

## Plagues vs. Afflictions

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### Weekly Parsha

# Bo

RABBI BERNIE FOX

### The Objective of the Plague of Locusts

*And Hashem said to Moshe: Go to Paroh. For I will make his heart stubborn and the hearts of his advisors so that I may place these wonders of mine in his midst, and so that you will retell to your children*

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## Firstborn Deaths

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Chait said Death of Firstborns was unique: Every other plague came through an angel, i.e., a visible, physical force. For example, a great wind preceded the Plague of Locusts, and the first plague (Nile River turning into blood) involved producing some change in the water and so forth. Every plague expressed itself via a change in some visible physical phenomenon. However, Death of Firstborns was direct. There was no medium through which it expressed itself, that was apparent to the Egyptians. Until now all they saw was that G-d had some type of control over the physical forces of nature, but that He was limited, in that He had to operate through them. Thus, there was some measure of safety and possible escape. "He couldn't just will me dead with no apparent cause which I could not trace to some element in nature", the Egyptians thought.

Prior to the Death of Firstborns, G-d always operated within nature, so to speak. But in Death of Firstborns, He revealed an entirely new dimension - outside of nature - by which He can strike you down at will. Hence, the terror of that night was different than that which attended any other plague. ■

### God's Mercy

## Afflictions

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Marc:** I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the following...

As I recall, Rambam teaches that Divine providence is in direct proportion with one's level of perfection. In light of that, how do we reconcile the comments of Chazal in Archin 16b regarding one who puts his hand in his pocket intending to pull up three coins and pulls up two...and the Talmud states this is an "affliction";

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(Bo cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

## JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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and grandchildren that I played with Egypt and the wonders that I placed among them. And you will know that I am Hashem. (Shemot 10:1-2)

This pasuk introduces the plague of Locusts. Hashem tells Moshe that with this plague He will “play” with the Paroh and his nation. The apparent meaning is that Hashem will humiliate Paroh and the Egyptians. Why was this plague more degrading than those that preceded it?

There is another interesting issue raised by the plague of Locusts. The essential affect of this plague was that locusts would consume all grain and produce that had survived the plague of Hail. Egypt would experience severe famine. In order for Paroh to rescue his people from this plague, he would need Moshe's immediate intercession. Once the crops were consumed, the devastation of the plague would be complete. As the damage of the plague was inflicted, Paroh resisted calling for Moshe and Aharon. Only after the crops had been totally destroyed, did he beseech Moshe and Aharon to pray on his behalf. Paroh had already persevered through the worst of the plague. Why break down at this point?

Rav Simcha Zissel Broida Zi"l offers an interesting approach to these problems. He posits that these two questions are interrelated. Paroh withstood the destruction of the plague without weakening. However once the locusts had ravaged the land, he was confronted with a scene of total destruction. This landscape of devastation overwhelmed Paroh. Paroh knew he could not reverse the damage of the plague. But he had to have relief from the sight of locusts. This was his reason for beseeching Moshe and Aharon to pray on his behalf. This is not the behavior of an individual who is in control. It is characteristic of an emotionally shattered person, unable to bear even a reminder of his misfortune. This approach identifies the unique element of degradation affected by the plague. The first seven plagues never broke Paroh emotionally. He was able to retain his self-respect. On occasion, the pressure of a plague forced him to promise Bnai Yisrael freedom. But with the cessation of each plague, Paroh quickly regained his confidence and sense of control. The plague of Locusts was different. The devastation of this plague shattered Paroh. He called for Moshe and Aharon even though he could no longer reverse or even suspend the damage. He needed Moshe and Aharon to relieve the pain of seeing the locusts – the reminder of his folly and demise. This is the degradation referred to in the opening pesukim.[1]

**The Selection of Nisan as the First Month of the Calendar**

*This month is to you the beginning of months. It is the first to you of the months of the year. (Shemot 12:2)*

This pasuk refers to the month of Nisan. Bnai Yisrael will leave Egypt during Nisan, and Hashem tells Moshe that this month should be regarded as the first month. This creates a paradox. Nisan is the first month. It follows that the first day of the year should be the first day of Nisan. However, the year begins on the first day of Tishrai. Tishrai is the seventh month from Nisan!

