



A wise Rabbi taught that as Moses carried his staff throughout the 10 Plagues, Egypt would be constantly reminded of their denial of God's abilities. For Egypt saw Moses staff transform into a real snake, while Pharaoh's magicians' staves did not.

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Weekly Parsha

Yitro

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Importance of a Just Society

*And it was on the following day
and Moshe sat to judge the
nation. And the nation stood by
Moshe from the morning until the
evening. (Shemot 18:13)*

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Weekly Parsha

The Staff of Moses

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Over the past few weeks we have read of God's appointment of Moses as His emissary to Pharaoh, the 10 Plagues, and the splitting of the Reed Sea. Many times, those matters that catch our attention year after year are the more spectacular events. These astonishing phenomena obscure other more subtle – yet equally vital – elements of the story...unless we are fortunate. This year we are fortunate.

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(Yitro cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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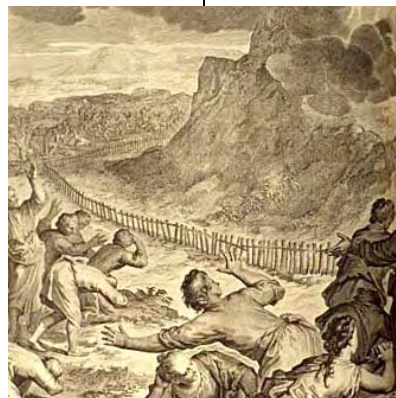
Moshe was the leader of Bnai Yisrael. He cared for the people's material and spiritual well-being. Among his various tasks, he served as judge. Each day, he devoted time to resolving the various disputes that inevitably arose among individuals. The pasuk indicates that, at least on occasion, this required the entire day. Rashi comments, that according to the Talmud in Tractate Megilah, the pasuk alludes to an important lesson. The Talmud interprets the pasuk homiletically. Moshe did not actually devote the entire day to judging the people. The intent of the pasuk is to communicate the importance of this function. One who judges justly – even for an hour – is equated to a scholar absorbed the entire day in the study of Torah. Furthermore, the righteous judge is considered a partner with Hashem in the creation of the universe.[1] One can easily appreciate that a judge plays an essential role in sustaining a just society. However, describing a judge as Hashem's partner in creation seems exaggerated.

The meaning of this lesson can be understood through an insightful comment of Rabbaynu Yonah. Rabbaynu Yonah begins by noting an apparent contradiction in Pirke Avot. Shimon HaTzadik teaches that the world is supported upon three pillars. These are Torah study, service to Hashem and acts of kindness.[2] Raban Shimon ben Gamliel asserts that the world exists by virtue of justice, truth, and peace.[3] It seems that these two scholars are involved in a dispute regarding which practices and behaviors are most important. Rabbaynu Yonah explains that, in reality, these scholars are not contradicting one another and do not disagree. They are addressing two different issues. Humanity was created with a purpose and mission. What is this mission? This is the issue that Shimon HaTzadik is addressing. He explains that we are charged with the responsibility to seek the truth, serve the Creator, and act with kindness towards His other creations. However, in order for humanity to achieve its goals, a social infrastructure is essential. The advancement of humanity requires a coordinated effort; our goals are unattainable unless we can work together. If this social infrastructure does not exist and humanity cannot pursue its mission, then the creation of humanity loses its meaning. Raban Shimon

ben Gamliel is identifying those elements that are essential to creating this social infrastructure. A cohesive, functioning society requires must uphold justice; its members must act truthfully towards each other and goodwill must exist among its members. A society lacking any one of these elements is doomed.

In short, these two Sages do not argue. Shimon HaTzadik is defining the purpose of humanity and its mission. The achievement of this purpose requires a functioning society. Raban Shimon ben Gamliel is outlining the fundamental elements of a healthy society.[4]

Rabbaynu Yonah's insight explains the teaching of our Sages quoted by Rashi. An equitable judge establishes justice within society. He helps create the society necessary for humanity to pursue its mission. The judge works towards assuring that creation has meaning and purpose. In this sense, the judge is a partner in creation.

**The Mission of the Jewish People**

And Moshe went forth from the nation to greet the L-rd from the encampment. And they stood at the foot of the mountain.

(Shemot 19:17)

The pasuk describes Bnai Yisrael as standing at the foot of Sinai. However, the Talmud comments that the nation stood under the mountain. Hashem uprooted Sinai and held it above Bnai Yisrael. He told the people that if they would not accept the Torah, they would be buried under the mountain.[5] If the comments of the Sages are intended to be understood literally, then it is strange that the Torah only makes reference to such a wonder through an allusion. Had this event actually occurred, the revelation at Sinai was very different from the description provided by the explicit meaning of the passages.

It seems that the Talmud is communicating to us two ideas. First, the development and existence of Bnai Yisrael is not a chance historical event. Bnai Yisrael was created and fashioned by Hashem. The nation was carefully nurtured in order to prepare it for revelation at Sinai and its acceptance of the Torah. This was Bnai Yisrael's destiny and its mission. Second, the exodus from Egypt and

(continued on next page)

the awesome events of Sinai were essential elements of this process of preparation. These wonders were designed to provide overpowering evidence of the omnipotence of Hashem and revelation. They were designed to assure that Bnai Yisrael accept its mission. In short, Bnai Yisrael was created and formed for the moment of revelation; acceptance of the Torah was virtually predetermined or compelled. It was as if the mountain was raised over the heads of the people.

Inclusion of Conviction in the Existence of Hashem within Taryag

I am, Hashem, your Lord that brought you out from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (Shemot 20:2)

This is the first statement of the Aseret HaDibrot – the Decalogue. It presents the most fundamental premise of the Torah. There is a G-d. Maimonides understands this statement to be a commandment; we are commanded to accept the existence of a G-d who is the source of all reality.[6]

The Halachot Gedolot differs with Maimonides. The author maintains that although acceptance of G-d's existence is fundamental to Judaism, it is not appropriate to classify this conviction as a commandment. Nachmanides explains the reasoning of the Halachot Gedolot. The six hundred thirteen commandments – the Taryag Mitzvot – can be compared to the decrees of a king. These decrees presuppose the acceptance of the king as sovereign. The act of acceptance is clearly not one of the decrees, but instead must precede them. Based on this reasoning, acceptance of the existence of Hashem logically precedes the mitzvot and cannot properly be viewed as one of these commandments.[7]

Rabbaynu Chasdia Kreskas also differs with Maimonides. He presents a very powerful argument against defining acceptance of Hashem's existence as a mitzvah. He argues that every mitzvah, by definition, must engender some obligation or result. A command to accept G-d's existence could not meet this criterion. Why? To whom is the command directed? If it is directed to a person who is already convinced, then the command engenders no new outcome. This person is already convinced! The alternative is even more absurd. This would require that the command be directed to the non-believer.

But the non-believer could not take such a command seriously! Through this argument, Rabbaynu Chasdai is illustrating the impossibility of legislating belief in G-d. Based on this argument, Rabbaynu Chasdia sides with the Halachot Gedolot. He concludes that conviction in the existence of Hashem precedes mitzvot and cannot be counted among Taryag.[8]

Another criticism of Maimonides' position questions the logic of a commandment that legislates any belief. A person can be commanded or compelled to act or behave in a specific manner. However, a person cannot be commanded to adopt a belief. I person either accepts or rejects a specific. Acceptance of a belief is not accomplished through an act of will.

How can Maimonides' position be explained? This issue provides a fundamental insight into Maimonides' understanding of Taryag Mitzvot. Apparently, Maimonides disagrees with a basic premise of the Halachot Gedolot. This premise is that the mitzvot can be equated to decrees. Maimonides seems to maintain that Taryag must be defined in a more inclusive manner.

He includes among the mitzvot, commandments that legislate actions and behaviors and others that describe beliefs. Obviously, this second group of commandments cannot be regarded as legislative for the reason explained above. However, they are included because combined with the other commandments they describe a model or a representation of human excellence. Not all aspects of this model can be emulated through sheer willpower and determination. Convictions cannot be attained through an act of will. Nonetheless, these fundamental convictions are essential components to the Torah's model of human excellence. Without adoption to these beliefs, excellence has not been achieved.

