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# JewishTimes

Volume X, No. 27...Aug. 26, 2011

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Chicago	7:18	New York	7:22
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Houston	7:34	Phoenix	6:45
Jerusalem	6:54	Pittsburgh	7:45
Johannesburg	5:35	Seattle	7:46
Los Angeles	7:10	Sydney	5:16
London	7:44	Tokyo	6:00
Miami	7:29	Toronto	7:48
Montreal	7:27	Washington DC	7:31

## 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)*

(continued on next page)

## Weekly Parsha

*Children  
of  
GOD*

RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

Throughout the Torah, both be'kesav and be'alpeh, we are described in different ways insofar as our relationship to God. We are called "mamlechet kohanim ve'goy kadosh," and the "chosen nation", as well as the "nation of God," and many more. One other reference is found in Parshas Re'eh, where we are singled out as "banim atem la'Hashem." This identification is the subject of debate in the Talmud, with some important philosophical ramifications.

We see the reference as follows (Devarim 14:1):

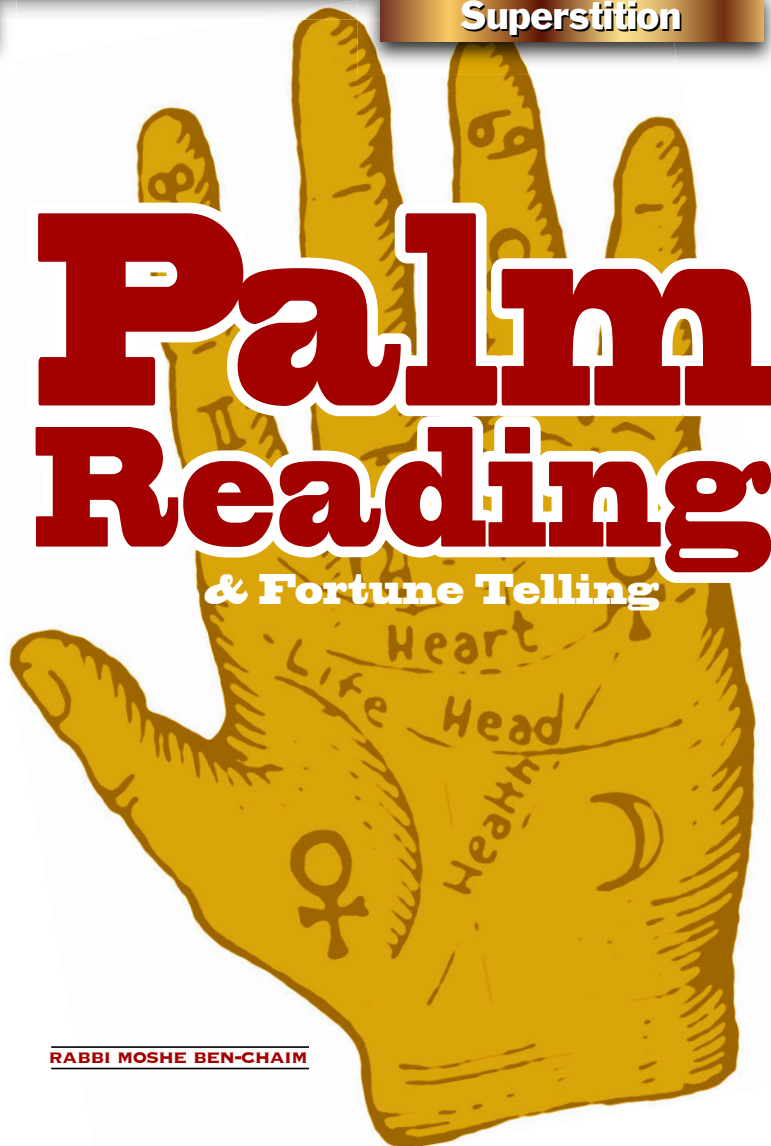
"You are sons of Hashem, your God; do not lacerate yourselves and do not make yourselves bald between your eyes for a dead person."

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## Superstition

# Palm Reading

& Fortune Telling



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

A friend sent me a published response by Rabbi X written to Chaya, a woman seeking his advice regarding palm reading. I have quoted the Rabbi verbatim and remarked where noted.

Before proceeding, it is crucial that matters are clear and without any confusion. My objective is to share God's view on palm reading – not

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(Re'eh cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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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 Gurion. 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."