Nachmanides explains that the Hebrew names now used to identify the months are of Babylonian origin. They originate from the time of Ezra and Nechemyah. Prior to this period, the months were numerically identified. In the Torah, Nisan is referred to as Chodesh HaRishon — the First Month. Similarly, Iyar is Chodesh HaSheni — the Second Month. These numerical designations were the exclusive means used to identify the months until the time of Ezra and Nechemyah. In

other words, before the time of Ezra and Nechemyah, the months did not have names. Therefore, dates were not assigned to events by identifying the name of the month and the day of the month associated with the event. Instead, an event could only be assigned date relative to the first month of the calendar.

An example will help illustrate this distinction. What is the date of Sucot? We are accustomed to referring to its date as the 15th of Tishrai. However, this simple system of dating did not exist before Ezra and Nechemyah. Before their time, the date of Sucot was identified relative to the first month of the calendar. Its date was identified as the 15th day of the Seventh Month.

Nachmanides explains that this numerical system used to identify dates has an obvious objective. It relates every date of the anniversary of the redemption. For example: Through referring to the date of Sucot as the 15th day of the Seventh Month, we are really saying that the festival is observed on the 15th day of the seventh month from the anniversary-month of our redemption from Egypt and bondage. This system mimics in its structure and its objective the Torah's system for identifying the days of the week. The days of the week do not have names. Instead, they are identified relative to Shabbat. The first day of the week is identified as one day from Shabbat, the second as two days from Shabbat, and so on. The obvious objective is to relate every event associated with a day of the week to Shabbat or to the completion of

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the creation of the universe. In this manner, the Torah uses a common every-day practice as an opportunity to remind us of important events. When we refer to a day of the week, we recall creation. When we refer to a date in the year, we recall our redemption.

Based upon this analysis, Nachmanides resolves the paradox. How can the year begin on the first day of the Seventh Month? The year should begin on the first day of the First Month! He explains that the above pasuk does not say that the month we now call Nisan is the first month of the year. Instead, the Torah states that it is the first of the months. This does not mean that the year begins in Nisan. It means that all events should be dated by and associated with the anniversary-month of the redemption. The various months should not receive distinct names. Instead, each should be identified relative to the anniversary-month of the redemption from Egypt. The paradox is resolved. The first day of the year, is indeed, the first day of the Seventh Month. In other words, the first day of the year occurs on the month that is the seventh month from the anniversary-month of the redemption. This is the first day of the month that we now refer to as Tishrai.

This leaves one issue to be resolved. Why was the Torah's system of dating that associates every date and event with the redemption replaced by a system that gives each month an individual name? This innovation severs the identification of the month and dates with the redemption from Egypt! Nachmanides responds by referring to a passage in Yermiyahu. The Navi tells the nation that they will be redeemed from their exile. When they return to the Land of Israel from the lands of their exile, they will no longer praise Hashem as their redeemer from Egypt. Instead, they will praise Hashem for restoring them to the Land from their more immediate exile.

Nachmanides explains that when the prophecy of their redemption was fulfilled, they adopted the names for the months that were used in the land of their exile. They replaced the dating system outlined in the Torah with these adopted names. These names would remind them of their recent exile and redemption. This was a fulfillment of Yermiyahu's prophecy. The Torah system of dating was designed to recall the redemption from Egypt. The new system recalled the more recent exile and redemption of the nation.[2] ■

[1] Rav Shimon Yosef Miller, Shai LaTorah (Jerusalem 5753), volume 2, pp. 213-215.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 12:2.

# the Plague of Choshech

Rabbi Darrell Ginsberg

Each of the ten makkos was an event fraught with fear and peril for the Egyptians. While it can be argued that the devastation of makkas bechoros produced the greatest effect in terms of sheer horror, there was perhaps no makka more frightening than Choshech, Darkness. A state of darkness naturally produces a sense of insecurity and anxiety. A three day duration of paralyzing darkness, where people were enveloped completely, must have been terrifying. While the desired effect of both the punishment and the demonstration of God's power were clear, there was another, less obvious dimension to this plague that separates it from the others. This makka signaled the beginning of Bnai Yisrael's transformation and emancipation.

The Torah explains that the plague of darkness lasted three days and encompassed the entire land of Egypt. Rashi (Shemos 10:22) comments as follows:

"Why did He bring darkness on them? Because there were among the Israelites of that generation evil people who did not wish to leave, and they died out during the three days of darkness so that the Egyptians not see their demise thereby saying, 'They are being struck as we are.' Furthermore, [during the darkness] the Israelites searched and saw their [the Egyptians' valuable] vessels and when they left [Egypt] and asked them [for the valuable vessels] and they (the Egyptians) responded, 'We have nothing [to give you],' he (the Israelite) would say to him, 'But I did see it in your house and it is in that particular place.'"

