

JewishTimes

JANUARY 27, 2012

WHICH IS GOD'S TRUE RELIGION & HOW TO KNOW

the rules of
KNOWLEDGE

**PROPHETS
& WRITINGS**

DIVINELY
INSPIRED?



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ONE TRUE RELIGION

With one human species, only one religion makes sense.

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The eighth of Maimonides' 13 Principles of Judaism is that the entire Torah is God's word. As God knows all, His will that Torah remains unchanged throughout every generation teaches that the Torah's ideas are eternally true; they are applicable to all generations.

History does not recount God giving a religion to mankind, other than Judaism. There was never a mass revelation other than upon Mt. Sinai 3324 years ago in front of the entire Jewish nation totaling 2.5 million people. While many other religions claim God spoke to them, such claims are without proof, explaining why other religions demand "belief" as a core tenet. They recognize the absence of any proof for their words. The Aztec account actually refers to itself as a "legend" and not a historical event. Additionally, it fails to provide the story's characters, their lineages or travels, while it also accepts

talking animals as reality. Christianity has numerous versions of the same supposed events surrounding Jesus, thereby confessing their ignorance and exposing the fallacy of those stories and miraculous claims. And those claims did not appear until generations after the time of Jesus' supposed miracles. Such silence indicates there were in fact no miracles, for no one could silence publicly witnessed miracles, had they occurred. Islam attempts to gain credibility by adopting Judaism and Christianity, following the same method of Christianity in its adoption of the Five Books. The Koran claims credit for giving the Book to Moses and recounts many Torah stories within the Koran. Both major religions affirm Torah's truth. Both attempt to attain status as God's religion by copying the Torah. Other religions rely on the claims of individuals. But not one religion possesses proof.

In contrast, Judaism traces individuals by name, family name, the ages of those people when they had children, the child's name, the dates of their deaths, and all of their travels. The eye-witness transmission of a single account of Jewish history proves its truth. Moses would not have been successful transmitting a fabricated story of Revelation at Sinai telling people "you were there." No one would have accepted he was somewhere he was not. No individual would agree with Moses that he witnessed miracles together with over 2 million others, when he and all others knew they didn't. The Jewish people would not have abandoned their true history, had Moses been lying about Sinai and the rest of the Torah. However, the fact that the Jewish people, and even the other major religions accept the entire history of the Jews – the Torah – is testimony to the absolute truth of the entire Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Christianity incorporated the complete Five Books into their religion.

All historical accounts are verified in the exact same manner: when masses testify unanimously to clear events, we know the event could not have been fabricated. Mass fabrication cannot occur. It is impossible that millions will share a common motive to lie, and abandon their true history. All other religions lack historical proof; not one claims masses witnessed an event, since such a claim would not have been accepted by the world when reality denies such claims. Therefore, all other religions launched themselves based on belief: you either accept or you don't. It is not a matter subject to "proof". A strategically safe position.

Last week's Parsha Vaeyra recounts Moses' numerous admonishments to Pharaoh and that Egyptian society steeped in a man made religion. Moses showed respect to Pharaoh for his status. But respect must not to be confused with recognition, tolerance or agreement with any element of that idolatrous culture. Moses was quite clear, as was God and the messages contained in the Ten Plagues. The Egyptian culture was built on lies; they and their gods were false and defenseless against God's plagues. There is but One Ruler of the universe. Egypt and Moses could not both be correct. Pharaoh admitted this by summoning Moses – not his astrologers – to end each painful plague. Pharaoh was stubborn, but his dependence upon Moses unveiled his true beliefs. In the end, Moses was shown as representing the true Creator, the world's Governor; while Egypt was exposed as a group of charlatans; lying astrologers with nothing more than sleight-of-hand tactics, incapable of altering natural law.

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It is sensible that God gave one religion. A heart ailment of any man or woman would not be treated differently based on the color of one's skin, accent, or culture. This is because there is one human design. All people receive the identical treatment, since the heart is identical in all men and women. As our bodies are identical, so are our souls and psyches. Happiness and fulfillment are achieved by all men and women following the same path: removal of conflict, attainment of basic physical and social needs, success, health, recreation, laughter, music, self esteem, the sense of belonging, accomplishment, peace, and intellectual pursuits. Only a religion that recognizes the human design and caters to it, can offer man real happiness. Religions that abhor sex or force man to renounce it, cause man to live in pain. Religions that demand man to believe claims without proof will frustrate man's desire to follow what's reasonable. Such religions are dissatisfying.

As there is only one mankind, only one religion makes sense. Judaism not only offers proof of God's Revelation, it also makes sense.



Not one human desire is rejected; in fact we are to satisfy all of our needs. We are not to live as unwed priests or nuns, or as self-deprived monks. We are asked to comply with our natures and follow reason. We see this most clearly in the volumes of Talmud where the Rabbis elucidate the Torah's commands with such depth, offering us a deep appreciation of the reasoning contained. All of Torah complies with our human design. The words of our great Kings Solomon and David reveal a religion of tremendous insight that rings true and offers us our greatest moments as we uncover new concepts and marvels. Like Abraham and David, we are to study the natural world and delight in its wonders. Our God is the God of the universe. In Judaism, science and religion are complimentary, unlike other religions. Maimonides wrote, "Had Aristotle proved the eternity of the universe, we would be forced to reinterpret Genesis."