In other words, according to Maimonides, Taryag can best be described as the basic blueprint for excellence in a

person and nation. This blueprint includes the guide to achieving this excellence as well as the basic description of the behaviors and convictions of the individual who embodies this excellence. Based on this definition of Taryag, Maimonides' position can be appreciated. The most basic ingredient to human perfection is acceptance of Hashem who is the source of all other reality. No description of the shalem – the perfected individual – can be construed which does not include this fundamental conviction. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 18:13.

[2] Mesechet Avot 1:2.

[3] Mesechet Avot 1:18.

[4] Rabbaynu Yona ben Avraham of Gerona, Commentary on Mesechet Avot 1:2.

[5] Mesechet Shabbat 88a.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 1.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Critique on Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 1.

[8] Rabbaynu Chasdai Kreskas, Ohr Hashem, Introduction (HaTza'ah).



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“Have you heard?”

RABBI REUVEN MANN



This week's Parsha begins by telling us that Yisro, the father in law of Moshe "heard" the news of the great events surrounding the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. At first glance the statement, "and Yisro heard" seems completely unnecessary. Of course he heard! Who didn't hear? The Exodus and destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea were events of international magnitude, which became known throughout the world. Moshe attests to the far-reaching impact of the great miracle in the Shira:

"The people hear, they tremble; agony grips the dwellers of Philistia. Now are the clans of Edom dismayed; the tribes of Moab 'trembling grips them; all the dwellers in Canaan are aghast.'" (Exod. 15:14-16)

Indeed, the impression created by these events was so powerful that even forty years later, Rachav told the spies sent by Joshua, "the fear of you is upon us and all the inhabitants of the land have melted before you. For we have heard that Hashem dried the waters before you when you left Egypt." (Joshua, 2:9-10) It is therefore, clear that the Exodus was a very well known event.

We must also assume that Yisro, whose own son in law was at the center of it, carefully followed what was unfolding. Why then would the Torah waste words by saying, "And Yisro heard?"

The Hebrew term "Shema" denotes more than simple listening. It connotes comprehension of the significance of what is being said. When we recite the "Shema", "Hear O Israel, Hashem Our God is One", we mean that one must contemplate

the meaning and importance of this idea, which is the foundation of the Jewish religion. Thus, "Vayishma Yisro", "And Yisro heard", is not telling us that he heard the news of the Exodus, but rather that he 'comprehended' its deeper meaning and recognized that there was so much he needed to learn about it. Therefore, he embarked on a journey to reunite with his illustrious son in law. The purpose was not just to enjoy a family visit. It was to take full advantage of the opportunity, to gain a more profound understanding of the spiritual implications of these awesome events.

As a result of his learning sessions with Moshe, Yisro became a new person. He converted to Judaism, making a great contribution to the Jewish people and merited to have the Parsha which contains the Aseret Hadibrot named after him.

There is much that we can learn from the story of Yisro. Hashem revealed Himself to the entire world via the great miracles, which He performed for Israel. Yet, how many people truly "heard" the message of the miracles? How many were motivated to open their minds, inquire, gain new understanding and elevate themselves to a higher spiritual plane? How many took advantage of the opportunity, which was knocking at their door?

The opening words of our Parsha "and Yisro heard" convey a deep meaning for us. All the miracles in the world are of no lasting importance unless they stimulate us to become actively involved in the pursuit of wisdom and spiritual growth. There are certain things that Hashem leaves for us to do.

"If I am not for myself, who is for me?" (Ethics, 1:14) ■

The JewishTimes takes this opportunity to wish Rabbi Reuven Mann great success as he commences his new position as Rabbi of the Young Israel of Phoenix, AZ. Under the leadership of Rabbi Mann and president Farley Weiss, may the Phoenix Jewish community realize new and continued spiritual growth.



So basic a question, yet I never pondered it: what purpose was served by Moses' staff?

We read of God telling Moses to wave his staff to initiate almost every plague. Certainly, God could have performed all the plagues and wonders without Moses' staff (and without Moses) just as He created the world without any instrument. There! Another question arises: what was Moses' role in the plagues? He too was unnecessary, just as was his staff, as we see God was ready to kill him for avoiding circumcising his son. Let's hold that question.

God gives Moses three signs intended for the Jews: the staff turning into a snake, his hand becoming leprous, and the blood. So the staff was to be used once: to turn into a snake. Nothing more. Interestingly, God does not instruct Moses to take the staff to perform the 10 Plagues, that is, until God concedes to Moses' plea and instead, God allows Aaron his brother to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf. (Exod. 4:17) But up to that point, there was no instruction for Moses to take the staff, except for performing the single sign of it transforming into a serpent. As a matter of fact, once God addresses all of Moses' concerns, He says, "And now go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you what to say." (Exod. 4:12) Thus, if God is telling Moses to go to Pharaoh at this point, it means the staff was as of yet not to be used in the plagues. God only tells Moses to take the staff to perform the plagues "after" God allows Aaron to join Moses. So we wonder what Aaron's accompaniment has to do with Moses' use of the staff to perform the plagues.

Additionally, Ibn Ezra teaches that a few plagues

were performed without the staff. (Exod. 4:17, 8:12) These plagues were Mixtures (of wild beasts; Arove), Pestilence (Dever), Boils (Shchin) and Firstborn Deaths (Makkos Bechorim). What is Ibn Ezra pointing to?

Let's step back and consider the purpose of the plagues. They were not about Moses, Aaron, the Jews or Pharaoh. They were all about God. God states His objective (Exod. 10:1-2):

"God said to Moses, 'Come to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order that I place these signs of Mine in his midst. And in order to speak in the ears of your son and your grandson that which I have mocked Egypt, and My signs which I have placed in them, and they shall know that I am God.'"

God's objective was to correct Egypt's flaws. They harbored many wrong notions concerning God. They felt the Nile was a deity, so God smote it powerless, turning it into blood. They felt the astrologers had powers, so He suffered them with boils just like the rest of the populous to expose them as charlatans. That is, just as the Egyptian people suffered from boils, the astrologers too suffered, "And the astrologers could not stand before Moses due to the boils; since the boils were on the astrologers, and on all of Egypt." (Exod. 9:11) But one minute...boils don't incapacitate one's ability to stand! What does this verse mean to say? It means boils exposed the astrologers as liars, so they could not "stand" i.e., "carry face" before Moses any longer. Thus, after Boils, we never hear from the astrologers again, as their reputations were shattered, as was intended. And

as a wise Rabbi taught, the hail shattered the awe of the heavens, up to that point maintained by the Egyptians. When God showed His control of the heavens with Hail, this was another blow to their idolatrous culture.

If you study each plague, you will find another view of Egyptian culture is exposed as a lie. But the objective in each plague was that God become known as the only power in the universe. With this introduction, we are ready to understand the purpose of Moses' staff.

As God wished the plagues to place His abilities center-stage, it was essential that no one steal the spotlight. Now, how would Egypt view a man, performing miracles, one after the other? Isn't it a possibility that this idolatrous and mystical people might focus on him, and not the abstract, invisible God he describes? Couldn't they deify him? Yes, they might: but not if it was Moses.

Moses had a speech impediment. And although he worked wonders, his tarnished image as one with a heavy tongue would prevent him from attaining celebrity status. Egypt would not view an impaired man as deity. (This is why Jewish priests must have no defects) Moses spoke poorly. The Egyptians would focus on the miracles, and remain impressed by the miracles alone, without attaching themselves to the performer, Moses.

This was the objective, to focus on God. And perhaps, Moses possessed this speech impediment as part of God's plan. His flawed speech would keep Egypt's attention on God.

However, Moses refused to take the mission. God gave in, and allowed Aaron to speak for Moses. But as Aaron was a man of eloquent speech, now the problem arose: Aaron would captivate Egypt. They would deify him due to his smooth speech and the miracles, and God's intended message to teach Egypt about a single Creator and Governor of Earth would be lost, or at least obscured.

One solution: a diversion was required to remove the possibility that the speaker would captivate Egypt. That diversion was the staff. The staff was something extraneous to Aaron, waved before each plague, diverting their attention away from Aaron. The staff served to 'point' at the source of the plague. Similarly, a magician waves his wand so as to divert the audience's attention away from his other hand. The Egyptians might even become curious about this staff, but the objective that no man obscures God was achieved. Additionally, God commands Moses to be a "mentor" to Aaron, adding to Aaron's reduced status. For no one could deify Aaron, if he took orders from Moses. And we already explained, due to his impaired speech, no Egyptian could deify Moses.

