



If we study Torah aware of the Author,
we then anticipate uncovering precious gems.
This excitement fuels the search with the energy
required to endure the process and refrain from
accepting any notion less than brilliant.

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Jerusalem	7:14	Pittsburgh	8:12
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London	8:23	Tokyo	6:23
Miami	7:46	Toronto	8:17
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Weekly Parsha

Re'eh

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Suffering of the Jewish People is Evidence of Providence

Behold, I place before you today a blessing and a curse. (Devarim 11:26)

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Holidays

Shofar in the Month of Elul

RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG

This coming week is Rosh Chodesh Elul, and with it comes the introduction of the minhag of blowing the shofar on a daily basis until Rosh Hashana. The source for this minhag merits analysis, and its evolution over the years is quite fascinating.

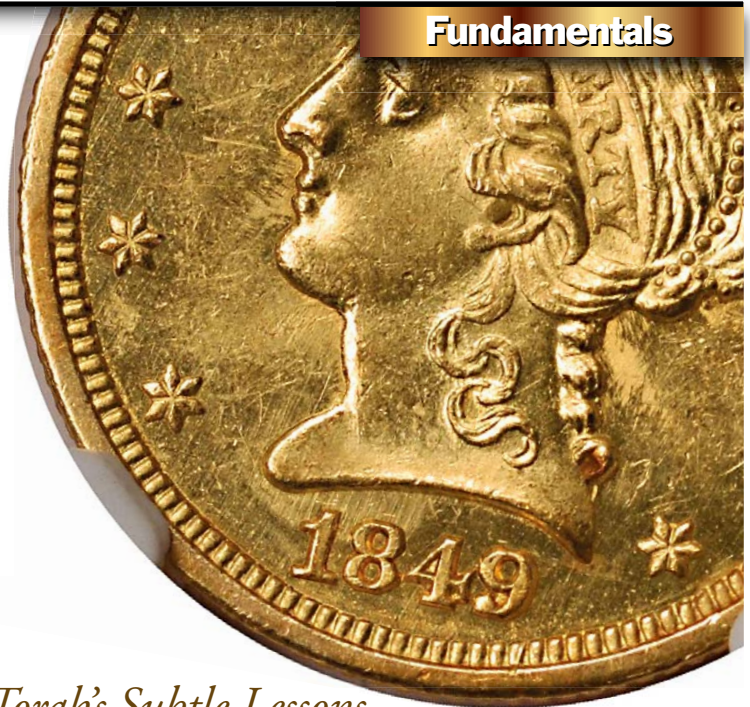
The Source

For most poskim, the origin for this minhag lies in a midrash found in Pirkei Di-Rabbi Elazar (46). As is well known, the decision to build the golden calf emerged from a miscalculation as to the conclusion of Moshe's time on Mt. Sinai. Moshe returned from the mountain and broke the luchos on the 17th of Tammuz. It was forty days later that the following took place (using Tur's interpretation, OC 581):

"On Rosh Chodesh Elul, God said to him 'Come up to Me on the

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Fundamentals



Torah's Subtle Lessons

Idolatry

Maimonides' Insightful Formulation

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This week's parsha Re'eh includes God's commands to abolish idolatry and all its traces from the land we were about to inherit. Idolatry forms the second of the Ten Commandments as well as the fifth of Maimonides 13 Principles, giving it vital focus and demanding we fully grasp this fundamental. Additionally, Maimonides teaches[1] that we derive a fundamental from the Rabbis: "One who admits to idolatry, denies all of Torah, all prophets and all that the prophets commanded from Adam through all genera-

(continued on page 4)

