our short time here into what could be an eternal and highly enjoyable existence.

We all die. But some think death is an escape from accountability, "Let not your inclinations trust that the grave is your escape". But we don't simply vanish. We all must answer before God.

If we wish the best for ourselves, we must admit that we are created beings, and therefore, we expire. But there is a great good ahead of us...if we act with honesty. The message of "there is no escape" is truly a blessing. It can refocus us on pursuing an existence that does not end with death. We can also avoid punishment if we repent, and discontinue Torah violations.

Two final questions now present themselves:

1) What does Rav Elazar Hakfar mean with his repeated use of "against your will"? What is his subtle message?

2) Furthermore, Rav Elazar Hakfar first says it is against our will to exist, then he says it is against our will to die. This clearly demonstrates how a human contradicts himself. And this, answers the first question...

The Primary Lesson

Rav Elazar Hakfar wisely equates human will, with error. That is why a human changes his mind: his will is not based on a full grasp of reality, but on emotional desires. And when a new emotion hits us, we shift our views, but only to satisfy our desires; not because we are following reality. Of course, before we were created, we had no will, so the meaning of "against our will we are born" means that 'after' we are born, we do not desire our new existence, which includes the yoke of the Torah. Then, the fear of death opposes that initial will, and we change, to desiring life.

With his presentation of human contradiction, Rav Elazar Hakfar teaches that our will is severely flawed...unless we adopt the Torah's view, which is God's will, that never changes. (Malachi, 3:6) His will never changes, since He alone possesses all knowledge, rendering His will absolutely true. No "unseen" consideration exists in God's mind, so nothing new causes His will to become obsolete. God's will is the best for man's existence. He alone knows what will offer us true happiness. Therefore, "Abandon your will and perform God's will, and He will then abandon performing the will of others, and perform your will." (Ethics, 2:4) Although it goes against our desire for complete freedom to act as we wish and cater to our desires, happiness is achieved only when one follows the single path that leads to it. A scenic road that heads leads off a cliff is a far more enjoyable drive, than a rocky, desert road

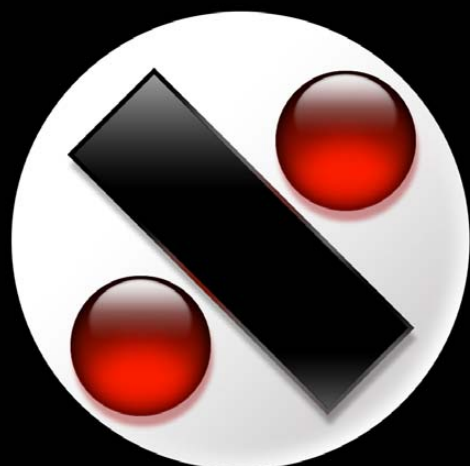
that leads to a town booming with business, great schools and all our needs. Just as attaining the best life here requires us to abandon the scenic route – and the cliff – so too, opting for the destination instead of the path leads to our eternal lives. Accept that you must forgo what 'seems' pleasurable, if you wish to attain what is a truly pleasurable and eternal existence. You will find that what you originally thought was most enjoyable, is not; and what you think is inconvenient and less pleasurable will actually become something you enjoy more than you thought.

Trust the Rabbis who unanimously endorsed Rav Elazar Hakfar. Consider that these brilliant minds know better than you, as they teach God's plan, which must be best for us all.

Rav Elazar Hakfar speaks against our false notions. Ponder his words, they are all true. Don't waste another moment living as if you do not die. Even today can be your last day. Do you wish to be held punishable for violating God's Torah? If we violate Him, He will punish us. But if we restrain our need for emotional gratification; if we abandon sin and invest time in Torah study and mitzvos, we will each find the most fulfilling life here, and we will receive the great reward that awaits us all.

And consider this: there is no escape from God's plan. ■

I thank my friend Jessie for raising this topic



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Perfection



Undignified Society?

Mordy Oberstein

The effects of society upon the mind of a person should not be taken lightly. Each society has fine subtleties that we become so accustomed to: we do not question the notions by which we abide. We are complacently unaware of them. We see this phenomenon even on an intergenerational level. For example, the WWII generation often complains that the younger generation lacks a certain work ethic, to which the younger generation is wholly unaware. It is only through a distant lens that one generation may make such observations of another. My intrigue however does not concern the idiosyncrasies of one generation relative to another. I question whether or not our entire weltanschauung in regards to certain aspects of our lives are completely off kilter due to the latent notions of our society: in particular, the idea of human dignity.