(continued on next page)

(Moses' Staff continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

In Exod. 4:17, God instructs Moses to take the staff to perform the miracles, and this is only after God concedes to Moses, allowing Aaron to speak on his behalf. So the staff enters the picture, but only "after" Aaron becomes an active participant...and a concern. The method to minimize Aaron's role is therefore expressed. Had Moses accepted God's original plan, the staff would be used once, to turn into a serpent. After that, it would not be used at all, as it would not be needed. However, Aaron's presence now required an alteration of that original plan. (We also learn that God does not coerce man to act. He offers the best plan, and man chooses. Thus, Moses made his choice, God then added Aaron to the equation, and therefore God commanded Moses to use a staff offset any attention to Aaron. God did not coerce Moses against his will.)

Now, why was the staff omitted during Arove and Dever? The verses explain. God's intent in delivering the mixture of beasts was so Egypt will know "that I am in the midst of the land". (Exod. 8:18) And the objective of the animal pestilence was to show that "God's hand was against the cattle". (ibid 9:3) In both plagues, God lesson was that He is not a distant deity, as Egypt imagined. Egypt thought the Supreme God was unrelated to them, but that sub-deities is how He ran the world. Thus, God's lesson was that sub-deities are a lie, and that He alone controls all corners of the Earth: "I am in the midst of the land", and "God's hand was against the cattle". It is heretical to believe that God cannot control His own creations, and that he is "at a distance". Of course, we do not mean that God takes up any space, or that He can "be here or there". That too is heretical. We mean that God wished to teach the Egyptians that their view of a "distant" (unrelated) God was false.

So how does this explain why the staff was omitted? I believe that had the staff been used in these two plagues, it might send the message that Moses could "cause" God's presence on Earth. That would degrade God, to be controlled by man. In all other plagues, the Torah's words do not state that God is "in the midst of the land". Only that "there is none like Me in all the land", or "the land belongs to God". These two statements do not refer to God's "actions" (like "in the midst of the land") but they refer only to His "reputation". So it is not problematic that Moses waves the staff to demonstrate God's reputation. But it is problematic had Moses waved the staff, to teach that God was operating on Earth. Thus, the staff was omitted for the two plagues.

The Medrash says that Moses staff had the 10 Plagues acrostic written upon it. I believe another

Medrash says it was made of sapphire. In truth, Moses had this staff before he witnessed the Burning Bush, so he wasn't carrying a sapphire staff. It was most probably a tree branch. What the Medrash points to, is that the staff was successfully viewed as something "special" in connection with the plagues. God's objective was reached, as if it were made of sapphire, and as if it controlled the plagues. The focus on Aaron was shifted, and God remained the focal point.

In summary, Moses was the choice emissary. His speech impediment precluded the Egyptians from attaching themselves to him, despite all the

wonders he was to perform. However, Moses refused, so God had Aaron speak on Moses' behalf. However, Aaron's smooth speech might divert attention away from God, from His miraculous phenomena. Therefore the staff, a diversion, was incorporated.

Yet, a few plagues whose messages were concerning God's interaction with Earth could not tolerate the staff. Such a device would suggest that man could affect God's operation on Earth. These two plagues must not incorporate the staff, and for this separate reason, the staff was omitted in these two plagues. ■

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Weekly Parsha



the Reality of Mitzvos

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

As Bnai Yisrael encamped near Har Sinai, preparing for the seminal event of the receiving of the Torah, God explains to Moshe how, through the acceptance of the covenant of the Torah, Bnai Yisrael would become a "Kingdom of priest and a unique nation". Moshe passes this along to the nation, resulting in the famous proclamation that whatever God says they will do. The Torah then tells us that Moshe returned (vayashev) to God with their response. The Torah (Shemos 19:9) continues:

"God said to Moshe, 'Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear when I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.' Moshe told God the words of the people."

What is strange about this pasuk is that Moshe does not seem to be conveying anything new!

The Talmud (Shabbos 87a) notes this problem, and then expands the question:

"And Moses reported the words of the people unto the Lord; and it is written, 'And Moses told the words of the people unto the Lord'. Now, what did the Holy One, Blessed be He say unto Moses, what did Moses say unto Israel, what did Israel say to Moses, and what did Moses report before the Omnipotent?"

The Talmud, after first offering the possibility of the mitzvah of hagbala being related, offers the following:

"Rebbe said: At first he explained the penalties [for non-observance], for it is written, 'And Moses reported [va-yashev]', [which implies] things which repel [meshabbebin] one's mind. But subsequently he explained its reward, for it is said, 'And Moses told [va-yagged]', [which means,] words which draw one's heart like an aggadah."

Clearly, what troubles the Talmud is the entire exchange between God, Moshe and Bnai Yisrael. Why was it important to relate this information to Bnai Yisrael at this point? What effect was it supposed to have on Bnai Yisrael? What were they to understand?

In order to understand the purpose of the information, it's important to recognize that at this point, Bnai Yisrael were not Jews, at least not in the way we think of a Jew. They did not have a Torah. The Divine system was not yet bestowed upon them. As such, they were no different from a ger, who must start at the very beginning.

The Rambam (Hilchos Issurei Biyah, 14:2-3), in his review of the different halachos regarding the process of conversion, writes that after explaining the concept of Yichud Hashem to the aspiring Jew, and then reviewing a few of the different mitzvos, the ger is presented with the following:

"...and he is informed of the punishment for the mitzvos. How? They say to him 'Do you know that until you came to this religion, if you ate forbidden fats, would you receive kares (spiritual excommunication)? If you violated Shabbos, would you receive the punishment of sekila (stoning)? And now that you are converting, if you eat forbidden fats, you will receive kares, and if you violate Shabbos, you will receive the ganey punishment of sekila'..."

In the following halacha, he explains that the ger (convert) must be informed of the reward of the mitzvos as well, and that the performance of the mitzvos entitles him to a chelek olam haba, the reward of the afterlife. Finally, he writes that a true tzadik is a chacham who performs the mitzvos and knows them.

Why is it necessary to relate the punishments and rewards to the ger? Why does the Rambam use the examples of chelev and Shabbos? Why would the ger presume he might be liable for eating chelev or violating Shabbos? And what does he mean about the definition of the tzadik?

Looking at the order Rambam lists, one can see a progression taking place. First of all, the ger must understand philosophically what separates Judaism from all other religions – Yichud Hashem. The most fundamental core of our entire ideology is this one idea, and this must be understood first and foremost. Along with this comes the antithesis of this idea, that of idolatry. Once a person understands this, he is then introduced to a few of the mitzvos, so he sees that there is a system of laws that govern this religion.

The ger is then told about the punishments and rewards associated with the mitzvos. After a person has learned a little about the mitzvos, he comprehends that being a Jew obviously involves following a set of guidelines. But this does not set Judaism apart – every religion and society has a set of rules to abide by. Civilizations revolve around social contracts, replete with rewards and punishments. A person naturally intuitively needs the need for punishment for actions such as stealing and murder. Yet the Torah, the covenant being entered into by the ger, is different. If a person was told he would suffer complete religious excommunication for eating a piece of fat, or suffer death by stoning for burning an object on the seventh day of the week, he would be aghast at such a proposition. There is no empirical reality to these violations, and yet one suffers the ultimate spiritual and physical fate. The rewards are identical.

Most people assume that the practice of religion should result in physical rewards – wealth and success, for example. Yet in Judaism, the reward for the performance of a mitzva has nothing to do with the physical world. Both the punishment and reward are tied into the philosophical realm. These are more than rules. The mitzvos are a means to perfection, allowing man to live in line with his tzelem elokim. In this context, the ger is taught that indeed one could lose his life for giving in to his instinctual desires, or die for violating the day set aside in the study of God. The ger must understand that the core of the Torah is redefining the physical world into a gateway to perfection.