The explanations Rashi offers (based on a Midrash) are befuddling, to say the least. Insofar as the first answer, what would be inappropriate about the Egyptians witnessing the death of these Jews? After all, they obviously merited this punishment from God! If anything, the Egyptians would be witnesses to God's justice, showing that God's actions are in line with truth. There was no favoritism taking place here. What better lesson to teach the Egyptians?

The second answer requires a further understanding as well. Why was it necessary for Bnai Yisrael to enter these houses prior to the exodus? Why was it important for them to identify the property of the Egyptians to ensure they would hide nothing from them? Would it be the worst crime if an Egyptian was not completely forthright at the time of the actual exodus?

While Rashi's answers clearly require a deeper and more thorough explanation, there is a more fundamental question that, upon first glance, seems to be a given. There is no other plague other than Choshech where the question of "why did He..." is raised. It is clear the different plagues were sent to both punish the Egyptians and demonstrate God's control of nature and the elements, and yet this question is never raised. What makes this plague require explanation or justification? Why does Rashi ask this question?

Studying the makkos open up amazing and enlightening insights into God's wisdom. Many view the makkos as distinct events, or create categories based upon certain similarities between them. Given that, it is possible that the

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## Weekly Parsha

plague of Choshech played a dual role. On the one hand, it functioned like all the other plagues insofar as the effect it had on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Simultaneously, it marked the beginning of Bnai Yisrael's exodus from Egypt.

Understanding Rashi's answers will help elucidate this concept. In his first answer, he relates a concern that the Egyptians would, in some way, compare the punishment to the Jews with their own situation. The truth is, the judgment afforded to these Jews was obviously just and had the Egyptians seen this, they would have rightly deduced that God does not "play favorites." However, seeing the Jews being killed would detract from the main objective of the makkos. The primary purpose of the makkos was to demonstrate God's complete control over nature. When explaining His objectives to Moshe, God tells him as follows (Shemos 7:5): "Egypt will then know that I am Hashem when I send forth. My hand over Egypt and bring out the B'nei Yisrael from among them."

In what capacity would the Egyptians understand God? The Rashbam (ibid) explains that they would know God was the ruler and master of all. This result would emerge through His hand being brought over Egypt. It would seem that God's objective through the plagues was to demonstrate his dominion over the natural world, a fact obviously brought out through the very source of the plagues, nature. Therefore, one could deduce that the objective of this plague was like every other one. However, the question remains - why then did God choose this makka to pass judgment on these members of Bnai Yisrael? This is where the above theory plays out. The beginning of the exit from Egypt had begun and one of the first steps is determining who would be part of this incredible event. God meted out His justice at this time, a necessary precursor to Bnai Yisrael's process of leaving Egypt, but he did so in a way that would not distract the Egyptians from His primary objective.

The second explanation might also be related to the concept of the duality of this plague. One of the principal psychological issues facing the fledgling nation of Bnai Yisrael was the intense slave mentality that was an inherent part of their lives. In forging this nation, God would strip them of their psychological enslavement to the Egyptians and transform Bnai Yisrael into servants of God. Part of this process was to exchange identities and roles at the time of

the exodus. Bnai Yisrael would no longer be the slaves, and the Egyptians would no longer be the masters. This new role is expressed in God's desire for Bnai Yisrael to claim the property of the Egyptians prior to leaving Egypt (see Shemos 3:21-22). Transferring ownership to Bnai Yisrael demonstrates the role reversal. This process was critical - therefore it needed to be complete. Part of the dominant role of a slave master is knowledge of every facet of a slave's life--a demonstration of total control. If a slave is able to hide his own property from the master's knowledge, it produces a small sense of freedom. It was this

state of mind that was being targeted in the plague of darkness. Having Bnai Yisrael possess complete knowledge of that which was owned by the Egyptians would solidify their role as master, a necessary prelude to the upcoming exodus.

These two explanations shed light on this obscure plague. This plague was more than a demonstration of God's control of the universe. The Exodus had begun with the implementation of Darkness, and so too Bnai Yisrael's evolution as a nation. Looking at this makka, one can see beyond the supernatural event, witnessing the infinite chachma of God. ■

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(Afflictions continued from page 1)

and Chullin 7b that states that man doesn't stub his toe unless it was decreed in heaven?