There is a very deep and strong drive in man to achieve the notion of human dignity. Though we often cannot fully conceptualize what we mean by human dignity, it is nonetheless a seemingly very natural striving of man. Describing dignity as a natural part of man is actually a very appropriate way to relate to human dignity. Human dignity means to consider or treat oneself according to our design, as well as our place in the world. As such, human dignity depends very much on our specific nature; hence we have the isolated category of human dignity. This intuitive reference is actually quite on target, as the dignity of an animal would certainly be different, since its role or place in the world is certainly different due to its unique nature.

As such, man upholds a unique posture in reality. Unlike the animal kingdom, he is not the limp subject of the forces of reality; rather he establishes a partnership with the world around him. Man is the great perceiver, God has majestically endowed man with the ability to perceive that which exists outside of himself, via an intellect. Man's activities are much more than monotonous reactions to impulse as seen in the animal kingdom. He has the ability to take control of his life, pause the forces of internal impulse or coercion, and act after diligent analysis. He acts based upon understanding. He moves when he decides to move; he moves where chooses to move, instead of simply reacting to his sublime instinctual impulses. Similarly, the S'forno comments on the Pasuk in Bereishis (1:26) which states that God created man "...in our image," that this refers to man's capacity for understanding. He specifically remarks, "indeed, that he be in a small way like the Heavenly hosts, insofar as they function with knowledge and understanding". The Rav formulates an exact equation between human dignity and the creation of man in the image of God (i.e. as S'forno stated, with action based upon understanding). The Rav states "...to be created in the image of God = to be endowed with human dignity." (Out of the Whirlwind, pg. 109). That is to say, action based upon understanding, without persuasion by impulse, this is the sum of human dignity.

Control and human dignity are concepts that go hand in hand. A person who is not in control of his responses to reality is a person who does not react with reasoning and understanding. The intellectual prowess of man allows him to stop short the rash and domineering instinctual impulse and allows him to regain control of his reactions. The Rav in the Lonely Man of Faith expounds on this point when he says "The Brute's existence is an undignified one because it is a helpless existence.....dignity is unobtainable as long as man has not reclaimed himself from coexistence with nature and has risen from a non-reflective, degradingly helpless instinctive life to an intelligent, planned, and majestic one" (Chapter I).

We see this phenomenon as well in regards to a Navi. The Gemara in Nedarim (38a) requires that a Navi be wealthy on his own. That is the equivalent of saying that a Navi must function based upon his understanding, based upon chachma, reliant on none other and in control of his own destiny. Furthermore, in order to be in a state of Nevuah, his life must be based upon his understanding of reality, not the pragmatism of making an employer happy. The Navi's sole source of activity must be founded upon his understanding of God's world. Direct reliance on another for sustenance often demands that we adhere to their, not our, understanding. It is no surprise now, that the Torah considers nevuah the height of human activity as a life in the image of God, based upon understanding. We see a similar concept by how we

are instructed to treat the needy. The Torah tells us that the highest form of charity is in giving the needy a means of sustaining their own existence. We thereby not only provide for the practical necessities of those less fortunate, but return a dignified life to them as well.

With a basic understanding of human dignity it is now possible to return to the original issue at hand and determine if human dignity is facilitated by our society.

In Torah, we often speak of the removal of the internal forces of coercion from our lives. We seek to limit the forces of the sexual and appetitive drives so that their impulses do not dictate our actions. It is a central theme of Torah to gain freedom from these compelling forces within the personality. But should we apply this idea to external forces, can we make the same claim? Can we make the same claim that we are opposed to the coercive forces which make us act based upon impulse, without understanding and without dignity, but rather out of fear etc.? While we certainly agree and are fervent to be wary of our internal forces that coerce us into action, can we say we have the same sensitivity and awareness of the external forces in society that compel us to act? In fact, I believe if we were to look around at our society and be honest with ourselves, we may find that many more of our actions are the result of compulsion rather than our personal, internal understanding.

The gamut of this is so vast, how often do we question certain etiquettes and other social behaviors? How much of an effect do the values of our society have on us without our noticing? But even beyond the social underpinnings that often go unrecognized, how often in our society are we being told what to do? How often are we being told what to do under the threat of fines and penalties, ticketing, and taxation? If we were to think about our days and ask ourselves how many times we acted to avoid being ticketed, to avoid a fine, to avert being "nickel and dimed" by some bureaucratic nonsense, how often would that be? Is this the sum of human dignity? Is this the result of action based upon our understanding of how the world works? Or is this being put under the gun and reacting off our gut instincts, of reacting out of compulsion and coercion, out of fear?