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. 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. 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 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

(continued on next page)



(Re'eh continued from page 2)

## Weekly Parsha

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. The second method is through prediction of future events. A person who proves capable of consistently predicting the future is deemed to be an authentic prophet. 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. A person who meets these requirements and also authenticates himself is deemed to be a true prophet. We are commanded to obey this prophet.

Much of Maimonides' discussion deals with a fundamental question. The false prophet is an individual who seems to meet all of the qualifica-

tions 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 punish-

ment 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. ■

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(Palm Reading continued from page 1)

man's view. We possess many incorrect Rabbinic opinions and there exist many flawed books contradicting our Torah, Prophets and Writings. For only these three works are God's words. Literally all other writings are man made and subject to human error. When we find a Rabbi's words conflicting with God's words, we must not fear reputation and cower from disagreement, but rather, we must accept King Solomon's words that form part of the Divine Torah: "For man is not righteous in the land who does good and does not sin (Ecclesiastes, 7:20)." King Solomon taught divinely that all men err. God teaches this too when He admonished and punished Moshe, the prophets and our leaders for their errors and sins. Therefore, we are not to deny God by suggesting that any human is correct 100% of the time. We must admit that just like Moshe erred, so did Arizal, Zohar's author and all other men. "Had even Joshua the son of Nun said it, I would not accept it (Chullin 124a)." The Talmud clearly endorses human error.

Additionally, we must not quickly accept ancient books as bearing only truths, starting with the Zohar. This book is not at all equal to Moshe's Torah: the latter being absolute truth, while Zohar can contain errors. The fact that something is "ancient" leads ignorant people to blindly accept the writings contained as incontrovertible truths. However, this is a deception of the human mind and is clearly rejected by idolatrous artifacts. These artifacts are also ancient, yet we know that a statue did not create the universe. Just as we dismiss ancient statues and idols as false, we must be ready to dismiss ancient writings. "The sole criteria for accepting truth is its compliance with 1) our senses, 2) reason, or 3) our Divinely-written Torah (Maimonides' Letter to Marseilles)." Let us now apply these rules to the topic of palmistry.

**Rabbi X:** *While I don't have hands-on experience in palm reading, I can tell you what our sources say about it. Moses was told to select judges over the people, "And you shall discern (literally "see") from among the entire people, men of accomplishment, G-d-fearing people, men of truth, people who despise money, and you shall appoint them leaders" (Exodus 18:21). The Zohar notes that Moses was told to choose the judges by "seeing" them, from which the Zohar learns that Moses was to perceive their qualities in the appearance of their hair, forehead, countenance, eyes, lips and lines in their hands.*

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Moshe was not to engage in palm reading, but to use his

senses; selecting those whom he witnessed as "G-d-fearing, truthful, and despising money." This is clearly the intent of the verse. Moshe was to assess a person based on his virtues, not his bodily features. We are taught "Ain mikra yotzay midday pshuto; A verse may not be interpreted against its literal reading (Sabbath 63a, Yevamos 11b 24a)." The literal reading is that Moshe was to examine human virtues and not accidental, physical features. Therefore, to suggest this verse refers to palm reading, violates the Rabbinic dictum found in the Talmud.

The Zohar conflicts with reason as it suggests that genetic causes of our bodily features formed in the womb, correlate to our righteousness. But righteousness is impossible at this early developmental stages. Therefore, they are unrelated to the Zohar's claims. Furthermore, since our physical form (forehead and palm creases) are naturally formed, they are not due to imagined "mystical communication."

**Rabbi X:** *The Zohar reveals that the Torah gives credence not only to palm reading, but also to reading facial features and even the hair. In fact, the Ramban (1195-1270) went one step further by asserting that this wisdom is actually found in the Torah: "every field of knowledge – whether it be science, agriculture, medicine or palmistry – can be learned from the Torah".*

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Here, the Rabbi equates palmistry and science. And although the Rabbi claims Ramban accepts palmistry, this in no manner validates it as truth, for the ancient Rabbis erred based on the deficient science of their times. Man thought there were invisible layers of spheres in which the stars were affixed, and through the motion of those spheres the stars moved. Man thought the Earth was the center of the universe. Man believed in astrology too. All have been empirically disproved or are bereft of support. To maintain the Rabbis were correct in these areas is to deny our senses. As our Rabbis accepted proven science, had they possessed the knowledge we attained over the years since they lived, they would agree with the later findings we now possess.