(Re'eh cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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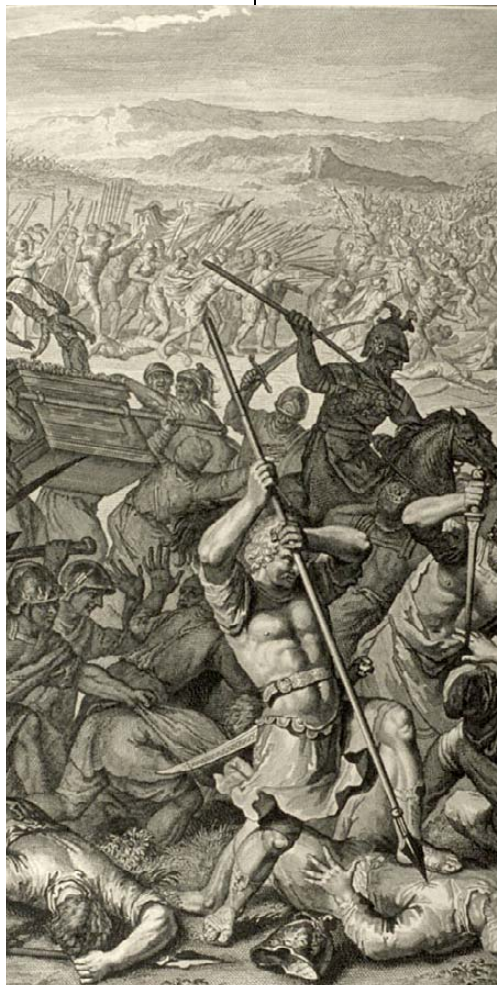
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The Talmud, in Mesechet Ketubot, relates a tragic incident that occurred after the destruction of the Temple. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai and his students were traveling from Yerushalayim. The group came upon a poor woman. In order to sustain herself, she was searching the droppings of animals for undigested kernels of grain. Upon seeing Raban Yochanan ben Zakai, the woman rose and asked him for charity. The two entered into a conversation. It was soon discovered that this impoverished beggar was the daughter of Nakdimon ben Guryon. This man had been one of the most wealthy and respected citizens of Yerushalayim. With the destruction of Yerushalayim, the family had lost everything. The once indulged daughter was reduced to the most desperate poverty.

Raban Yochanan ben Zakai proclaimed, "Happy are you, Yisrael. When you fulfill the will of Hashem, no nation has power over you. And when you do not fulfill the will of Hashem, you are delivered into the hands of the lowest nation. You are even delivered to the animals of this nation." [1]

Raban Yochanan ben Zakai was clearly contrasting the previous glory of the Jewish people with the remarkable ravages that followed the Churban - the destruction of the Temple. He also explained that the fate of the nation is determined by obedience to Hashem. If the Torah is observed, no nation, regardless of its power, can subjugate Bnai Yisrael. If the Torah is disregarded, Bnai Yisrael becomes the lowliest of nations. The difficulty with Raban Yochanan ben Zakai's statement is that he introduces it as a happy tiding. He tells us we should be pleased to discover both the heights to which we can rise and the depths to which we can fall. It is encouraging to know that we can achieve remarkable success. But the assurance that our downfall will be equally extreme seems less of a cause for happiness.



An understanding of Raban Yochanan ben Zakai's attitude emerges from a study of the opening of the parasha. Moshe tells the people that they will be subject to a blessing and curse. The blessing will be the result of observing the Torah. It will encompass every essential form of material wealth and well-being. The curse is a consequence of disregarding the commands. It will be a terrible curse of astounding proportions. Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno points out that this blessing and curse have an important implication. Other nations may experience periods of success and advancement. At other times these

nations may suffer disappointments and decline. But both the advancement of a nation and its decline is usually gradual. Change occurs slowly and with moderation. However, Bnai Yisrael is subject to sudden and extreme changes - extreme success or extreme persecution and suffering. [2] Jewish history is characterized by this pattern of ever-changing extremes.

Why does the condition of the Jewish people tend to these extremes? Other nations are generally governed by natural law. [3] Natural causes do not often produce extremes. As a result, unless confronted with an unusual catastrophe, most nations experience gradual progress and decline. The condition of the Jewish

people is controlled by Hashem. He determines our condition and well-being based upon our behavior. His control over nature is complete. When Hashem rewards His people, there is no limit to the blessings He can bestow. His punishment can also be profound. The magnitude of our success and even our sufferings is indicative of Hashem's influence.

Now, the meaning of Raban Yochanan ben Zakai's statement is clear. The astonishing downfall of the Jewish people was a consequence of the special relationship enjoyed with

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(Re'eh continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

the Creator. Punishment is not pleasant. However, it does reflect this important bond between Hashem and His people. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai is teaching that even in times of terrible national suffering we can receive comfort. The magnitude of the suffering reflects our special relationship with Hashem.

When there will arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he will perform for you a sign or a wonder. (Devarim 13:2)

This pasuk introduces the laws concerning a false prophet. This is a person who claims to be a prophet and seemingly proves his claim through performing a wondrous sign. The supposed prophet commands the people to worship idols or contradicts the Torah. This person is a false prophet and is condemned to death.