If all is as Rambam states, that in many cases an individual is not under any Divine providence due to his lack of perfection, how are these Talmudic areas understood, which both imply that everyone suffers Divine afflictions, and in even the most inconsequential matters? Any help would be appreciated.

**Rabbi:** You are correct. Rambam states the following in Book III chap. xviii of his "Guide":

*"...the greater the share is which a person has obtained of this Divine influence, on account of both his physical predisposition and his training, the greater must also be the effect of Divine Providence upon him, for the action of Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect, as has been mentioned above. The relation of Divine Providence is therefore not the same to all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence. This benefit is very great in the case of prophets, and varies according to the degree of their prophetic faculty: as it varies in the case of pious and good men according to their piety and uprightness. For it is the intensity of the Divine intellectual influence that has inspired the prophets, guided the good in their actions, and perfected the wisdom of the pious. In the same proportion as ignorant and disobedient persons are deficient in that Divine influence, their condition is inferior, and their rank equal to that of irrational beings: and they are 'like unto the beasts' (Ps. xlix. 21). For this reason it was not only considered a light thing to slay them, but it was even directly commanded for the benefit of mankind. This belief that God provides for every individual human being in accordance with his merits is one of the fundamental principles on which the Law is founded."*

*"Those who approach Him are best protected, and" He will keep the feet of his saints"; but those who keep far away from Him are left exposed to what may befall them; there is nothing that could protect them from what might happen; they are like those who walk in darkness, and are certain to stumble. The protection of the pious by Providence is also expressed in the following passages: "He keepeth all his bones," etc. (Ps. xxxiv. 21): "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous" (ibid. ver. 16): "He shall call upon me and I shall answer him" (ibid. xci. 15). There are in Scripture many more passages expressing the principle that men enjoy Divine protection in proportion to their perfection and piety."*

I wish to mention that I base my words on a lecture given by a wise Rabbi many years ago, as he addressed this case in Archin. Now let us examine those words of the Talmud. But first, we must define our term "affliction". In Torah contexts, this refers to pain or suffering intended to correct a person, or people. But many times, people err in assuming that an affliction is ordained by God at a specific time and intended for an individual. I intend to show this is not necessarily the case. It is vital that we not simply read, but "study" the words of the Rabbis. Talmud Archin 16b states:

*"What is the most minimal form of affliction? Rabbi Eliezer says, 'One who wove a garment, but it doesn't properly fit'. Zeyerah or some say Rav Shmuel stated, 'Greater than this first case, is one who wished to mix a hot drink but erred and used cold water, or the opposite.' Mar said, 'Even if one put on his shirt inside-out'. Rabbi Isaac said, 'Even if one reached into his pocket for three coins and only pulled up two. But if he desired two and pulled out three, this is not an affliction to place back the extra coin.'" [The Talmud then asks] "But what is the relevance of all this? [The answer as learned in a braissa] It was taught in the house of Rabbi Ishmael, 'Anyone who goes 40 days without any affliction, he has received his reward [on Earth]. And in the West they said of such a person, 'Punishment awaits him' [in the next world]".*

Let's first understand the opening question of "What is the most minimal form of affliction?" Evidently, the Rabbis were of the opinion that not all negative events are to be viewed as "afflictions". Meaning, they felt that some events are too miniscule in their negativity to be viewed as afflictions. So they wished to draw the line, and therefore discussed what criteria determine some negative experiences to be afflictions.

What strikes us next is that in none of these cases, do we find evidence of any "Divine" intervention. The person caused all these afflictions in every case. Either he was careless when measuring his shirt size in the first case; or grabbed the wrong water container in case 2; in case 3 he didn't turn his shirt outside-out before putting it on; or he didn't properly feel for the desired number of coins in case 4. Now, if the person erred in all cases, how can the Talmud call all these cases "afflictions"? Ahhh...therein lays the answer. Who ever said "affliction" equates only with "Divine" matters?

The Talmud is teaching us that there is such a thing as natural inconveniences, annoyances or frustrations – matters that God does not directly

will that occur to each of us, but are part of natural laws. We get stuck in traffic; we cross the street and get splashed; and all the cases above. But if these are all natural, why do they safeguard our afterlife? As we read, one who experiences no afflictions in 40 days, has been given his reward on Earth, and he will not receive the afterlife! The explanation is as follows.