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(Mitzvos continued from previous page)

The Rambam chooses chelev and Shabbos precisely because they have no empirical expression in the physical world; they epitomize the category of abstract halacha. Therefore, to the Jew, it is no longer a piece of fat – it is "chelev". And it is no longer another day – it is Shabbos. And the benefits? The performance of mitzvos enhance the mind and perfect the soul, allowing for a greater level of Yediyas Hashem, knowledge of God. The promise of olam haba, a "place" whose only benefit lies in the philosophical, sets Judaism apart. Finally, the Rambam explains that the ger must know that it is not the rudimentary action that brings the person to this level, but the comprehension and understanding of the idea that allows him to soar to new heights.

Bnai Yisrael were gerim as well, a nation ready to accept this new system of Torah. Up to this point, they understood the concept of Yichud Hashem (Shemos 3:14), and were already introduced to some of the mitzvos (by Marah). After God speaks to Moshe, and the information is relayed to them, they could easily conclude that the covenant being proposed was simply a guide, a set of laws to help advise them on how to act properly. God has Moshe explain that this religion is completely different. They are first taught that there are punishments tied into a philosophical state of mind, a revolutionary idea that counters a person's natural outlook on life. This is the "repelling of the mind" described by the Talmud, a complete intellectual upheaval, a concept completely foreign to one's being. To the merit of Bnai Yisrael, they accept this concept. Now, being in this state of mind, God has Moshe explain the rewards. Why does the Talmud use the example of that which "draws one's heart to an aggada"? When one first approaches an aggada, he usually sees a strange, fantastical story or event that defies logic. Through careful analysis and thought, one can unravel the mystery behind the strange facade, possibly revealing a tremendous yesod, principle. The benefit of this is purely abstract, the enjoyment tied into an intellectual satisfaction. There are no award ceremonies, no cash prizes – "just" an increase in knowledge and perfection. The aggada is a microcosm of the overall approach one must have to the reward of the mitzvos.

Bnai Yisrael came to understand, and so too we must understand, that the reward for the proper performance of the mitzvos is tied into a philosophical good, and the enjoyment one obtains in these actions lies in the ability to see the infinite chachma of God unfold. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



delaying the people on many fronts. When the people asked for a new "Elohim" (leader of sorts) Aaron asked for their gold, as he didn't think they would so readily part with their gold. He had cast the gold into the fire to delay them again, as he had no utensils with which to form the gold. Despite his efforts to avert their grave sin, "they" forged the calf on their own. Additionally, Aaron tells Moses on his descent from Sinai, responding to Moses' alarm at the situation, "...you know that these people are evil". Now, had Aaron been the one who created the calf, his statement would make no sense. He was condemning the idol construction. Had Aaron made it, it would come out, and he would appear as a fool before his brother for attempting to cast the blame on the Jews. But the Jews in fact created the Gold Calf, not Aaron. So although he "appeared" to have started the process (collecting & melting gold) it was the people who actually made the calf. Thus, Aaron was innocent. ■

Copyright: Protected by Torah?

Rabbi: The Torah describes violations of theft in terms of confiscating objects of value.

Doug: What about intellectual property, like unauthorized use of an idea, CD duplication or forging paintings and selling them? Does Torah law prohibit unauthorized use in these acts too? If so, what is the violation?

Rabbi: The answer is "falsehood". The Torah teaches that one must not lie: "From a falsehood distance yourself". (Exod. 23:7) Therefore, if one were to sell as his own, prints of a painting that he counterfeited from another artist, he is violating that law, as he falsely presents the reprints as his own. If one were to reproduce books in the same lying manner, again he violates lying. The next question would be how we assess the damages, if someone violates these cases. Additionally, copyright infringement is an American law, and the Torah commands Jews to adhere to the "law of the land" in monetary matters.

Josh: I assume that if someone did the opposite (wrote a book and attributed it to another author), he would be violating the same

Aaron: Not Punished for the Gold Calf?

Dick: I have, many times, read the account of Aaron being left in charge of the Jews when Moses went up the mountain to meet with G-d. In many places in Torah there are accounts of G-d's disappointment with the people for their chasing after idols and false man-made gods. Yet, Aaron apparently permitted, or at least turned a blind eye to the people as they manufactured and then worshiped the golden calf...a throwback to one of the gods of the Egyptians.

There is not a word of punishment, retribution or irritation toward Aaron by either Moses or G-d. Why? It seems to me from what is said in Torah, though Moses was angry with the people, Aaron, after abdicating his leadership duties, got off scott-free.

What am I missing?

Rabbi: Sforno answers your question. Aaron did not make the Gold Calf; he intended on

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Letters

prohibition against "falsehood". What about the case where one reprints and sells copyrighted books, but gives full credit to the correct author? He is not lying, but he is violating U.S. copyright laws.

Rabbi: Here too he lies, as he represents himself as the true book salesman. ■

Golem

A recent email from About.Judaism.com read as follows:

"Craigslist is one of those places where you can find just about anything and, according to the "wanted" listing submitted to the site yesterday, one family jokingly hopes that a rabbi trained in the dark arts is among the many resources to be found:

"Looking for Rabbi Versed in DARK TALMUDIC ARTS to create GOLEM: WANTED: One Rabbi versed in the Dark Talmudic Arts to create one Golem for household of three. Golem will perform rudimentary household chores such as dishes & sweeping, basic Math Tutoring for our daughter in 3rd grade and basic household security. Golem must be obedient and..."

Rabbi: We all enjoy a good laugh, and I enjoyed this one. But I also felt this an opportunity to address a foolish idea we have not yet dealt with on Mesora, which many Jews still accept as fact.

People love to get mystical. But if we adhere to our Torah leaders - not our unlearned peers - we find a pleasing, rational approach to all areas, including "golem". This term is typically and ignorantly understood to refer to a soulless human. An impossibility. What do our great Rabbis say about golem? Pirkei Avos addresses this:

"Seven matters are stated in reference to a golem, and seven in relation to a wise man. A wise man does not speak before one greater in wisdom; he doesn't interrupt his friend's discussions; he is not excitedly quick to respond; he inquires and responds intelligently, and he answers [orderly] on the first matter first, and the last matter [asked] he responds last. And on what he has not heard, he says "I have not heard about this". And he admits to truth.

The opposite is true in all cases regarding a golem." (Avos; chap. 5)

According to our Torah leaders, a golem is a person who is arrogant, driven by emotion, cannot order his thoughts, is not truthful, and speaks before thinking. A golem is not a soulless lump of clay created by man. ■

Predetermination vs. Free Will

Dov: What is your understanding of Rabbi Bachya's view on predetermination, as he sets forth in Duties of the Heart[1]? He clearly states that there seemingly conflicting Torah verses. Some verses appear to describe all man's actions as guided by God; others appear to support the view of free will.

Rabbi: I read through the sources. Rabbi Bachya actually concludes that man is ignorant of how to make sense of both, 1) predetermination and 2) justice, i.e., freewill and reward and punishment. He says this on page 327. But let's review the verses cited in support of both views. In support of predetermination, Rabbi Bachya cites the following verses:

"Whatever God did He willed, in heaven and on Earth" (Tehillim 135:6)

"God puts to death and brings to life; He casts down into the grave and raises up; God makes poor and makes rich, He brings low, He also exalts" (Shmuel I, 2:6,7)

"Who has spoken and it has come to pass, unless God has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?" (Eicha, 3:37,38)

"I form light and I create darkness, I make peace and create evil." (Yeshayahu, 45:7)

"Unless God builds a house, its builders toil in vain on it. Unless God watches over a city, the watchman stays on alert in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and stay up late, you who eat the bread of anxious toil; for He grants sleep to His beloved." (Tehillim, 127:1,2)

In support of freewill and justice, we need not mention the many Torah verses that warn

us to act a certain way, lest we are punished; and if we act properly, that we are rewarded. Thus, we are granted the free will to choose. Otherwise, the Torah's warnings make no sense. Furthermore, we sense in ourselves that nothing coerces our choices. So how can we understand those verses above that seem to contradict free will? The resolution is as follows.

The verses above do not address man's free will, but events and situations: wealth, poverty, life, death, good, evil, plans, and accomplishments. These verses all teach that if God does or does not desire a certain event or outcome, man has no say about it. However, this in no way means God interferes with our free will. An example would be a man desirous of building a house that God does not want built. God will not interfere with the man's free will, but God has many ways of eliminating the possibility of the house being built: He can cause the building material shipment to be rerouted, the man to fall sick, and so on.