Maimonides discusses this section of the Torah at length. In this discussion, he deals with some very important issues. Maimonides explains that the Torah created a means through

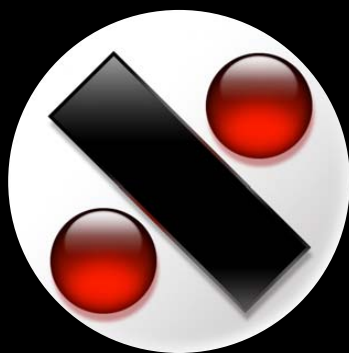
which a prophet is authenticated. He explains that there are two methods. The first is through the performance of a wondrous sign.[4] The second method is through prediction of future events. A person who proves capable of consistently predicting the future is deemed to an authentic prophet.[5] Maimonides explains that neither of these methods is applied in isolation. The claimant must be an individual fit for prophecy. This requires that the person be learned, wise and moral.[6] A person who meets these requirements and also authenticates himself is deemed to be a true prophet. We are commanded to obey this prophet.[7]

Much of Maimonides' discussion deals with a fundamental question. The false prophet is an individual who seems to meet all of the qualifications of a true prophet. Yet, because this claimant commands the people to disobey the Torah he is renounced and put to death. This suggests an important question. Presumably, this false prophet has met all of the requirements for authentication but we are commanded to disregard his directions and instead execute him for his crime. This means that Torah clearly concedes that wondrous signs can be misleading. The false prophet performed these signs. Yet, this individual is a fraud! How can these same inconclusive indications prove the authenticity of the true prophet?

Maimonides provides an insightful response. The Torah does not regard any wonder as an infallible sign of the prophet's authenticity. Wonders can be fabricated. We do not follow the prophet because these signs prove authenticity. So, why do we obey a prophet who has performed wonders? This is because the Torah commands us to obey. In order to understand Maimonides' perspective an analogy will be helpful. The Torah commands us to decide legal matters on the basis of testimony provided by a pair of witnesses. The Torah also provides us with laws for the punishment of false witnesses. These laws acknowledge the possibility that a pair of witnesses can successfully conspire to mislead the court. Testimony

is not an infallible form of evidence! Why do we rely on testimony? The answer is that we do not rely on testimony because we assume it is infallible. Instead, we decide the matter on the basis of testimony because the Torah commands us to accept this standard. Similarly, we acknowledge that the signs of the prophet are not perfect evidence of authenticity. We accept these signs because we are so instructed by the Torah.

We can now resolve our question. A prophet does not provide infallible proof of authenticity. The claimant is obeyed only because the Torah commands us in obedience. The false prophet denies the Torah. This individual commands us to disobey the Torah. This command undermines the claimant's very authenticity. We only accept signs and wonders as sources of authentication because of the Torah. If the Torah is false - as this supposed prophet claims, then the claimant's wonders are meaningless. Without the Torah, there is no basis for accepting the commands of this false prophet.[8] ■



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[1] Mesechet Ketubot 66b.

[2] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim, 11:30.

[3] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 4:19.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:7.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 10:1-2.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:7.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:7.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:10.

tions. And concerning one who denies idolatry, he converse is true." Maimonides adds, "and it [idolatry] is the essence of all the Mitzvos". Let's start by understanding that last statement.

How exactly the command not to violate idolatry the "essence", let's say, of waving the Lulav and Esrog? How is it the "essence" of rejoicing on the holidays through eating meat and drinking wine, or wearing tzitzis?

Maimonides does not mean idolatry forms the essence of the "act" of all commands, but rather, the "objective". God gave literally each command with the goal being our realization of more of God's wisdom. If we don't understand the concepts in each command, Rashi says the performance is useless. This makes sense, for what benefit do we achieve when waving a palm branch and citron, if it is not motivated by some ideal? But if we study the Rabbis' words, we realize that waving up and down demonstrates our acceptance of the One who created all that is up (in heaven) and down (on Earth). That is, God created all corners of the universe. And when we wave in the four, horizontal Earthly directions, we demonstrate our conviction that all man's horizontal travels and doing are recognized by God, and that we benefit from His providence. Thus, God created all, and governs all. Now we can appreciate this command of waving produce at harvest time. Our very sustenance is due to the Creator. And this idea rejects the notion of idolatry.

Tzitzis calls to mind "all" mitzvos: "And you shall see them, and you shall recall all the mitzvos of God and you shall perform them, and you shall not go astray after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you deviate".[2] We possess senses and desires. We can easily be aroused by both, A) visuals and B) imagination. God commanded we wear an item that recalls the total Torah system. When about to sin, we are faced with this A) visual reminder that forces B) recollection of God. Tzitzis visually obscures a tempting visual, and the command to recall all the mitzvos is a mental activity that combats another internal function – our emotions. This restraint on our desires also conditions us not to follow idolatry, which is found only in our desires and not in reality. Contemplating the Torah system as well, focuses us on God, and mitigates the drive towards "other" beings.