God created the physical universe in a manner that is perfectly imperfect. I mean, that it is a perfect plan, that the physical is imperfect. For if man could find 100% satisfaction in the physical pursuits, lusts and enjoyments...he would never seek out the greater existence of pursuing wisdom. In order to frustrate man from total immersion in physical gratification, God purposefully created the physical world with shortcomings. For example: we don't have perfect sensation in our fingertips, so when we grab for coins, we might come up short. And that frustration – how ever miniscule – is an "affliction". Meaning, it serves to limit how far we indulge in the physical. We rush to make a drink, and unintentionally grab the hot water and not the cold. Again, our own shortcomings, i.e., carelessness are part of God's design. We cannot measure perfectly, so we weave garments that do not fit exactly. As we go through life, we are conditioned day-by-day, year-by-year, to remove our energies from the expectation of complete fulfillment in the physical...so that we might redirect our energies, find God's plan of immersion in wisdom, try it, and then gain the greatest reward.

However, there is one Divine element cited in the Talmudic portion: the man who goes 40 days without any affliction. It is impossible that during 40 days, someone won't get a splinter, never miss a train, never spill food on his clothing, make every green light, catch every elevator, etc.... when one does find that he has experienced no afflictions at all for 40 days, this is Divine. It is impossible to avoid otherwise. Thus, the Rabbis teach that this person is evil, and is receiving his reward on Earth in the form of perfect, physical serenity where literally all works in his favor. This is God's justice: even a wicked person who performed some good, receives reward for that good. But at the cost of his afterlife; his Olam Haba is lost.

The Talmud also follows a sequence of cases to illustrate a progression. These Rabbis debate what qualifies as afflictions. Weaving a shirt that doesn't fit is no catastrophe, but it is irreparable. That's the first definition of affliction. Pouring hot water instead of the desired cold water can easily be redone, but something is lost, the first glass is wasted. So even something that can be repaired is affliction, provided one suffers some waste or loss. The next case is not irreparable and there is no

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(Afflictions continued from previous page)

## God's Mercy

waste, he simply takes off his shirt, turns it outside-out, and puts it back on again. It's an "inconvenience". Finally, pulling up 2 and not the desired 3 coins is so easy to correct, there is no waste, and it takes less time than the previous case. Nonetheless, there is some psychological anguish in the disappointment of not grabbing what he desired. The cases progress from greater loss to lesser, and on to inconvenience and simple anguish. Each provides insight into a lesser level of frustration or affliction, but also teaches us wherein precisely lays the frustration, be it irreparable, waste, time or minor anguish.

The intentionally, imperfect physical world – in combination with unavoidable human error – helps deter us from seeking physical satisfactions alone as a sole means towards happiness, which it cannot provide. Through these natural frustrations – although not Divinely "targeted" at anyone at anytime – God redirects us to another area so we might attain true happiness...God's wisdom.

I would add that the mitzvah of circumcision targets this very notion: it demonstrates that physical gratification is not God's plan. Therefore we are commanded to minimize the pleasure from sexual intercourse for both parties through this command. (Rambam)

Marc, you also cited Chullin 7b:

*"Rabbi Chaninah said, 'Man doesn't stub his toe below [on Earth] unless it was decreed above [in heaven] as it says, 'From God are man's steps,*

*and man does not understand his path'.* (Mishley 20:24)"

On the surface, this appears it might be a similar lesson. However, let's examine the clues.

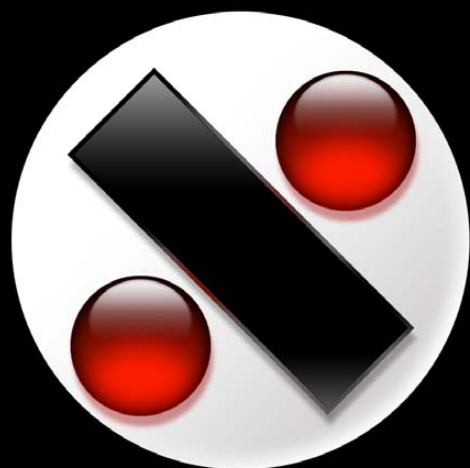
This lesson centers only on one's toe, or foot, in contrast to the first Talmudic portion that addressed woven garments, drinks, and coins. And the quote too deals only with man's "steps", the path of his foot. Now, is Rabbi Chanina truly saying that matters of the foot alone are decreed? That would be quite odd! In truth, "foot" here, is used to connote man's "path" in life. And the verse states, man's "steps". So what this portion addresses according to Rabbi Chaninah, is man's plans, his steps towards an objective or the next road he travels.