How much thinking is involved in these activities compared to how much action out of impulse to avoid trouble? Coercion inherently means that we are not acting based on understanding, but being manipulated into a position where certain psychological forces overtake us. When was the last time you were driving and thought about what speed limit makes sense for the conditions you were currently driving in? How many times while driving have you thought about what the speed limit was so as to avoid being pulled over by a cop and avoid a fee and points on your license?

My point exactly, when was the last time you chose and didn't just respond? ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Talking to the Dead II

Last week, we discussed the prohibition of talking to the dead. (Deut. 18:11) We wrote:

"Truth is determined by what we experience. And no one in history ever experienced a conversation with the dead. The dead don't respond. Never had, never will. That's what 'dead' means. And this is why Torah prohibits this act."

Moses too urges the Jews to adhere to this method of accepting what is true: "Guard your souls exceedingly, lest you forget the events which your eyes saw". (Deut. 4:9)

Moses warns us that matters which we do not experience, must not be accepted. And as God wished a proof to exist that He gave a religion to the Jews alone, He orchestrated Revelation at Sinai. Thus, all other religions bereft of actual experiences, and requiring blind faith, must be rejected as lies. Similarly, we must also reject mystical and unproven notions heard from religious Jews.

The rule I suggested is this: "experience determines reality". However, discussing this rule with a friend, has asked as follows:

"If you claim that experience is what determines truth, what if I see a spoon inserted into a half-full glass of water? I see the spoon's portion below the waterline as larger than that which is above the waterline, and it also appears like the spoon is broken. What if I see train tracks going into the

distance, and they seem to meet? Yet I know that they do not. If I trust what I "experience", I will admit things that are not true, against what you say."

I maintain the rule is still true: experience determines reality. However, if one's experience is lacking, that ignorance will result in false assumptions. It is only when we have experienced all there is to experience, that we will possess absolute and accurate knowledge in all areas. Thus, we will all retain a great amount of ignorance as we will never experience everything. But, we can and must continually increase our knowledge as far as possible. And in certain areas, we can master a majority of experiences affording us accurate knowledge, in that area.

So let's walk to the point where we think the tracks meet, and we will increase our "experiences" to now include a new truth, that distance causes objects to "appear" smaller. (So small, the two tracks seem to touch) We thereby learn that our confusion was in equating things that we should not: appearance and fact. We now learn – from a new experience – that appearances are deceiving. Thus, it is still true that experience determines reality. Our new experience is that appearance – and not objects – become smaller with distance. However, when our experiences are lacking, we will make false conclusions. And when one dips an object into a glass of water making it appear larger and broken, but then removes it to find it unchanged, he now experiences two new truths: 1) a curved water glass magnifies objects like a magnifying glass, and 2) water refracts light differently than air, making the object below the waterline appear as though it shifted its position. Again, experience is what determines truth and reality.

Returning to our initial point, our Torah observance too must follow Moses' words: we must reject what we do not experience. Ibn Ezra too made this vital point, worth repeating (Leviticus, 19:31): *"Those with empty brains say 'Were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.' But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn't prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues."* Aside from experience as a means to determine truth, we have God's word. All He says is absolute truth. Therefore, if we wish to determine what is false, study what Torah laws prohibit. Study the lives of the Prophets. Never do we find mystics or those who believed or accepted anything unproven.

The next time you hear a "Torah" lesson where the teacher or Rabbis makes claims without demonstrating it, reject it. If he claims a story "once occurred", ask for witnesses. If there are none, or just a few, reject it. If he quotes a Talmu-

dic source for such a "miracle", follow the words of the Rabbis, that all such stories are allegories – not real events.

Act as a concerned Jew. Reject all unsupported claims: not only for yourself, but to prevent these lies from poisoning the next generation. ■

Allegory

I recently asked Rabbi Israel Chait how to understand the "miracles" of Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa found in Talmud Taanis 24b-25a. I asked Rabbi Chait as follows.

Student: If Revelation at Sinai is the barometer by which we accept miracles (mass witnesses is necessary for proof) does this force us to interpret all such Talmudic accounts of "miracles" as metaphor when masses were absent?

These miracles (one was where vinegar burned as oil) seem to surpass the miracle of Channukah.