We conclude that predetermination is about events and situations, but not about man's choices. ■

[1] Pages 318-326, Feldheim pocket hardcover edition, 1999

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Revelation at Sinai: Proof of God & Torah

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

INTRODUCTION

Judaism, as seen through the eyes of the scholars of the Talmud, has its own unique religious orientation. While basing itself on a cataclysmic event - revelation, it does not look to miracles as the source of its intimate relationship with God. God's revelation at Sinai was a one-time occurrence never to be repeated. This is expressed in Deuteronomy 5:19, "a great voice which was not heard again." (1) In the mind of the Talmudic scholar God continuously reveals himself not through miracles but through the wisdom of his laws. (2) These laws manifest themselves in Torah - the written and the oral law - and in nature.

The Psalmist expresses this view most clearly. He speaks freely of the wonders of nature and the awe-inspiring universe as in Psalm 8:4, "When I look at the heavens, the work of Your fingers; the moon and stars which you have established".

Psalm 104, dedicated to the wonders of nature, climaxes with the exclamation, "How many are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all with wisdom." Regarding the sheer intellectual joy one derives from studying Torah, he states, "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul, the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making wise the simple person. The precepts of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is lucid, enlightening the eye. The statutes of the Torah are true; they are all in total harmony. They are more to be desired than gold, even fine gold, and they are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

When speaking of man's search for God the Psalmist states, "The Lord, from heaven, looked down upon the children of man, to see if there were any man of understanding searching for God (14:2)." Man discovers God only through understanding. Accordingly, the righteous are depicted as being constantly involved in this process of searching for and discovering God. "But only in the Torah of the Lord is his desire, and in His Torah he mediates day and night" (Psalms 1:2). Maimonides sharply criticizes those who consider themselves religious and search for God through the miraculous. "Say to a person who believes himself to be of the wise men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the foetus [sic], he will be satisfied with the account; he will believe it and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire and is as big as a third part of the Universe, yet he considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs and he will turn away because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of bringing into existence forces active in a thing that cannot be perceived by the senses." (3)

While Judaism is based on a supernatural event, it is not oriented toward the supernatural. The essence of Judaism is not realized through religious fervor over the miraculous but through an appreciation of God's wisdom as revealed both in Torah and the natural world. A miracle, being a breach of God's law, does not contribute to this appreciation. This distinction is crucial since it gives Judaism its metaphysical uniqueness.

Part I

The foundation of our faith is the belief that God revealed himself to the people of Israel a little over three thousand years ago. The revelation consisted of certain visual and audible phenomena. The elements of fire, clouds, smoke pillars, and the sound of the shofar were present. God produced an

audible voice of immense proportion that He used to speak to Moses and then to the people. The voice conveyed intelligible Laws of great philosophic and halachic import. The event left no doubt in the minds of those present that they had witnessed an act of God. The Torah describes the details of the event in two places, first in Exodus 19 and then in Deuteronomy 4, where Moses recounts the event to the people before his passing. What was the objective of the event? In both places the Torah very clearly tells us the purpose of the revelation. The statement that God made to Moses immediately before the event reads as follows:

"I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will also then believe in you forever." (Exodus 19:9)

When Moses recounts the event to the people he says,

"Teach your children and your children's children about the day you stood before God your Lord at Horeb. It was then that God said to me, 'Congregate the people for Me, and I will let them hear my words. This will teach them to be in awe of Me as long as they live on earth, and they will also teach their children.'" (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)

God clearly intended the event to be a demonstration that would serve the present and all future generations. Nachmanides and others consider it one of the 613 commandments to teach the demonstration of the event at Sinai to every generation. We are therefore obliged to understand the nature of this demonstration and how it was to be valid for future generations. An understanding of the foundations of a system offers insight into the character and philosophical milieu of that system. Comprehension of Torah from Sinai provides the most rudimentary approaches to the entire Weltanschauung of Torah.

Part II

The very concept of a proof or evidence for the occurrence of the event at Sinai presupposes certain premises. It sets the system of Torah apart from the ordinary religious creed. The true religionist is in need of no evidence for his belief. His belief stems from something deep within himself. Indeed, he even senses in the idea of evidence for his belief a mixed blessing, as it were, a kind of alien ally. He does not enjoy making recourse to reality. Judaism, on the other hand, doesn't just permit evidence; it demands it. If one were to say he believed in Torah from Sinai and

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does not need any evidence, he would not be in conformity with the Torah. The Torah demands that our conviction that it was given to us by God be based on the specific formula of the demonstration He created for us. Nachmanides states further that were it not for the event at Sinai we would not know that we should reject a false prophet who performs miracles and tells us to abandon any of the laws or ways of the Torah. It is written in Deuteronomy 18:20 that we should not follow such a prophet. But, says Nachmanides, were it not for the demonstration at Sinai we would be totally in a quandary, unable to know whether we should follow the Torah based on miracles that occurred in Egypt or follow the false prophet based on his miracles. (4) The event at Sinai resolves this dilemma. After the event at Sinai the Jew remains unimpressed even by miracles that would lead an ordinary person to conclude that the words of the false prophet are true. We shall return to this point later.

Clearly then, the basis on which one's religious convictions are built differ in the cases of the strict religionist and the man of Torah. The difference might be stated in the following manner: The religionist believes first in God and then in his mind and senses, while the man of Torah, who bases himself on evidence, accepts his mind and his senses and then proceeds to recognize God and His Torah by means of these tools. Only the man of Torah perceives God as a reality as his ideas concerning God register on the same part of his mind that all ideas concerning reality do. (5)

Let us proceed to the demonstration that took place at Sinai. We must understand not only how this event would serve as proof for those immediately witnessing it but for future generations as well, as it is stated in Deuteronomy, "and they will also teach their children." We must define at the outset what we mean by proof. The term proof as it is commonly used has a subjective meaning. We mean proof to the satisfaction of a given individual. As such it is subject to a wide range of definitions and criteria. There are those for whom even the world of sense perception is doubtful. In order not to get lost in the sea of epistemology let us state that the Torah accepts a framework similar to the one a scientist employs. It accepts the world of sense perception and the human mind. The events that occurred at Sinai are according to Torah valid evidence from which a rational person would conclude that a). There exists a deity, b). This deity is concerned with man, and c). This deity entrusted Moses with the task of conveying his system of laws to the people. To anyone who maintains that even if he were at Sinai he would remain unconvinced, the Torah has little to say.

The Torah addresses itself to a rational mind. It must be remembered that every epistemological

system that is defensible from a logical standpoint is not necessarily rational. Rationality demands more than logical consistency; it requires clear intellectual intuition. One may argue, for instance, that we possess no real knowledge of the atom. One might contend that all electrons and protons conspired to act in a certain way when they were being observed. It may be difficult to disprove such a hypothesis, but it is easy to see that it does not appeal innately to the human mind. (6) Our intuitive intellect rejects it. (7)

Part III

Let us now proceed to the question of how the events at Sinai, which occurred over three thousand years ago, were to serve as evidence for all succeeding generations. We may begin by asking what kind of event, if any, could possibly be performed that would qualify as evidence long after such an event has transpired? What criteria could we set forth that would satisfy such a requirement? Let us analyze how we as human beings gain knowledge. What methods are available to us? It would seem that there are two methods we use to obtain knowledge. The first is by direct observation. This course seems simple enough and for our purpose requires little analysis. Very little of our knowledge, however, is obtained through direct observation. We would know little or nothing of world history if we limited ourselves to direct observation. Even in science little or no progress could be made if one were limited to direct observation. We could not rely on textbooks or information given to us by others. Instead, each scientific observer would have to perform or witness all experimental evidence of the past firsthand. Knowledge in our personal lives would be equally restricted. When we place ourselves on the operating table for surgery we have very little firsthand knowledge about our physical condition or even whether the practitioner is indeed a physician. We put our very lives on the line with almost no firsthand, directly observed evidence.

Why do we do this? Are there any criteria we use that can rationally justify our actions? Here we come to the second class of knowledge available to us - secondhand knowledge. Secondhand knowledge seems to us quite reasonable provided certain criteria are met. When secondhand knowledge comes to our attention we are immediately faced with the question: Is this piece of information true or false? We cannot directly know whether or not it is true since we have not witnessed it directly; we can, however, know if it is true by way of inference. If we can remove all causes of falsehood we can infer that it is true. How can we remove all causes of falsehood? The rationale is simple. If the information that others convey to us is false, it is so

for one of two reasons. Either the informer is ignorant and mistaken in what he tells us, or his statement is a fabrication. If we can rule out these two possibilities, there remains no cause for the information to be false. We then consider it to be true.