We are taught that God will guide man's plans. Why? Because in this area – the future – man is blind. Regarding choosing sin or mitzvah, man has all the knowledge he needs to act, and God does not interfere with free will. But regarding the future, man cannot predict or plan for all that will befall him, if he were to take a certain route, accept a certain job, or marry a certain woman. God alone knows what might befall him years down the road. And King Solomon teaches us here that God in His kindness will step in to protect man from a poor decision. Malbim teaches that man might feel frustrated as he "stubs his toe" (labors in vain) which is what these words mean; "man does not understand his path". When God foils our plans, it is because He knows that another course will prove beneficial.

We conclude that these two portions address two separate concepts. Talmud Archin addresses how God designed the natural order to cause metal to rust, people to age, man to measure inaccurately, things to break, and all other phenomena that frustrate us...all in order to redirect man away from physical gratification and towards wisdom. And these frustrations are not Divinely intended for "Jack" or "John", but are part of nature, whether these two people lived or not. Nature follows God's design of imperfection.

Talmud Chullin address a single area of man's plans, that God kindly steers us away from future harm, which we cannot predict or avert, and towards paths of benefit.

Applying Rambam's lesson above to Chullin, God will only assist man in his path, provided he or she is on the level to deserve such providence. "For those who God loves, does He rebuke". (Mishley 3:12) However, regardless of man's perfection or sin, Archin teaches that God has already created the world with imperfections as lessons for those who wish to follow God. And this design occurred before the first man lived. Imperfection in nature is unrelated to individuals. In either case, Rambam and the two Talmudic portions are in harmony. ■



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## Letters



# Letters

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## READERS



### Trust in God

**Dov:** I still have questions regarding "Duties of the Heart," (Gate Four) These two statements cause me the most trouble: "No one or no thing can harm or benefit a person without God's consent." This seems to be touting the belief in God's direct hashgacha in all the minutia of a person's life. The other statement is this: "all of man's actions are pre-determined."

Is Bachya talking of the tzaddik, which would align with the Rambam's view? (We would have to assume this, since Bachya does not make this distinctions in Duties). Bachya says that the acknowledgment of the above fact, leads to peace of mind, the removal of jealousy and allows others to feel only trust and lovingkindness to the person who internalizes this concept.

**Rabbi:** "Nothing can harm or benefit a person without God's consent" can be understood that God "allows" but not "wills" what occurs. If so, then it too is part of His "general" will that misfortunes may occur. But a perfected person accepts those misfortunes, as did King David, when he said that "God told him [Doeg] to curse me". This means King David used that event for his perfection "as if" God willed it. Meaning, as God decreed all men have free will, and at times some men will use it to curse others, King David operated based on that reality, and appreciated God's decree of free will – not that he appreciated Doeg's curse. King David always saw God behind the scenes of all events. His attachment to this ultimate reality allowed him to care less about the specific curse of Doeg.

**Dov:** The way that I understand R' Bachya (in the area let's say of parnasa) is the following: Man needs to make an effort, but that effort is not the cause, in the true sense. God determines how much money a person will earn, and God is the cause. The intermediary things like the person's effort and the particular means employed do not have the power to be the cause. R' Bachya gives the example of the water wheel, which is driven distantly by the animal. That does not mean that man can just lie around at home and the money will just come to him. God commanded man that he be involved in the world (working), but man will not earn more by employing a certain means or doing illegal things. This is the illusion of man that he is the (real) cause,

or the particular job is the cause of his earnings. By having the philosophy that God is the cause of his earnings, he will praise and have bitachon in God. He exerts effort because God commanded him to work, but he will not place his trust in his abilities or a particular means he is utilizing (a certain job or person) to be the ultimate reason he earns a certain amount.

**Rabbi:** Correct: man must not view people, places and things as the ultimate causes of his fortunes and happiness. For if one lives properly, God will provide in all cases. My thinking is as follows:

- 1) God created each and every person. Thus, He desires that we each exist.
- 2) We know God is just, as He created us to require food to live; to ingest food and dispel waste. And He created the very food with which to do so.
- 3) He granted mankind intelligence and He gave us His Torah in which we are to engage that intellect. In His Torah He promises success to those who follow Him.
- 4) As we follow His word and adhere to natural law (working for our needs) He will help us overcome all hurdles.
- 5) Under all circumstances, our faith in His abilities never wanes, as we know He controls all.