Additionally, Ramban does not say he found palmistry per se in the Torah. Rather, Ramban says every field of knowledge will be alluded to in Torah. This is agreeable. But if something is discovered to be a false belief, Ramban would abandon it, and he would not say a falsehood is in Torah.

In fact, Torah prohibits Nichush: the practice of assessing reality based on unrelated events.

Thus, one commits Nichush when believing that reality or his future has been altered by a black cat crossing his path. If one opens a book to a random page, blindly placing his finger on a word and acts based on the word's meaning, here too one commits Nichush. Similarly, if one says "since the lines on my palm go this way and not that way, certain things are true", one commits Nichush. Conversely, science is where causes and effects are related. Science is valid. Grouping palmistry with science is not accurate, or intelligent.

**Rabbi X:** *From the Tannaitic (1st – 6th century) through the Gaonic era (7th – 11th century), sages who knew the Torah's secrets also knew how to read faces and palms, and they passed their knowledge down from one to another. However, like the other secrets of the Torah, the wisdom of reading faces and palms has been lost. One notable exception was the Arizal (1534-1572) who approached the level of the Tannaim and could see on a person's forehead what he had transgressed, how many reincarnations his soul had been through, and what he had come to this world to rectify.*

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** I wonder which criterion the Rabbi deems accurate. When watching John commit a sin conflicts with the "reading" of his palm that says he is not a sinner, which one does the Rabbi accept? Certainly, John is a sinner, and the palm reading is a lie. An important principle is now revealed: perception is undeniable. Despite the palm reading that "said" John is not a sinner, intelligent people know that perception outweighs theory: John just sinned, we saw it. For this reason Moshe was correct to review man's actions alone to appoint the judges. For that is the only barometer of human worth, not the creases in our hands. We now grasp that perception is reasonable, and must be followed. And since we dismiss the palm reading and favor perception, we agree that palm reading is something other than reality. Focus on that phrase, "other than reality": this means it does not fall within the pale of what is real and true. We have senses to determine truth, and nothing in our senses validates palm reading. And as palm reading is not reasonable, it must not be followed. And if a palm is read, and nothing in reality conflicts with it, should one accept the reading? Again the answer is "no". In this case, as in all cases, a person must use his senses to determine his actions. When seeking a mate, we investigate the other party and invest time in dating. When seeking a job, we also investigate...and do so thoroughly. What would you say of a man who

(continued on next page)



(Palm Reading continued from previous page)

accepted a job with no investigation, but based only on the reading of his palm? Would it be wise to marry someone blindfolded, also without an ounce of knowledge of that person, based on a palm reader's suggestion? In all cases, perception and reason will yield facts. Conversely, Torah violations such as Nichush (palm reading) prove nothing as they are unrelated to facts.

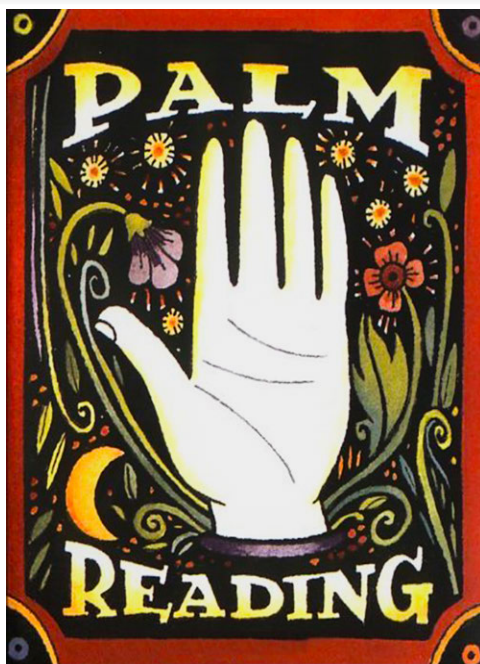
We must appreciate the foolishness of attributing significance to accidental and unrelated phenomena. Just as the size of a leaf is unrelated to the personality of a person, so too are our skin creases unrelated to our perfection. So foolish is this, that writing this sentence disturbs me. Yet, this is where Judaism has steeped to in our day, so we must respond.