Even the rejoicing with food on holidays generates good emotions associated with the holiday: a recollection of God's providence. Thereby, we do not accept that an idol rescued us from bondage, or sheltered us in huts, or gave us the Torah. This is what Maimonides means by "idolatry is the essence of all the Mitzvos". All mitzvos are to increase our appreciation for the only God, simultaneously rejecting the notion of idolatry.



Core Idea

Maimonides teaches the central theme of idolatry is that we must not worship anything created.[3] This includes the sun, moon stars, angels and constellations, all the way down through humans, animals and plants and all elements and minerals. We must appreciate that the source of idolatry is human insecurity. If man were self-sufficient, having no worries or cares, he would not pray or seek assistance. But we are in fact, dependent, with needs. Intelligent people realize that as all in the universe is created, they do not seek assistance from anything or anyone except the Creator, the only being truly capable of assisting us. Maimonides adds[4] that we also do not admit of God, while seeking intermediaries. The practice of seeking intermediaries in any form expresses a false view of God: that I cannot relate to Him directly, nor that He can relate to me directly. Worse, it expresses the idea that God is not independently sufficient, i.e., He requires an intermediary or assistant.

Major Themes

Idolatry includes a few major parameters: one cannot create idols or instruct others to make them; one cannot worship them; one cannot look at idols; one cannot derive any benefit from idols; one cannot create figurines for beauty even if not for idolatry; one must abstain from idolatrous practices like omens, horoscopes, amulets, consulting the dead, witchcraft; and one must destroy idols and all that is used in its worship.

Regarding the various objects under this prohibition of creating idols, we wonder how both Maimonides[5] and the Shulchan Aruch[6] state that creating figures of animals is permissible, while Deuteronomy 4:17 teaches we cannot create such figures. Was not the Gold Calf a primary example? To compound this question, Deuteronomy 4:16 groups man with animals as the forms prohibited regarding the creation of replicas (idolatry). Thus, man and beast should be equal.

Statues of Worship vs. Beauty

We must contrast the source prohibiting "idol" creation to the verse prohibiting the creation of figurines for "beauty" and not for worship.

Exodus 20:4 (the Ten Commandments) prohibits all forms of idols: "Do not create for yourself a statue of any form that is in heaven above and that is in the Earth below and that is in the water under the Earth." (Deuteronomy 4:17 cites Moses' additional warning not to do so.) In both cases, the Torah prohibits the replication of any being for the sake of "worship". In this prohibition, man is no different than animal. So in what sense are animals (and plants) permitted?

The permitted replication of animals and plants is for beauty, like statues on one's lawn, or in his home. When not created for idolatry but merely for decoration, we are taught that animals and plants can be replicated. Even decorative replicas of man and the heavenly bodies and angels would be permitted, were it not due to the Torah's separate concern that erring individuals not be misled and follow idolatry. So as not to mislead people, even the creation of statues or figurines for decoration is prohibited, but this prohibition applies only to man, the heavenly bodies and angels.

The verse Maimonides cites for this second prohibition is Exodus 20:20: "Do not make with Me gods of silver, and gods of gold do not make for yourselves." Notice the words "silver" and "gold", i.e., ornamental materials. It is thereby learned that this verse does not come to prohibit idolatry, what Torah already prohibited in Exodus 20:4, but it must add a new prohibition. This addition is the creation of figurines that are ornamental in nature, and not idolatrous. Nonetheless, they are prohibited.

My friend Rabbi Roth suggested the exclusion of plants and animals from decorative purposes is due to their lack of intelligence. Thus, the Torah only went so far to protect people from error, and only prohibited decorative statues that reflect beings possessing intelligence and capable of

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(Idolatry continued from page 4)

Fundamentals

answering man's cries...those things that could possibly be treated as idols. But as plants and animals have no intelligence, the Torah did not go so far as to prohibit these categories of replicas, when not made for idolatry.

Perhaps another reason is that plants and animals of each species are identical. One can barely distinguish two lions, two zebras, or two maple trees. Thus, the individual member of each species offers man no satisfaction that "this one" is unique and worthy of worship. Thus, animals and plants are not prohibited when created for decoration or beauty. In contrast, the sun, moon, constellations and descriptions of angels are all unique. This uniqueness of each individual subject lends itself to man's projection of "powers", and thus idolatry. Therefore, these latter subjects are prohibited, even if created for beauty. But let's further appreciate the Torah's formulations...

Replica vs. Imagination

What is the need for this additional verse, and command? Why are not the angels and the spheres subsumed under the primary prohibition taken from the first verse we quoted in the Ten Commandments, "Do not create for yourself a statue of any form that is in heaven above and that is in the Earth below and that is in the water under the Earth"?