Due to these considerations, if we adhere to His Torah, we can accept all that occurs, for we know we are acting as He desires. He sees all, and He will assist us in all areas. We don't feel upset when we lose a large account, since it is not 'that' client that provides us with success, but it is God. We don't get attached to specifics, but we are attached to a path of life which we know meets with success. We are never worried.

R' Bachya does not say all of man's actions are pre-determined, to mean we have no free will. This cannot be so, we have free will. He says that our "fate" is predetermined; all that occurs is under God's eye. Nothing can occur that He doesn't wish to occur to us. So all that occurs outside our abilities, is wholeheartedly accepted by those who adhere to Torah. This is because they are confident in God's promises. ■

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## Letters



## Letters

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## READERS

The Better Teacher:  
Experience or Reason?

**Chaim:** Man comes to the realization that the truth of the Torah is accurate and should be fully accepted as our stronghold. Man comes to this realization through different experiences: calamity or loss, study and learning, observing Hashem's beneficence and assistance in our daily lives, and through written accounts of Torah concepts by previous and current Torah giants.

Question: Does it matter how we come to this realization? Is one more lasting and steadfast?

**Rabbi:** Interesting that you ask this, as I just recently learned a Talmudic portion addressing this very point. Sanhedrin 101a-101b says as follows:

*"When Rabbi Eliezer became sick, four elders visited him; Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Tarfon said, 'You are better for Israel than a drop of rain: for a drop of rain is in this world, and [you] Rebbe are in this world and the next world'. Rabbi Joshua said, 'You are better for Israel than the sun: for the sun is in this world, and [you] Rebbe are in this world and the next world'. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, 'You are better for Israel than parents: for parents are in this world, and [you] Rebbe are in this world and the next world'. Rabbi Akiva said, 'Afflictions are beloved'."*

*Rabbi Eliezer replied, 'Help me sit up so I might listen to the words of Rabbi Akiva my student who says afflictions are beloved. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Akiva, 'This that you say, from where do you derive it?' Rabbi Akiva said, 'I derive it from a*

*verse, 'Mennasheh was 12 years old when he became king, and he reigned for 55 years in Jerusalem' ... 'and he committed evil in the eyes of God.' It is also written (Mishley 25:1) 'These too are the words of King Solomon which the men of Chizkiyah, king of Judah, copied out'. And could it be that Chizkiyah, king of Judah, to the entire world he taught Torah, but to Mennasheh his son, he did not teach Torah? In truth, despite all the toil Chizkiyah toiled and all the labor Chizkiyah labored to teach Mennasheh his son Torah, Chizkiyah could not improve his son's behavior. But it was affliction that returned him to God. For when Mennasheh was in dire straits, he prayed to God, and God answered him and returned him to Jerusalem to his reign as king. And Mennasheh knew that God is Ruler. From here we learn that afflictions are beloved'."*

In our story above, we have two personalities. Chizkiyah was convinced of Torah truths using his mind alone, while his son Mennasheh required experience to teach him. A person of higher intellectual capacity can prove things to himself using reason alone, while less abstract individuals are impacted only through their senses.

Furthermore, reason, by definition, is not deceptive, whereas experiences can be illusory, like mirages and magic tricks. Of course even reason is tied to our senses, as we can only reason about matters we have perceived. For example, I cannot make premises, offer any reasoning or conclude any complete notion about the sun and moon, until I see them. I have nothing on which to base any comment. But once I see the sun and moon, and calculate their sizes, speeds, rotations, and paths, I may offer insight based on what I see. And if I am adept at geometry and physics, I may also conclude that one sphere is far larger and distant than the other, while a person without mathematical skills using experience alone will conclude the sun and moon to be identical in size. So, while experience can be more appealing to some people, without the application of reason and greater knowledge, one can arrive at false conclusions.

Reason also affords the thinker growth in his understanding, deductions and inductions, without new experiences. While one who relies on experience alone will remain trapped in his current knowledge until he undergoes new experiences. So reasoning allows a person to resolve problems, and also grow in knowledge.

There are a few issues here: your question of what is more lasting and steadfast. But there is also the question as to what is required for one to initially accept a truth. Experience and thought might equally provide ideas that last, and that become firm and steadfast. But based on a person's emotional makeup, to first accept a new truth, one might require experience, as was the case with regards to Mennasheh.