The Rabbi also suggests reincarnation and a purpose for that reincarnation of "rectifying" something: two notions that again are without basis. He says this, despite Moshe's admonition that the Jews "select life (Deut. 30:19)" and not death. Thus, Moshe's very words are that one who selects death, will no longer have life. Moshe rejects reincarnation, yet the Rabbi endorses it.

**Rabbi X:** *According to the Kabbalah, the way palm reading works is that when a soul is garbed in a body, it becomes imprinted in the body, particularly in the face and hands, and its nature can thereby be revealed.*

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** The Rabbi offers no basis for this, but assumes that citing Kabbalah as his source renders this practice viable and true, and worth disseminating. Such statements are quite dangerous. Since reason and proof are not required to support palmistry, endorsing it equally validates all other baseless beliefs, even following Jesus.

The Rabbi says the soul is "imprinted" on the hands and face. I wonder, at what moment is this imprint made? If while innocent an imprint is made, and then he sins...a palm reader will be in error as the imprint was of a sinless person. And if the imprint is after the person sins – that imprint being of a wicked person – and then he repents, again the palm reader is in error. For he will read the person as a sinner, even though he has repented. Or, do our palms' creases change course whenever we sin, then change when we repent, and then change again when we sin? In truth, if someone repents, he still maintains the identical bodily features as when he was a sinner. Thereby, one who "reads" palms and forehead creases will err, since these creases are identical on the sinner, and after he repents. Thus, reading physical features is inherently flawed.



Or perhaps, the Rabbi does not mean the creases are read, but that some mystical communication takes place. In this case, looking at the palms is irrelevant, as communication is not viewable on one's body. Here too the Rabbi will teach us nothing, since he has not defined what he means by "mystical." Truthfully, the term mystical is used when a person cannot explain a phenomenon, but wishes to induce belief in others. Why do people induce others to believe what they cannot prove? In this case, I suspect to preserve a pristine reputation of the Arizal. Even when his words do not make sense, loyal followers repeat them, as if communicating unintelligible theories impresses others.

It is crucial to recognize that claiming knowledge of the future denies free will. It suggests matters that have not yet occurred, are fixed. Thereby, we cannot choose otherwise. And as we know free will is a reality, any palmistry forecast must be false.

**Rabbi X:** *It is important to stress that in Judaism, reading the face and palm was used only to help ascertain whether one was worthy of a certain position or knowledge, or to help improve oneself. However, reading the face and palms in order to tell the future is a violation of the prohibition against divining auspicious times (Leviticus 19:26), and the commandment to have perfect faith (Deuteronomy 18:13).*

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Ibn Ezra differs with the Rabbi. Ibn Ezra states that all Torah prohibitions are prohibited, precisely due to their false nature: "Those with empty brains

say, 'Were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.' But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn't prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues (Leviticus 19:31)." This is sensible, that God prohibits falsehood and that palmistry is false.

Torah prescribes a specific, reasonable means of determining truth and falsehood. Our court system engages in inquiry and deliberation to arrive at convictions and acquittals. Imagine people's outrage at a court that dismisses the evidence of witnesses and sentences individuals based on the lines of the litigants' hands. But, if as the Rabbi suggests that truth is imprinted on our faces and hands, why would God demand a system where the courts are open to error relying on circumstantial phenomena, when we could attain absolute truth through palm reading? Would God not be committing a grave injustice by allowing His creatures to err, when He could in fact charge us to palm read and determine the absolute truth?

Such arguments clearly reject palmistry and all similar beliefs as falsehoods and lies. They are prohibited by Torah. Their inclusion in Zohar or Kabbalah does not mean it's true. These two areas are not Divinely written and free from error. Unlike the Rabbi's assessment that palmistry was "lost" from Judaism, in fact, it is the farthest thing from Judaism.

It is wrong for the Rabbi to claim a belief is part of Torah, a belief which he did not prove. Regardless of the author, be it Arizal or anyone, if one cannot prove a notion, then he does not know it to be a truth. To then repeat unproven ideas is wrong, as it misleads others. Moreover, it is a lie to present as fact, that which one has not proved. Repeating Arizal's teachings bereft of validity is of no merit to the one repeating, or to the audience. Therefore, it is meaningless. If one wishes to teach, this means he demonstrates a truth. But without proof, a notion is not a truth. Silence is demanded.