Our second verse (Exod. 20:20) is precise...also saying Do not make "with Me". "With Me" means to say "Do not make forms of ministers who minister before Me on high"[7], referring to the various angels and the spheres. Of course, God does not occupy space, so the heavenly spheres and angels are not "with" God.

"The Torah speaks in man's language",[8] thus, "With Me" refers to subjects that man deems more closely related to God, such as the spheres and the angels. But "with Me" carries another idea...

Do not make "with Me"

This refers to a new category of idolatrous prohibition: objects not subject to replication.

We don't know what God is. And anything "with God" implies that it shares something with God. But nothing is comparable to God![9] What then does this mean?

I believe the equation is that just as God is unknowable and not subject to replication, the angles too are not subject to replication. Even the spheres cannot be replicated, as Abbayeh taught.[10] Maimonides too points to this distinction, as he says we cannot create the "similitude" (dimus) of the angels or the spheres. Maimonides does not use "similitude" when describing replications of man, since man can in fact be accurately replicated. Since the concept of a replica cannot

apply to angels (of which we're ignorant) or spheres (true replication is impossible due to sheer magnitude) Maimonides correctly includes these objects under a new heading, requiring a different verse for their prohibition. So the first verse in the Ten Commandments prohibits true idol creation. This includes those objects, which can be replicated, i.e., animals and man, and also anything made expressly for idolatrous use. But the Torah also warns against creating things incapable of replication: either due to its size (planets, sun, etc.) or due to our ignorance of what it is (angels). Such creation cannot be deemed "replicas" and thus, Maimonides places these laws under a different heading. We now appreciate the need for two verses.

As we said at the outset, Tzitzis guards against our nature to "see" and be led astray, or to "imagine" with our hearts and be led astray. The Torah is beautifully consistent, as we are warned not to replicate what we "see" (viz. animals), or what we "imagine" (angels).

God must be viewed as the Creator – the sole source of the universe. Idolatry assumes that God does not exist and there is something else, or that He does exist, but requires additional assistants to create or run His world.

The study of reality – science – and the study of

Judaism both reject the notion of a Godless world that created itself or always existed; or a world where God is dependent on other imaginary forces. Thus, as Maimonides teaches, we have no need for – nor is there truth to intermediaries. No force exists, other than God. There is nothing, except for Him alone. We need only Him alone. For nothing can run the world, which He already created. No man or object can help us. We are taught to pray to Him alone. We can reach Him from anywhere.

Nothing can stop His payment to the righteous.

Nothing can save us from His punishment – not even mitzvos. The only recourse is Teshuva from that flaw.[11] ■

[1] Laws of Star Worship 2:4

[2] Numbers 15:39

[3] Laws of Star Worship 2:1

[4] ibid

[5] Laws of Star Worship 3:11

[6] Yoreh Daya 141

[7] Talmud Rosh Hashannah 24b, Laws of Star Worship 3:11

[8] Laws of Torah Fundamentals 1:9

[9] Isaiah 40:18

[10] Talmud Rosh Hashannah 24a

[11] Deut. 10:17. See Sforno's commentary

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"Retrospective" – 60 pages on Judaism's fundamentals

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THE TEST OF TRUE LOVE

RABBI RUVEN MANN

One of the fundamental principles of Judaism is the belief in prophecy, i.e. that man can communicate with and receive instruction from the Creator of the universe. It is through the prophecy of Moses that Hashem revealed the Torah to us. However, prophecy did not cease with Moshe. The early history of the Jews was marked by the activity of many great prophets such as Samuel, Eliyahu, Yirmiyahu etc. According to the Rambam, prophecy was suspended during the exile and will be restored in the messianic era.

This week's Parsha, Re'eh, commands us to listen to the true prophet and to reject the false one. Sometimes this can be a very challenging matter. There are very specific qualities which a true prophet must possess. He can't be an ordinary person but must be on the most advanced intellectual and spiritual level. He must also provide concrete proof that Hashem has spoken to him. When he meets these conditions, he is pronounced to be a true prophet and we are then commanded to obey him.

There is a significant exception to the basic rule. Our Parsha talks about a prophet who performs "signs and wonders" i.e. accurately predicts future events or produces miracles which ordinarily would establish his authenticity. However, in this case, the "message" he delivers is that we should "go and worship other gods." In this case we are commanded not to listen to him and instead to execute

him as a false prophet. The question arises: What about the miracles which we witnessed, how could they happen if this person is an imposter? The answer is provided in the Parsha. "Do not listen to the words of this prophet for Hashem, your G-d is testing you to know whether you love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and all your soul."