What is more lasting and steadfast as a truth? Let

us read Maimonides' words (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 8:1)

*"Israel did not believe in Moses, our teacher, because of the wonders that he performed. Whenever anyone's belief is based on wonders, [the commitment of] his heart has shortcomings, because it is possible to perform a wonder through magic or sorcery. All the wonders performed by Moses in the desert were not intended to serve as proof [of the legitimacy] of his prophecy, but rather were performed for a purpose. It was necessary to drown the Egyptians, so he split the sea and sank them in it. We needed food, so he provided us with manna. We were thirsty, so he split the rock [providing us with water]. Korach's band mutinied against him, so the earth swallowed them up. The same applies to the other wonders."*

What is the source of our belief in him? Revelation at Mount Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds; the Voice spoke to him and we heard, "Moses, Moses, go tell them the following:...."

Thus, [Deuteronomy 5:4] relates: "Face to face, God spoke to you," and [Deuteronomy 5:3] states: "God did not make this covenant with our fathers, [but with us, who are all here alive today]."

How is it known that the [revelation] at Mount Sinai alone is proof of the truth of Moses' prophecy that leaves no shortcoming? [Exodus 19:9] states: "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear Me speaking to you, [so that] they will believe in you forever." It appears that before this happened, they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever, but rather with a faith that allowed for suspicions and doubts."

Notable, is that Maimonides refers to two groups of people, 1) Jews who left Egypt and 2) all generations. The second point is that he says "Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's". How can he say this? We weren't there!

Maimonides' lesson is paramount. What those ancient Jews witnessed in Egypt and in the desert, was not a lasting source of belief. Meaning, most experiences fail a person...even those containing miracles. What proved Moses as a true prophet was Sinai. And that proof is for all generations, which explains how Maimonides says "our" eyes and "our" ears. He means that Sinai was a 100% proof, "as if" we witnessed it ourselves. Thus, although we lack the in-person experience, our reasoning today about that event provides proof, whereas Jews who witnessed miracles back then left doubts.

Our senses err. Also, our senses do not possess any capacity other than perceiving. They cannot reason. But an idea proven true by our minds cannot change, and is not subject falsehood.

What is more lasting and steadfast as a truth? Due to these reasons cited, truths apprehended in thought outweigh experiences. ■





# AROVE: the Mixture of Animals

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

Egypt deified animals. Moses directed Pharaoh to recognize this flaw. He told Pharaoh the Egyptians would not stand by if the Jews sacrificed in Egypt. For this reason, the Jews were required to offer the Paschal lamb to earn God's salvation: they had to demonstrate their disregard for animal deification, and their trust in God's salvation from any attack, and His deliverance of the nation to Israel.

But how did this plague attempt to correct Egypt's animal deification? It was through psychology. God sent multiple species of beasts that destroyed Egypt, including snakes and scorpions as Rashi stated, the very beasts we find on Pharaohs' headdresses. Thus, the

Egyptians should no longer deify that which causes them much grief. When a person is alarmed at some phenomenon, he tends to no longer gravitate towards it, and this I believe was one of the objectives in this plague: to sever ties between man and animal.

Why was a "mixture" sent, and not a single species? A mixture was used as it generates a feeling of disdain toward animals "in general", not just a single class, which would allow the Egyptians to retain their deification for all other species. This explains why this plague was called "Mixture" (Arove). For the Mixture targeted this concept of ridding Egypt of their "elevated" species, by generating disdain for animals in general.

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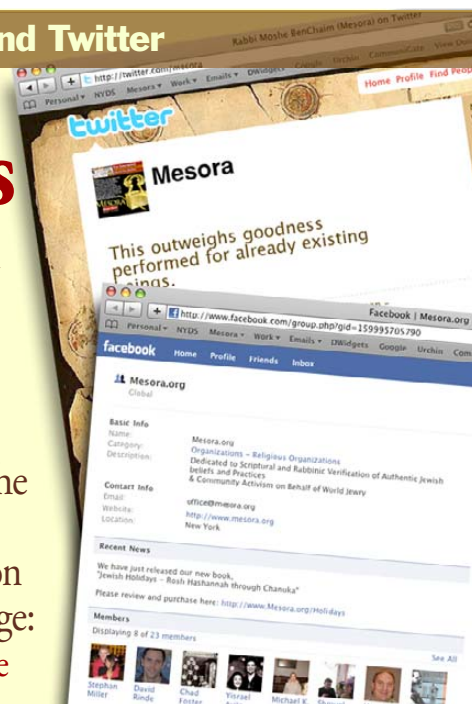
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