How can we eliminate these two possibilities? For the first one, ignorance, we only need to determine whether the individual conveying the information to us is intellectually capable of apprehending it. We deal here with a direct relationship. If the information is simple we may trust an average person. If it is complex or profound we would only trust someone capable of understanding such matters. The more complex the matter, the more qualified a person is required to be; the more simple the matter, the less qualified an individual needs to be. If an ordinary person would tell us it was raining we would be inclined on the basis of the first consideration to believe him. If he would tell us about complex weather patterns we would doubt his information. If, however, an eminent meteorologist would describe such patterns to us, we would believe him. The day President Kennedy was assassinated word spread almost instantly that he was shot. This report remained accurate although it passed through many hands. The details about how or where he was shot were confused. The shooting was a simple item of news capable of being communicated properly even by many simple people. The details of how and where were too complex for ordinary people to transmit properly.

Sometimes our criteria are fulfilled in concert with each other. We may believe a layperson's testimony that another individual is a well-qualified physician and then take the physician's advice. In another case we may accept a layperson's assertion that a text is the work of notable scientists. We would then proceed to accept as true ideas stated in this text even though they seem strange to us. We would not accept these very same ideas from the original simple person. Our acceptance of the information found in textbooks is always based on this process.

Now we come to the consideration of fabrication. Here again we operate through inference. We may rule out fabrication when we trust the individual or think he has no motive to lie. If we do not know the individual we work with a second criterion. We accept the information if many people convey it, and we doubt it when its source is only one individual. The rationale is based on the assumption that one individual may have a motive to lie, but it is unlikely that a group of people would have a collective motivation to lie. If we met someone who told us that the 8:30 train to Montreal derailed we might at first be doubtful, but if several passengers gave us the same report we would accept it.

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We deem it unreasonable to assume a universal conspiracy. Our acceptance of the authorship of books by those named on the covers is based on this assumption. The moment we hear information our minds automatically turn to these two factors. We ask ourselves if the informant is capable of apprehending the information he is conveying and if there is any reason to assume fabrication. If we can answer in the affirmative to the first question and in the negative to the second question, we accept the information as true.

These are the criteria, which guide our lives. They determine the choices we make in both our most trivial and most serious decisions. With this *modus operandi* we conclude that so and so is a highly qualified physician. If we suspect his integrity or his capabilities we consult a second physician or even a third. If all of them agree we would submit to even a serious operation on the grounds that a universal conspiracy is absurd.

Our acceptance of all historical data is based on the previous considerations. We are satisfied with the verisimilitude of certain historical events and unsatisfied with others depending on whether or not our criteria for reliability have been met. We are quite sure of simple well-known facts. For example, no one would dispute the claim that World War I occurred. Again, we are quite certain that George Washington existed, but we are not so sure of what size shoe Washington wore. A simple fact readily observable by many individuals we accept as true. Details we doubt. For these and for complex information we require qualified individuals. By ruling out fabrication we accept their communications as true. Because of our system we often arrive at gray areas when our criteria have not been adequately fulfilled. To the degree that they are not satisfied we are infused with doubt.

We are now in a position to determine what event could be performed that would retain its validity for future generations. Since future generations cannot observe the event directly, it would have to be an event that rules out in its process of communication the causes of doubt due to the ignorance of the communicators and due to fabrication. A simple event grasped easily by the senses that occurs before a mass of people who later attest to its occurrence would fulfill the requirements. Such an event would have all the credibility of the most accepted historical fact. If we doubt either a simple event attested to by masses of people or a complex event attested to by qualified individuals, we would *ipso facto* have to doubt almost all the knowledge we have acquired in all the sciences, all the humanities, and in all the different disciplines existing today. Moreover we would have to desist from consulting with physicians, dentists, lawyers, mechanics,

plumbers, electricians, or specialists in any field who work from an accepted body of knowledge.

The event at Sinai fulfills the above requirements. The events witnessed as described were of a simple perceptual nature so that ordinary people could apprehend them. The event at Sinai was structured with the same built-in ingredients that cause us to accept any historical fact or any kind of secondhand knowledge. Moses himself points this out (Deuteronomy 4:9-13,32-36). Moses notes that those events that transpired before the entire nation were clearly perceived. He states,

"You are the ones who have been shown, so that you will know that God is the Supreme Being and there is none besides Him. From the heavens, He let you hear His voice admonishing you, and on earth He showed you His great fire, so that you heard His words from the fire."

Someone may ask how we know that these events were as described in the Torah, clearly visible, and that they transpired before the entire nation. Perhaps this itself is a fabrication? The answer to this question is obvious. We accept a simple fact attested to by numerous observers because we consider mass conspiracy absurd. For the very same reason no public event can be fabricated, for we would have to assume a mass conspiracy of silence with regard to the occurrence of that event. If someone were to tell us that an atomic bomb was detonated over New York City fifty years ago, we would not accept it as true because we would assume that we would have certainly heard about it, had it actually occurred. The very factors, which compel us to accept as true, an account of an event of public proportion safeguards us against fabrication of such an event. (8) Were this not so all of history could have been fabricated. Had the event at Sinai not actually occurred anyone fabricating it at any point in time would have met with the stiff refutation of the people, "had a mass event of that proportion ever occurred we surely would have heard of it." Fabrication of an event of public proportion is not within the realm of credibility.

History corroborates this point. In spite of the strong religious instinct in man, no modern religion in over two thousand years has been able to base itself on public revelation. A modern religion demands some kind of verifiable occurrence in order to be accepted. For this reason the two major Western religions, Christianity and Islam, make recourse to the revelation at Sinai. Were it not for this need and the impossibility of manufacturing such evidence, they certainly would not have based their religions on another religion's revelation.

Part IV

We now face one question. One may argue that we are to accept Torah much as one would accept any major historical event, and we may put our lives on the line based on no stronger evidence, but doesn't religion demand certitude of a different nature? Here we are not looking for certitude based on some formula, which we are forced to employ in our daily lives but certitude, which gives us conviction of an absolute and ultimate nature.

To answer this question we must proceed with an examination of the tenets involved in the institution of Torah from Sinai, to which the rest of this paper is dedicated. Maimonides states that the nation of Israel did not believe in Moses because of the miracles he performed. (9) Moses performed these miracles out of simple necessity. They needed to escape from Egypt, so he split the sea, they needed food, so he brought forth manna. The only reason the people believed in Moses and hence God and Torah was because of the event at Sinai where they heard a voice that God produced speaking to Moses and instructing him to teach the people. But we may ask, weren't the miracles in Egypt enough to convince the people of Moses' authenticity? Didn't they follow him out of Egypt based on what they observed of God's miracles? And doesn't the Torah itself state at the splitting of the sea (Exodus 14:31),

"The Israelites saw the great power that God had unleashed against Egypt, and the people were in awe of God. They believed in God and his servant Moses."

But Maimonides is thoroughly supported by the Bible itself since after this very statement, after the splitting of the sea, God says to Moses (Exodus 19:9),

"I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then also believe in you forever."

It is clear, as Maimonides concludes, that there was something lacking in the previous belief for if it were complete the very motive for the Revelation, as stated clearly in the Torah, would be lacking.

A belief instilled by miracles, even miracles of cataclysmic proportion forecasted in advance and occurring exactly when needed is lacking according to Maimonides. They do not effectuate total human conviction. It is, in the words of Maimonides, "a belief which has after it contemplation and afterthought." It may cause one to act on it because of the profound improbability of coincidence but it is not intellectually satisfying. The mind keeps returning to the event and contin-

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ues to ponder it. God wished Torah to be founded on evidence that totally satisfies the human mind - Tzelem Elokim - which He created. He wished Judaism to be based on a sound foundation of knowledge, which would satisfy man's intellect completely. Miracles may point to something. We may be convinced that coincidence is improbable but such conclusions are haunted by afterthoughts. When the voice produced by God was heard from the heavens there was no further need for afterthought. It was a matter of direct evidence. Only then could it be said that the people knew there is a God and that Moses was His trusted servant. The requirements for knowledge were complete.