We see from this that "miracles", no matter how compelling cannot establish the impossible. The Rambam says (Yesodai Hatorah ch. 1) "The foundation of foundations and pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a primary existence who is the source of all that exists besides Himself." It is a mitzvah to recognize and to draw close to and love and fear this Being. The Rambam says in the Moreh Nevuchim that it is the aim and purpose of the Torah to utterly abolish all forms of idolatry. The purpose of man and the source of all virtue and goodness is to know his Creator and to serve Him. One who achieves this genuine love of Hashem cannot be separated from it and knows it is impossible that G-d should ever want him to serve nonexistent, imaginary deities. The true lover of Hashem is not overwhelmed by the emotional impact of "miracles." He lives in accordance with his knowledge and Emunah in Hashem. If a person cultivates the right kind of faith, he will never falter and will emerge triumphant from "the test of love."

Shabbat Shalom ■

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mountain', and the [sound of the] shofar was heard throughout the camp, [announcing] "Moshe had gone up the mountain", so that they would not err again [pursuing] after idolatry, and God was 'lifted' through this blowing of the shofar, as it says (Tehilim 47:6) 'God rises up at [the blowing of] the shofar'."

This led to Chazal instituting that the shofar would be blown on Rosh Chodesh Elul.

The implication from this midrash is that the reason the shofar was blown was to clarify to Bnai Yisrael that this was the first day of Moshe's re-ascension onto Mt. Sinai - if they knew without a doubt which was Day 1, they would not repeat the same "mistake." However, it is clear through studying the incident of the golden calf that there was a deeper issue surrounding this tragic event, namely, Bnai Yisrael's connection to idolatry. The miscalculation was a front of sorts, an excuse and distorted justification in committing the heinous act. If so, why would blowing the shofar ensure their avoidance of idolatry? If the idolatrous emotions existed still, blowing the shofar to correctly count the number of days would merely remove the justification symptom - but the idolatrous problem could still emerge!

The problem surrounding the golden calf centered on Bnai Yisrael's inability to place their security in God - as is so often the source for idolatry. The idolatrous emotions guide man to search through the physical world for security - a pursuit that has no end and no possibility of fulfillment. The purpose of the shofar, then, had to be more than removing the justification - the midrash says it would prevent them from returning to idolatry. The fate of the nation hung in the balance, Moshe's tefila (prayer) to God, and God's response, seeming to determine whether they would continue on their mission or be wiped out. However, to think that Moshe's tefila alone would decide this outcome would be incorrect. The sound of the shofar was a sign that the next forty days were their opportunity to engage in teshuva-repentance. The situation at that moment was nearly identical to the first ascent by Moshe - same time frame, same place, nearly identical event. Clearly, God's intent was to put Bnai Yisrael in this same situation with the opportunity for teshuva available. To simply sit back and rely on Moshe would not cut it - they had to analyze themselves, understand their defects, and, ultimately, completely place their security in God.

Much like this occasion was set aside for Bnai Yisrael to engage in teshuva, so too we engage in this process as well and the shofar being blown on Rosh Chodesh Elul signifies the commencement of this time.



Which day of Rosh Chodesh?

With an explanation of the minhag in place, the halachic issues begin to emerge. One question has to do with which day of Rosh Chodesh Elul is the one to initiate this minhag (Rosh Chodesh Elul is always two days: the 29th Av and the 1st of Elul). If one were to count forty days, culminating with Yom Kippur, the shofar would need to be blown on the last day of Av, which would be the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul. In fact, many poskim (see Magen Avraham OC 581:2) maintained that we should begin blowing shofar on the first day of the two-day Rosh Chodesh. Yet, today it is virtually unheard of to blow shofar on 29 Av - instead, everyone starts on 1 Elul. The Magen Avraham explains that those who start on the second day of Rosh

Chodesh maintain that the idea is to have thirty days of shofar blowing. Therefore, starting on 1 Elul, excluding Erev Rosh Hashana (when we do not blow shofar), and including the two days of Rosh Hashana itself, one would have thirty days of shofar (how this serves to work with the midrash is difficult to understand). The Magen Avraham concludes that one should indeed start blowing shofar on the second day of Rosh Chodesh, but for a different reason that is based on a conclusion reached by Tosafos (Bava Kama 82a "Kidei Shelo..."). Tosafos concludes that the month of Elul, when Moshe re-ascended the mountain, was a full thirty days (something that cannot happen after the time of Ezra) - and if the shofar was blown on the first day of Elul there could be forty days until Yom Kippur. Since the second day of Rosh Chodesh was the day that the shofar was blown, we have no right to change the minhag and the importance shifts from the actual amount of "forty days" to the overall designation of a significant period of time leading to Yom Kippur.