Furthermore, we do not see such miracles performed for King David or King Solomon. Are we then to say that Talmudic Rabbis – who are not prophets – benefit from miracles, while the prophets did not? Meaning, do miracles occur, despite the level of the recipient?

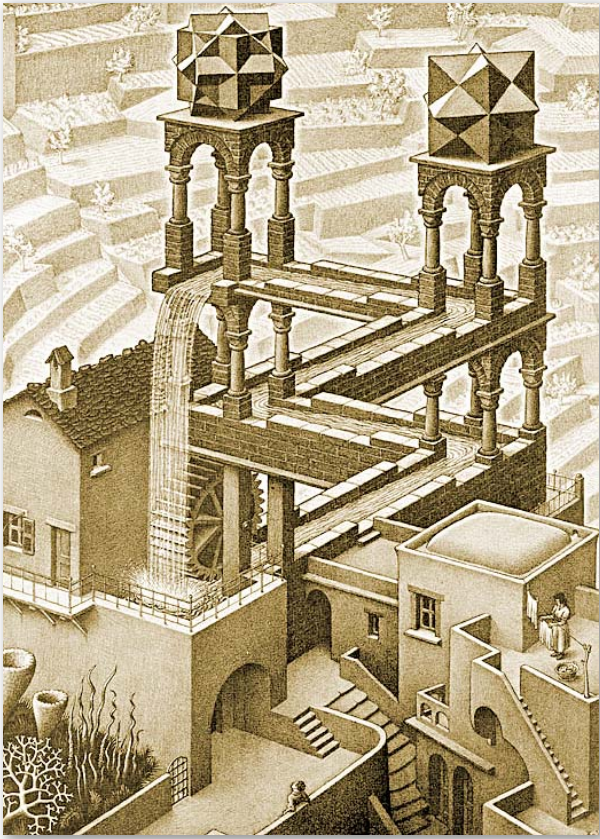
The stories (24b at bottom) open by teaching that Chanina Ben Dosa was poverty-stricken. No miracle helped him find success. Yet, a "miracle" occurred when his wife had no bread Erev Shabbos. She burned twigs in the oven (smoke exited the chimney like one who is baking) to make it appear she had bread so as to save face from her neighbors who did have what to cook. But when her evil neighbor – knowing she had nothing to cook – walked in to inquire of that smoke, bread "miraculously" filled the house.

Certainly the "miracle" of his goats balancing bears between their horns is not literal. And Rambam and others teach that Aggadas are not literal.

What is the rule by which we determine when Talmudic stories of miracles are taken as metaphor?

Rabbi Israel Chait: To paraphrase Shmuel Hanagid⁽¹⁾, the value of Aggadah is found only in the gems of wisdom one derives from it. If one derives nonsense, it has no value. Very few people are capable of 'diving into the deep water and coming up with pearls'. [Ramban metaphor] Other individuals have no business delving into Aggadah. They would do better refraining from trying to interpret that which is beyond them. "Bmuffrosh mimcha al tidrosh". Such people cannot discern between something literal or metaphorical, so your question is moot. ■

(1) See "Mavo HaTalmud" (Intro to the Talmud) found at the end of Tractate Brachos



How to Determine Truth

*Excerpts from Maimonides’
“Letter to the Community of Marseille”*

“I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man’s birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counter-arguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden.”

“It is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things: 1) clear proof deriving from man’s reasoning; 2) what is perceived through one of the five senses; 3) what is received from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15).



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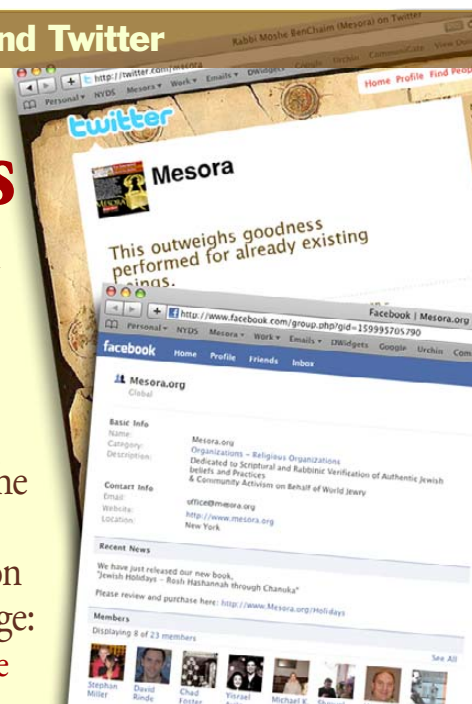
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