Finally, what of this notion of telling the future? It must be clear that man cannot do so. This is because human perception is only via one of the five senses. And as the future is not something our senses can detect, we cannot perceive it. It is unknown.

Primarily, the future is not subject to perception for it has not yet occurred. The future is not yet a reality. Thus, man's senses do not relate to the future. No man can tell others about something unreal, and no man can perceive what is outside his senses. ■

## Weekly Parsha



# BEWARE of the *False Prophet*



RABBI REUVEN MANN

In Parshas Re'eh the Torah takes up the subject of prophecy. The prophet can be a great benefit to the people. In ancient times G-d would make hidden things known to those who were qualified to receive His word. Thus, when faced with perplexing problems and a need for special information people could turn to a prophet and seek his guidance. This was true even with regard to mundane matters. Thus when Saul despaired of finding his father's lost animals he was reminded that a prophet was nearby and he turned to him for help. It so happened that the prophet was Samuel and the meeting had been arranged by Hashem so that Saul could be anointed as king.

The prophet can also be a source of danger. Our parsha warns us about a Navi who claims that Hashem has instructed us to worship other gods. This could create a tremendous dilemma. The prophet is renowned for his wisdom and holiness. When he claims to have received a message from G-d we are obliged to follow it. Yet now he is telling us to commit what normally is regarded as the worst sin in the Torah, idolatry. What are we to do?

Well, you will say, let's not just take him at his word. Let's test him out by demanding some "sign or wonder". After all, the Jews did not just believe Moshe back in Egypt when he appeared to them in the name of Hashem. He performed very convincing miracles such as transforming his staff

into a snake, turning water into blood, etc. As a result of these signs the pasuk says "The people believed that Hashem had encountered Moshe..." Now, a different prophet comes to us claiming that G-d has instructed that we commit an act of Avodat Zarah. We demand a proof and he performs wondrous signs. He executes a miracle equal to those of Moshe Rabbenu. What are we to do in that situation?

The Torah is clear and unequivocal and warns us, "Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer..." We are absolutely forbidden to commit the deed of Avodat Zarah, even though we are told to do so by a prophet who backs his words with undeniable miracles.

This teaches us that we must use our minds in the service of Hashem. Certain of the mitzvot can be temporarily suspended by a genuine prophet. However, that cannot be the case with idol worship. Judaism is founded on the absolute renunciation of any and all forms of idolatry. Nothing is more destructive of the divine soul than its rejection of the true G-d and embrace of false deities. No human, regardless of his spiritual stature can convince us that our G-d who is a G-d of truth would ever want us to abandon Him and embrace falsehood.

If that is the case, how are we to explain the miracles? The answer is that while miracles are

impressive they can only affirm that which is possible but cannot validate something which our minds decree must be patently false. The holiness of the Jew consists in the fact that he does not allow his emotions to overwhelm him into believing that which is false and nonsensical. We must use our reason and reject the impossible even if it is enunciated by the greatest authorities such as prophets.

Why would Hashem allow such a thing to happen? The answer is that "the L—d your G-d tests you to know whether you love the L—d your G-d with all your heart and all your soul." Sometimes, Hashem puts us to the test. One whose knowledge and love of the Almighty is weak will not understand what is so bad about Avodat Zarah. He will be of the opinion that it is not so harmful as long as one's intentions are good. However, the true lover of Hashem who strives for a genuine relationship with the Creator, and seeks to embrace Him with all his heart and soul will never be able to commit the blasphemy of serving an idol. He will know that the message of the prophet is false and will disregard all the wondrous "stunts" that he performs. Let us strive to cultivate a genuine love and fear of Hashem based on the highest degree of knowledge we can attain. In that way may we find favor in the sight of Hashem and be worthy of all His blessings. ■