Maimonides concludes, "Hence it follows that every prophet that arises after Moses our teacher, we do not believe in him because of the sign he gives so that we might say we will pay heed to whatever he says, but rather because of the commandment that Moses gave in the Torah and stated, 'If he gives you a sign you shall pay heed to him,' just as he commanded us to adjudicate on the basis of the testimony of two witnesses even though we don't know in an absolute sense if they testified truthfully or falsely. So too is it a commandment to listen to this prophet even though we don't know if the sign is true. Therefore if a prophet arose and performed great wonders and sought to repudiate the prophecy of our teacher Moses we do not pay heed to him. To what is this similar? To two witnesses who testified to someone about something he saw with his own eyes denying it was as he saw it; he doesn't listen to them but knows for certain that they are false witnesses. Therefore the Torah states that if the sign or wonder comes to pass do not pay heed to the words of this prophet because this (person) came to you with a sign and wonder to repudiate that which you saw with your own eyes and since we do not believe in signs but only in the commandments that Moses gave how can we accept by way of a sign this (person) who came to repudiate the prophecy of Moses that we saw and heard." (10) The Jew is thus tied completely and exclusively to the event at Sinai which was formulated to totally satisfy the human mind. (11)

This explains the main idea of the chapter of the false prophet given by the Torah in Deuteronomy 13:2-6.

"If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you comes to pass, and he says, 'Let us go after other gods which you have not known and let us serve them.'"

"Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. God your lord is testing you to

see if you are truly able to love God your Lord with all your heart and all your soul."

What is this test? The test is to see if your love (12) of God is based on true knowledge, which He has taught you to follow and embrace, or if you are to fall prey to the unsound primitive emotions of the moment that well up from the instinctual source of man's nature. The faith of the Jew can never be shaken by dreamers or miracle workers. We pay no attention to them. Based on the rationally satisfying demonstration of Sinai we remain faithful to God through His wisdom and knowledge. (13) Our creed is that of His eternal and infinite law. When we perfect ourselves in this manner we can say that we truly love God with all our hearts and with all our soul. We then serve God through the highest part of our nature, the Divine element He placed in our soul.

Part V

We have so far dealt with the actuality of the event at Sinai and with the nature of this event. We must now concern ourselves with the purpose of this event. When the Jews received the Torah at Sinai they uttered two words, naaseh v'nishma, "we will do and we will hear", the latter meaning we will learn, understand, and comprehend. The commitment was not just one of action or performance but was one of pursuit of knowledge of the Torah. Rabbi Jonah of Gerundi asks, (14) how can one do if he doesn't understand? A performance of a rational person requires as a prerequisite knowledge of that performance. Rabbi Jonah answers: The event at Sinai served as a verification of the truth of Torah. The Torah set up a system of scholarship to which its ideas are entrusted. "We will do" means we will accept the authority of the scholars of Torah concerning proper religious performance until we can understand ourselves by way of knowledge why these performances are correct. The commitment of naaseh (action) is preliminary until we reach the nishma, (hearing) our own understanding. Our ultimate objective is the full understanding of this corpus of knowledge known as Torah. We gain knowledge of Torah by applying our intellects to its study and investigation. The study of Torah and the understanding of its principles is a purely rational and cognitive process. All halachic decisions are based on human reason alone.

Until rather recently the greatest minds of our people devoted themselves to Torah study. Since the tradition of our people has lost popularity, the great intellectual resources of our people have been directed to science, mathematics, psychology, and other secular areas from which eminent thinkers emerged. In former years our intellectual resources

produced great Torah intellects like Maimonides, Rabbeinu Tam, and Nachmanides. In modern times these same resources produced eminent secular giants like Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Sigmund Freud. I mention this so that the layman may have some understanding of the intellectual level of our scholars, for just as it is impossible to appreciate the intellect of an Einstein unless one has great knowledge of physics, it is impossible to appreciate the great minds of Torah unless one has attained a high level of Torah knowledge.

The greatest thinkers of science all share a common experience of profound intellectual humility. Isaac Newton said that he felt like a small boy playing by the sea while the "whole ocean of truth" rolled on before him. Albert Einstein said, "One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science measured against reality is primitive and childlike - and yet it is the most precious thing we have." The human mind cannot only ascertain what it knows; it can appreciate the extent and enormity of what it does not know. A great mind can sense the depth of that into which it is delving. In Torah one can find the same experience. The greatest Torah minds throughout the centuries have all had the realization that they are only scratching the surface of a vast and infinite body of knowledge. As the universe is to the physicist, Torah is to the Talmudist. Just as the physicist when formulating his equations can sense their crudeness against the vast reality he is attempting to penetrate, so too the Talmudist in formulating his abstractions comes in sight of the infinite world of halachic thought. As the Midrash states, "It is far greater than the earth and wider than the sea, and it increases infinitely." The reason for both experiences is the same. They both derive from God's infinite knowledge.

Let me elaborate further on this point. When the scientist ponders the phenomena of nature and proceeds to unravel them, he finds that with the resolution of each problem new worlds open up for him. The questions and seeming contradictions he observes in nature are gateways that guide him to greater understanding, forcing him to establish new theories, which, if correct, shed light on an even wider range of phenomena. New scientific truths are discovered. The joy of success is, however, short-lived, as new problems, often of even greater immensity, emerge on the horizon of investigation. He is not dissuaded by this situation because he considers his new insight invaluable and looks forward with even greater anticipation to future gains in knowledge. The scientist is propelled by his faith that nature is not at odds with itself, that the world makes sense, and that all problems, no matter how formidable in appearance, must eventually yield to an underlying intelligible system, one that is capable of being grasped by the human mind. His faith is amply rewarded as each

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success brings forth new and even more amazing discoveries. He proceeds in his infinite task.

When studying man-made systems, such as United States Constitutional Law or British Common Law, this is not the case. The investigator here is not involved in an infinite pursuit. He either reaches the end of his investigation or he comes upon problems that do not lend themselves to further analysis; they are attributable to the shortcomings of the designers of the system. The man-made systems exhibit no depth beyond the intellect of their designers. Unlike science, real problems in these systems do not serve as points of departure for new theoretical insights but lead instead to dead ends.

Those who are familiar with the study of Torah know that the Talmudist encounters the same situation as the scientific investigator. Here difficulties do not lead to dead ends; on the contrary, with careful analysis apparent contradictions give way to new insights, opening up new highways of intellectual thought. Wider ranges of halachic phenomena become unified while new problems come to light. The process is infinite. The greatest human minds have had this experience when pondering the Talmud; indeed, the greater the mind, the greater the experience. We are dealing with a corpus of knowledge far beyond the ultimate grasp of mortal man. It is this experience, this firsthand knowledge of Torah that has been the most intimate source of faith for Torah scholars throughout the ages.

The ultimate conviction that Torah is the word of God derives from an intrinsic source, the knowledge of Torah itself. Of course this source of conviction is only available to the Torah scholar. But God wants us all to be scholars. This is only possible if we do the nishma, the ultimate purpose of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

The revelation at Sinai, while carefully structured by the Creator to appeal to man's rational principle to move him only by his Tzelem Elokim, is only a prelude to the ultimate direct and personal realization of the Torah as being the work of the Almighty. The revelation at Sinai was necessary to create the naaseh, which is the bridge to the nishma where anyone can gain firsthand knowledge of Torah and the truth it contains. As Rabbi Soloveitchick once said, the study of Torah is a "rendezvous with the Almighty". When we begin to comprehend the philosophy of Torah we may also begin to appreciate how the revelation at Sinai was structured by God in the only way possible to achieve the goals of the Torah - to create a religion, forever secure, by means of which man worships God through the highest element in his nature.



Postscript

A statement of Nachmanides warrants inclusion here. Nachmanides says that we can infer the truth of the Torah from the principle that a person would not bequeath a falsehood to his children. At first sight this seems inexplicable. Idolatry could also avail itself of the same argument. We must obviously say that the principle, it may be true, must be amended to read a person would not transmit intentionally a falsehood to his children. How then does this show Judaism is true? All religious people believe their religion is true and that they are bestowing the greatest blessing on their children by conveying to them their most cherished beliefs.