How Often?

Another evolution in this minhag occurred with the increase in the amount of times we blow shofar throughout the month of Elul. The Rosh (Rosh Hashana 14) writes that the shofar is blown every day of the month of Elul, rather than only on the first day of the month (as implied in the midrash), and this is agreed upon by nearly all poskim. Why the shift? One possibility (as expressed by a friend of mine) is that during the time of Moshe's ascent, Bnai Yisrael were facing extinction. As a result, they only needed that one blast to motivate them. This is not the norm, though, and as a result, having a constant reminder of the importance of this time is crucial in the lead up to the Yomim Noraim.

There is also a question as to how many times daily the shofar should be blown. The Tur (OC 581) writes that the minhag was to blow shofar both morning and evening, and the Chaye Adam (1748-1820) reported that this minhag was still followed by some. While it is true that it is almost unheard of today to blow the shofar twice a day, there is an interesting halachic scenario that results from this variation. The question was posed to R' Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe OC 4:21) regarding if one did not hear shofar after shacharis, would he be obligated to make it up later at mincha. He writes that since there is a definitive source for blowing shofar at the end of the day, a person should try and blow shofar at the time of mincha, giving the twice-a-day shofar position some practical importance. ■

Fundamentals

שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד ואהבת את
יהוה אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך והיו
הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך ושונתם
לבניך ודברת בם בשבתך בביתך ובליכתך בדרך
ובשכבך ובקומך וקשרתם לאות על ידך והיו לטעפת
ביך עיניך וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך
והיה אם שמעו השמעו אל מצותי אשר אנכי
מצוה אתכם היום לאתם יהוה אלהיכם ולעבדו
בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם ומטרי ארצכם בלתי

the UNIQUENESS of Judaism

RABBI ARI GINSBERG

"For you are a sacred people to Ad-noy, your G-d, and Ad-noy has chosen you to be for Him a treasured people from all the peoples who are on the surface of the earth" (Devarim 14:2)

One of the most amazing aspects of living in a free society such as America is the ability to engage in intellectual debates with members of different religions and theologies without fear of retribution. As we all know, this was not the case through many periods of our history. I recently had the privilege of engaging in such a debate about religion with a colleague who considers herself a staunch evangelical Christian. Her background, as she explained to me, was that she is a self-proclaimed "born again" Christian who studies and lectures on the bible in her church community on a consistent basis. Although I normally would avoid discussing religion in the workplace, in this instance, I made an exception. Interestingly, this experience did open my eyes to some important issues that heightened my appreciation of the Torah and our

tradition/Mesora.

I asked my colleague many questions about basic Christian philosophy throughout our informal conversation, but there were three questions that revealed the essential difference between our two religions. The first question involved an understanding of the trinity - the Christian belief that God takes the form of three entities or has three components based on the plural usage of "Elokim" throughout the Torah. I asked her how she reconciled this belief with the verse in the Torah, "Hear Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One" (Devarim 6:4). If the bible claimed that God is one, how could he have three parts simultaneously; is this not an obvious contradiction? I explained that the use of "Elokim" in the Torah is reflective of God's perfect justice, and is used interchangeably with reference to a human court to reflect a thorough process of deliberation. (Rashi/Ramban: Shmos 21:6) The second question I asked was how it was possible for Jesus to experience pain and suffering if he was perfect. Wouldn't a perfect deity be capable

of avoiding physical discomfort and ultimate crucifixion? Despite the negative connotations in limiting God's abilities, Judaism maintains that God cannot be imperfect and is therefore unable to experience human pain. The third question I posed to her regarded the topic of God taking human form and expressing genuine emotions. A verse in Malachi (3:6), as quoted by the Rambam (Yesodei Hatorah 1:12), states: "I am Hashem, I never change." This appears to directly oppose the possibility of God transforming from a non-physical to a physical form, or from a state of happiness to an emotional disposition of anger or regret. The Rambam, therefore, elucidates that all the demonstrations of emotions in the Torah are not genuine in nature, but recorded for our benefit in human terms in order to gain insight into Hashem's actions and our own way of life.