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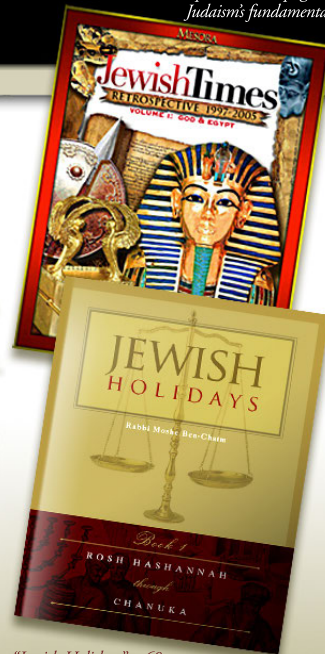
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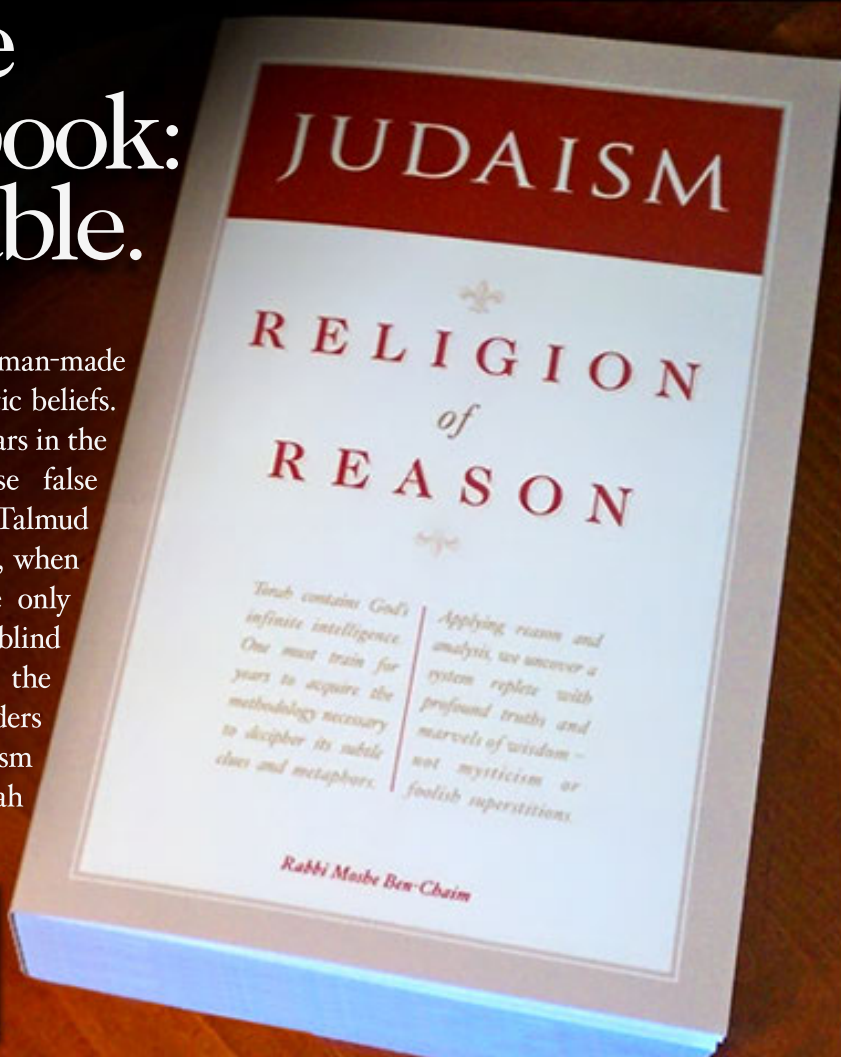
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Most commentaries note the juxtaposition of the classification as “sons” and the subsequent prohibition of “lo sigdodedo.” However, the Talmud offers a unique interpretation (Kiddushin 36a):

“That is wanted for what was taught: ‘Ye are sons of the Lord your God’; when you behave as sons you are designated sons; if you do not behave as sons, you are not designated sons: this is R. Yehuda’s view. R. Meir said: In both cases you are called sons, for it is said, they are “sochli” children; and it is also said: They are children in whom is no faith; and it is also said, a seed of evil-doers, sons that deal corruptly; and it is said, and it shall come to pass that, in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God. Why give these additional quotations? For should you reply, only when foolish are they designated sons, but not when they lack faith — then come and hear: And it is said: ‘They are sons in whom is no faith’. And should you say, when they have no faith they are called sons, but when they serve idols they are not called sons — then come and hear: And it is said: ‘a seed of evil-doers, sons that deal corruptly.’ And should you say, they are indeed called sons that act corruptly, but not good sons — then come and hear: And it is said, and it shall come to pass that, in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God.”