The words of Nachmanides become clear when we realize that his inference is based on a certain level of Torah knowledge. Either the emotions or the intellect generates a belief. But Torah is a vast system of knowledge with concepts, postulates, and axioms. If such a system were fabricated it

would have to be done so intentionally. Nachmanides therefore states his proposition that a person does not bequeath a falsehood to his children.

For the purpose of Nachmanides' inference, one would have to attain at least a basic familiarity with Torah. The ultimate recognition of Torah as a science would of necessity require a higher degree of knowledge. Nachmanides' proof is partially intrinsic, whereas the demonstration of Torah from Sinai is totally extrinsic. There are then three levels of knowledge of Torah from Sinai: the demonstration, the intrinsic verification through knowledge, and that of Nachmanides.

Epilogue

Torah completely satisfies the needs of the Tzelem Elokim in man's nature. Every human mind craves Torah. Man was created for it (see tractate Sanhedrin 99b). Following the example of Maimonides, who said "Listen to the truth from

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whomever said it (Introduction to Avos)," and his son Reb Avraham, who endorsed the study of Aristotle in the areas in which he does not disagree with Torah, (15) I take the liberty to quote Bertrand Russell: "The world has need of a philosophy or a religion which will promote life. But in order to promote life it is necessary to value something other than mere life. Life devoted only to life is animal, without any real human value, incapable of preserving men permanently from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity. If life is to be fully human it must serve some end, which seems, in some sense, outside human life, some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as God or truth or beauty. Those who best promote life do not have life for their purpose. They aim rather at what seems like a gradual incarnation, a bringing into our human existence of something eternal, something that appears to the imagination to live in a heaven remote from strife and failure and the devouring jaws of time. Contact with the eternal world - even if it be only a world of our imagining - brings a strength and a fundamental peace which cannot be wholly destroyed by the struggles and apparent failures of our temporal life." (16)

Torah makes our lives worthwhile. It gives us contact with the eternal world of God, truth, and the beauty of His ideas. Unlike Russell the agnostic, we do not have to satisfy ourselves with a world of "our imagining" but with the world of reality - God's creation. How fortunate we are and how meaningful are the words we recite each day, "for they [the Torah and mitzvot] are our lives and the length of our days." ■

End Notes

1. See Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra on this verse.

2. In his description of the Torah scholar, Rav Soloveitchik states, "He does not search out transcendental, ecstatic paroxysms or frenzied experiences that whisper intonations of another world into his ears. He does not require any miracles or wonder in order to understand the Torah. He approaches the world of halacha with his mind and intellect just as cognitive man approaches the natural realm. And since he relies upon his intellect, he places his faith in it and does not suppress any of his psychic faculties in order to merge into some supernal existence. His own personal understanding can resolve the most difficult and complex problems. He pays no heed to any murmurings of [emotional] intuition or

other types of mysterious presentiments." Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. (Philadelphia: 1983, Jewish Publication Society of America) p.79.

3. Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Trans. by M. Friedlander. (London: 1951 Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd) p. 161.

4. From both Maimonides and Nachmanides who concur on this point, as well as from the plain meaning of the Bible itself with regard to the objective of Revelation, it is clear that Judaism does not give credence to the existence of an authentic inner religious voice. Were this the case, there would be no need for the demonstration at Sinai in order to discredit the false prophet (Deuteronomy 8:2-6). On the contrary, this would be the exact test spoken of, to see if one will be faithful to this inner voice. For Judaism this inner voice is no different from the subjective inner feelings all people have for their religious and other unwarranted beliefs. It stems from the primitive side of man's nature and is in fact the source of idolatry. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 29:17, 18:

Today, there must not be among you any man, woman, family or tribe, whose heart strays from God, and who goes and worships the gods of those nations. When [such a person] hears the words of this dread curse, he may rationalize and say, "I will have peace, even if I do as I see fit."

Why does the Torah here as in no other place present to us the rationalization of the sinner? The Torah is describing the strong sense of security these primitive inner feelings often bestow on their hosts and is warning of the tragic consequences that will follow if they are not uprooted.

5. It is imperative that the reader examines the passages in the Torah relevant to this notion. These include Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 4:3,9,34,35, and 36.

6. As a classic example, metaphysical solipsism may be logically irrefutable but is to the human mind absurd.

7. We may even be able to discover why we reject it, let us say, due to Occam's razor, the maxim that assumptions introduced to explain a thing must be as few as possible, but our rejection is not due to a knowledge of Occam's razor but rather Occam's razor is based on our rejection. It is part of the innate rationale of our mental system. Occam's razor, a rather marvelous formula, does not rely on deductive logic. It shows that the natural world somehow conforms to our mental world. The simplest idea is the most appealing to the human mind and is usually the most correct one. The world is in conformity with the mind. In the words of Albert Einstein, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible."

8. It should be understood that the mere claim

that an event was a public one and its acceptance by people does not qualify the event as fulfilling our requirements; it is only if the people who accept the information are in a position to reject it that their acceptance is of value. If a person from Africa claims to people of Sardinia that a public event transpired in Africa, the acceptance by the Sardinians is no indication of reliability as they are not in a position to confirm or deny the event. It is only if the claim is made to the same people who were in a position to observe the event that acceptance is of value. Claims made by early Christians about public miracles of the Nazarene do not qualify, as the masses of Jews before whom they were supposedly performed did not attest to them. The same is true of claims made by other faiths (though, as we will see, after Sinai miracles have no credibility value).

9. See Maimonides, Code of Law, Chapter VIII, Laws Concerning the Foundations of Torah.

10. Ibid. Chapter VIII.

11. This point is crucial. It contradicts popular opinion. The Jew remains at all times unimpressed by miracles. They do not form the essence of his faith, and they do not enter the mental framework of his creed. Though the most righteous prophet may perform them, they instill no belief. His credence harks back to only one source - Sinai.

12. See the concept of love of God as described by Maimonides Code, Laws of the Foundations of Torah Chapter II 1,2, and our elaboration on this theme in "Why one should learn Torah."

13. When visiting the Rockefeller Medical Institute, Albert Einstein met with Dr. Alexis Carrel, whose extracurricular interests were spiritualism and extrasensory perception. Observing that, Einstein was unimpressed. Carrel said, "But Doctor what would you say if you observed this phenomenon yourself?" To which Einstein replied, "I still would not believe it." (Clark, Ronald W. Einstein: The Life and Times. (New York: 1971, Avon Books) p. 642). Why would the great scientist not capitulate even to evidence? It is a matter of one's total framework. The true man of science who sees knowledge permeating the entire universe from the smallest particle to the largest galaxies will not be shaken from his view by a few paltry facts even though he may not be able to explain them. Only the ignorant are moved by such "evidence." In a similar manner miracles do not affect a man of Torah who is rooted in Sinai and God's infinite wisdom. His credo is his cogito.

14. Rebbeinu Yonah Avos III 9.

15. Concerning books that are proscribed, this follows the precedent of the Talmud [Sanhedrin 110b], *mili mealyesah deis baih darshinon* - those true things that are contained in them we do study.

16. Schlipp, Paul R. *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. (LaSalle: 1989, Open Court Publishing). p.533.



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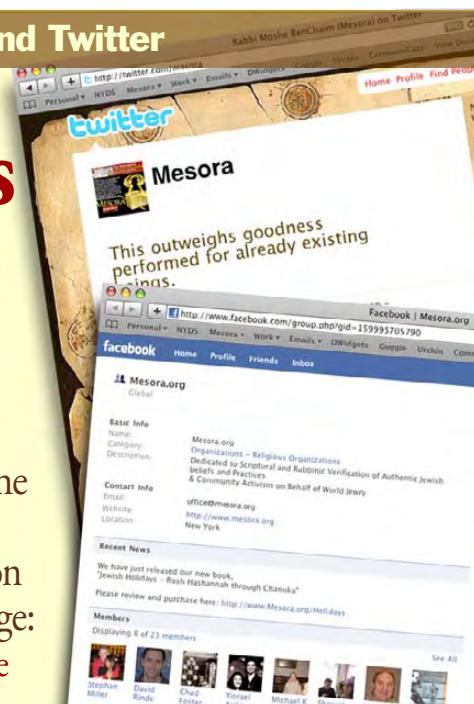
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