At the conclusion of this debate, my colleague admitted that she did not have satisfying answers to the questions I had raised, but she made recourse to an inarguable position. She claimed that she had a religious experience, whereby she had literally felt the "Holy Spirit" (one of the components of the trinity) inside her body. She explained that nothing I could say would faze her. This signaled the end of the debate, leading me to reflect on what had transpired. The conclusions seem to be of the utmost significance. First, the importance of our Mesora that outlines the boundaries of Jewish theology and the foundations of our religion gives us and our scholars the ability to understand the Torah and its literal contradictions on a more profound and complex level. Without the Oral Law (Torah Sheba'al Peh), the Written Law (Torah Shebichsav) is incomprehensible and is subject to gross speculation. Second, the ability to understand the nuances of Lashon Hakodesh (Hebrew), as opposed to a translation, can be the difference between the Torah being used as a proof for Christianity, or as we know it, a clear expression of

Judaism's veracity. The last concept that I had surmised, which I found distressing, is the possibility that many Jews would have been unprepared to answer these contradictory questions convincingly and may resort to falling back on the same point made by my Christian colleague. It is not sufficient for an Orthodox Jew to claim that he "feels" Hashem's presence on Shabbos, or during davening or while singing, or "knows" that Hashem is everywhere, and therefore believes in God. It is imperative to distinguish our Jewish religion in quality of thought as well as religious fervor and emotion. Every Jew should understand how and why our Mesora makes us a distinct messenger of God's wisdom to the world.

To illustrate the previous point, when I was a freshman in college I had enrolled in a class called Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature. My professor was a Reform rabbi who enjoyed veering off topic and challenging the Orthodox Jewish students in the class with questions stemming from classic bible criticism. Although I enjoyed these attacks and the requisite counter-offensives, (luckily I can credit many wonderful teachers and my Jewish education for preparing me to rationally defend Orthodox Judaism), many of the other Orthodox students were clearly struggling in their responses. This experience revealed a clear weakness of conviction and understanding that should be strengthened at a young age in our Jewish educational institutions.

The appreciation of our Mesora, as well as its ability to help us understand the Torah to a greater degree, is a source of strength and conviction in our Jewish ideals. As Orthodox Jews, we should take advantage of this tremendous gift from Hashem and use it to further our standing and mission in this world. As such, we can be a true "Mamleches Kohanim Vegoy Kadosh", a "Kingdom of priests and a distinct nation" (Shmos 19:6) in representing the wisdom and depth of Judaism's beliefs and practice. ■

Weekly Parsha

DEAD MEN'S GODS

RABBI DR. MICHAEL BERNSTEIN

Full victory over the Canaanites will not come, Moses tells the people, when they defeat the defending armies on the battlefield. The ultimate battle will not be fought until afterward (12:30-31). "Watch yourself lest you become drawn to them after they have been destroyed before you, and lest you seek out their gods, saying, 'How

did these nations worship their gods? I, too, will do the same.' You shall not do so to God your Lord, for everything that is an abomination to God, that He hates, they have done for their gods; for they have even burned their sons and daughters in the fire for their gods."

These verses reveal the great seductive power of idolatry. Consider the situation. The Jewish people have just conquered the land. With God's help, they have destroyed the indigenous defenders and completely exposed the impotence of their gods. God's power is manifest; the pagan's imaginary deities are discredited. Incredibly, at this moment of Jewish triumph, the Torah warns the victors not to be drawn to the gods of the vanquished. Why would they be drawn to these dead men's gods or find their cults attractive? What is at the root of this strange seductive power?

In actuality, idolatry is much

more apt to arise out of the psychological needs of idol worshippers than from an intellectual mistake. Idolatry allows its adherents to create and observe, in the guise of a religion, a system of rituals and practices that satisfy their primitive urges and address their insecurities. Even when these pagan religions call upon their adherents to make sacrifices, there is a simultaneous satisfaction of deep primitive urges. Often this attraction is so subtle that the worshippers, unaccustomed to self-examination, are unaware of its insidious nature.

The Jewish people entering the Holy Land, although victorious on the battlefield, would not be immune to the drives and character flaws that draw people to idolatry. It was quite possible they would turn in that direction as they contended with the psychological pressures of their daily lives. However, having no direct experience with idolatrous cults, they might be intrigued by the vestiges of the destroyed cults all around

them, sensing their psychological appeal. And they would ask, "How did these nations worship their gods? I, too, will do the same." The Torah forbids them to do this and warns them (12:31) that, in the end, such practices can even lead their followers to throw their children into the fire.

Ironically, the practice of child immolation, from a psychological perspective, reflects selfishness rather than altruistically intended, though misguided, religious fervor. The practitioners may tell themselves they are sacrificing their beloved children selflessly, but the exact opposite is true. These supposedly religious people are tremendously narcissistic, full of undeflected self-love. Attached to the physical reality and fearful of their own mortality, they are prepared to make the penultimate sacrifice of a relatively expendable part of themselves, namely their children, in order to protect that which is most important, namely themselves. ■

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