The passage is nearly impossible to understand without further analysis. For one, what type of argument is this? Are we always sons or are we not? Furthermore, what is the benefit or advantage of being the sons of God? It is difficult to posit that God is our “father” in any sort of literal way — such a belief is the core of other theologies and anathema to Judaism.

The Talmud also devotes a great deal of attention to the different verses, substantiating the opinion of R’ Meir. Rashi helps elaborate on the meaning of these. In the first description, Rashi explains that “sochli” refers to “shetus”, or ignorance. In other words, we are still the children of God even if we act in a manner of “shetus”, but we may not be considered so if we do not express belief in God. In the last description, where being “sons who act corruptly” is equivalent to worshipping idolatry, we are referred to as “good sons”, as denoted in the last verse. Rashi explains that one might think we would be considered to be these corrupt sons indefinitely. Instead, through the potential of teshuva, we are able to retain the title of “sons”, rather than that of “corrupt sons.” These steps must be understood. Why does the Talmud assume one particular defect might result in the loss of our status as sons of God, and then reject it? And why the extensive detail?

The overall debate is what needs to be understood first and foremost. The concept of the Jewish people as the children of God implies a certain type of relationship between God and the nation. We are not

strangers to God — instead, a unique bond exists between us. The concept of being God’s children then is really a reference to a degree of familiarity. This relationship is comprised of different features and characteristics, as we shall soon see. Once the nation does not act in line with the demands of such a relationship, the debate about identity emerges. The initial question then is whether this is an intrinsic designation, or is it one that can be eradicated. And yet one can take the question one step further. The basis for the link as being intrinsic or not depends on the perspective. According to R’ Yehuda, when Bnai Yisrael do not act like the children of God, they forego the relationship altogether. The actions of the Jewish people clearly convey a rejection of this status. Yet according to R’ Meir, it is from God’s vantage point that the designation exists. Much like a bris, or covenant, whose source from God is immutable, so too this relationship is one that God will never terminate, regardless of our actions.

Of course, as alluded to above, we must understand the parameters of this relationship. The first of R’ Meir’s steps indicates how the relationship might unravel. What is he referring to with the term “shetus”? Are we just talking about the nation possessing a low IQ? The correct behavior of the nation refers to people living a life in line with chachma, personified by adherence to the Torah. If people give in to their base instincts and turn away from Torah, they embrace the world of “shetus.” It is ignorance not of the intellect, but of the correct philosophy of life. At that point, it would seem, R’ Yehudah would maintain the nation as a whole has rejected their identity as God’s sons. However, R’ Meir, who maintains it is intrinsic, begins to show

how even though we might have certain assumptions of at what point God should cast us away as strangers, the relationship stands. Straying from the derech hachayim would not bring about this consequence. What about a lack of faith in God? To not believe in God might seem to be a pretty valid reason to terminate the relationship, but R’ Meir explains this is not the case. The Talmud then moves to idolatry. For the Jewish people, idolatry is, in fact, a two-step process. The first entails a denial of God — yet this does not necessitate a move to idolatry. It is both the rejection of God and ultimate acceptance of idolatry that is the definition of avoda zara. At this point, there is a slight derivation. Once the nation has embraced idolatry, they are referred to as “sons that act corruptly.” In other words, they retain the identity of being the children of God, yet with the added description of being corrupt/idolatrous. Rashi’s explanation is that such a designation would last forever. What he is referring to is the stain of idolatry that is left on the nation’s identity. It could be that the effect of idolatry is so powerful that the nature of this relationship is permanently altered (similar to what occurred after the sin of the eigel hazahav). We are still the children of God — but we are viewed negatively. A similar concept is conveyed with the four sons of the Hagadah. Even the rasha, who is antithetical to that which the Torah stands for, is a “son”. He does not shed the identity; instead, he is always characterized as this type of child. However, as R’ Meir concludes, it is the system of teshuva that prevents us from ever permanently bearing the mark of the corrupt. Therefore, as powerful as an effect that avoda zara may have on the nation as a whole, we still retain that unique relationship with God. ■

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## Letters



# Letters

from our

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### Sinai: Distorted over Time?

**Omphile:** A colleague said even if he was at Sinai, he wouldn't be convinced. So I should have dropped the conversation. But how would you respond to his words below?

*"The truth is the events on Mt Sinai could have been a small fire with a few people gathered around. A ventriloquist claimed that it was God speaking. Over the years when the story was retold, the the fire got bigger; as did the crowd. The voice moved from the belly of a man, to a huge roaring fire. And seven hundred years later when the official version of the Torah was completed we have a completely different story from what actually happened. I don't think this is that far fetched."*

**Rabbi:** As he would not trust his senses had he been at Sinai, you are correct that any discussion is futile. For he will also doubt you are speaking.

But his argument that "history is distorted over time" contains an internal contradiction. For with this argument, one must be consistent and suggest this applies in all cases. Yet, mankind does not accept that all world history has undergone distortions.

Furthermore, according to this theory, we must find numerous versions of every historical event.

For why should people in the West distort a history that ends up perfectly matching a distortion made by Easterners? Yet, this is what we find: singular historical accounts for all peoples, refuting his theory.

Sinai is no different. Had distortion been at play, today numerous versions of Jewish history would exist for that moment in time. But this is not so. A singular history of an event testifies to its accurate account. ■

### Resurrection: Hard to Believe

**Anna:** Do you believe in resurrection of the dead? How can you explain this reasonably?

**Rabbi:** We witness life. Yet, at one point it did not exist. For nothing physical exists without a beginning. Thus, life must have come from nothingness, or lifeless matter. This must be. Therefore, not only is resurrection possible, and to quote Talmud Sanhedrin, it is more likely for life to come from matter that once possessed life (bones) than from that which never had life (semen). ■

### God Appears Brutal

**David:** I'm troubled about the parts of the Bible where the Lord seems horribly cruel. A lot of Exodus chapters 21 and 22, Leviticus 20 through 26, and Deuteronomy 20 through 22 detail the Lord telling the Jews to kill people for offenses that seem pretty minor, while He tolerates disgusting practices such as slavery. And the Lord seems downright bloodthirsty in Numbers 31 and Deuteronomy 7. I know that the Bible has many other passages where the Lord is merciful and encourages his people to be hospitable and kind, but how can I (or anyone) worship a God who'd also be so savage and brutal?

**Rabbi:** You misunderstand God's justice. Deuteronomy 13:19 teaches that only through following God, can we perform what is right "in His eyes." This means there is a sense of justice that is not befitting our actions. This verse also teaches the vital importance in recognizing that God alone defines what is just and unjust. God alone created all life. Therefore, He alone reserves the sole say of when it may endure, and when it must be cut off. If you disagree in some cases, then you do not possess an accurate understanding of His terms.

There are numerous cases of God's justice; each one illustrates new concepts, thereby explaining why each case is cited in the Torah.

There is no redundancy.

Punishment varies depending on the crime. This is reasonable. At times, women and children are spared as they were not corrupt, or corrupted. But as seen in the Flood, all people were killed as society could no longer breed a culture worthy of existence: "And God saw that many were man's evils on Earth; and all the inclinations of his heart were only evil, all day (Gen. 6:5)." This does not mean infants too were corrupt, but rather that they had no chance to escape corrupt lives as they matured. God's mercy demanded that in order to give mankind a second chance, this generation must be obliterated. You exist due to this kindness.

This same reasoning explains why in your cited cases the following people are killed: an idolatrous city, witches, murderers, false prophets, misleading idolatrous individuals and cities, Sodom, the Midianites, the Egyptians, the Seven Nations and others. All these people lost their worth, and would harm others had they been left alive.

There are those evils you deem "pretty minor". Perhaps you allude to witches and those performing bestiality. Yet, witches must be killed as the Talmud states (Chullin 7b), they remove honor from God, since they make it appear that other forces rival God's uniqueness. Now, as God created man for the sole purpose to know Him and appreciate His unique role in the universe for our own benefit, those who remove this opportunity perform the most tragic of crimes, causing others to forfeit their purpose. And those whose sexual drives become so deviant that they perform bestiality must also be killed. Their own lives are most distant from an intelligent life, and they mislead others.

Those who curse or hit parents are also killed. This is because they display an inability to respect an authority figure. Without accepting authority, one has no opportunity to transpose that subjugated role onto a relationship with God.

I hope this clarifies the severity of these crimes to some degree, and that you appreciate that it is God who determines justice, not man. ■

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and responses to articles.

*"The only poor question  
is the one not asked."*

[Letters@Mesora.org](mailto:Letters@Mesora.org)