We follow reason, evidence and honesty. But we are to not only follow. God asked that we also lead. He desires all of His creations to attain happiness:

"Observe therefore and do them [the commands], for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the people that, when they hear all these statutes, shall say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!" (Deut. 4:6)

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God desires all mankind to be impressed with the one religion He gave the Jews. When we accurately represent the Torah, this quote is what God says the other nations will say. He wants us to lead, and not hide the truth. God is telling us the other nations will be as impressed with Judaism as we are, and God desires this. God commands us not to alter the Torah at all. How then does it make sense that new religions should arise? It is clear, and it is proven: God gave one religion, for all mankind, for all time.

Just as Moses taught, that he and Egypt could not both be correct, we too must sustain this eternal Torah lesson that God gave only one religion and that all others must be false. We are not to silence this truth based on some emotional fear or cowardice. It is for this reason that we must denounce the path led by many Jews and Jewish leaders who play "religious apologetics." Our goal is not to be liked by other religions, but to share the truth, despite their initial disagreement with us. We must prefer their rejection and speak God's truth. For only through our honest representation of Judaism will other religions come to appreciate the brilliance and perfection of Torah. Only through our honest condemnation of false religious notions will other religions recognize the fallacy of their beliefs.

Interfaith dialogue lies to other religions. It says that we share something in common, when we do not. Nothing is further from God's Judaism than Christianity's deification of man. This idolatry is Torah's antithesis. Moses was respectful to Pharaoh, and we too are respectful to Christians, Muslims and others, as we respect all God's creations. But we must be clear with them that we do not accept their religious corruption in any measure, their falsehood, and their denial of God's Torah commands. This emotional insecurity to gain favor with other

religions hurts Judaism, and misrepresents God's will for mankind.

Judaism requires courageous leaders who value truth over friendship, and rejection over popularity. To become the beacon God desires, our message must be truthful, clear, pure and undiluted by all social motivations:

- Religious life must adhere to reason just as any science; proof is required.
- All other religions lack proof of Divine origin and design and are false. God revealed Himself and His religion only once, at Mt. Sinai.
- All other religions accept fantasy – a violation of God's will – as God wants us to engage the intelligence He gifted us in all areas, certainly in religious life.
- Deifying man violates God's commands.
- There is no common ground between Judaism and any other religion. Interfaith dialogue and religious apologetics suggest there is. This misleads other religionists and prevents them from learning Judaism's unique nature. It hides God's message to all mankind.

Torah contains absolute truth. By hiding it in any measure, we violate God's will and show no concern for other human beings. Let us be severely conscious that we were not created to cater to men, but to obey God, to benefit all of mankind. If we follow God, and He is our focus, we will shed the desire to be accepted by men and false religions, we will courageously take pride in the one true religion, and we will create the example that will elicit the world's response: *"Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!"* ■

(Theme continues next page with **PROPHETS & WRITINGS**)



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Prophets & Writings

DIVINELY INSPIRED?

With His verse in Deuteronomy 18:19, God obligates us to follow the Prophet. God also threatens our rebelliousness towards the Prophets' commands with punishment by His hand. Maimonides states (Yesodei Hatorah 10:1,2) that we affirm a Prophet as true, only once he repeatedly predicts the future and all details materialize. We need not ask him to perform miracles. His commands that we adhere to the Torah and his true predictions, God tells us, are only possible if he is in fact a Prophet. If he were a charlatan, he would not have Divine access to future events and all of their details. This knowledge emanates from God alone.

If the Prophet then tells us certain writings are to become part of Prophets or Writings, then they shall become a part. His commands are of equal weight to Moses' words. This validation of these new

writings is no less Divine than Revelation at Sinai and its validation of the Five Books. My friend Josh said similarly, "The proof of the Prophets and Writings may also be connected to the proof of Sinai, "According to the Torah which they teach you (Deut. 17:11)" applies to the question of "What is Tanach?" "

The Rabbis also possess the authority to determine whether certain books will be hidden away or sustained in accessible status. It appears this is what Rabbi Chait referred to regarding the Rabbis' debate whether to hide away Koheles and Proverbs due to their "contradictory" content. Ultimately neither was hidden away: Koheles was not hidden since it commenced and concluded with "words of Torah." Apparently this means that King Solomon's message was consistent (beginning to end) that Torah must be followed. And as the King would not contradict himself, thus, all

intermediary words too within this book must be consistent with Torah. This mitigated the concern for certain "conflicting" statements found within the book. Proverbs too was not hidden, since after due study, its "apparent" contradictions were also revealed as harmonious. (Tal. Sabbath 30b)

My friend asked, "If the Rabbis had to debate it, then it wasn't clearly validated by a prophet. Thus, it can only be held as a work written by someone of potentially high scholarship. The sheer presence of a debate seems to be prima facie evidence of a lack of prophecy and, thus, Divine inspiration. I'm not aware that any Rabbis got together and debated whether, say, Numbers should be included in the Torah."

It is important to note that the Rabbis sought to "store away" these books, not abolish them. Storing away indicates a desire to preserve these works. Thus, the Rabbis must have seen the truth of these books, but their concern was not to confuse the masses lacking the skills to unravel the riddles and metaphors of one of the wisest men to have ever lived. There was no question whether either book was "Divine." The Rabbis understood that once a Prophet is deemed a prophet by God's standards, then we must follow his word. His words are then Prophetic. The Rabbis debate centered only on whether the works in question would be received properly by the masses. Talmud Baba Basra 14b-15a teaches who were the authors of Torah, Prophets and Writings. While there is debate concerning who wrote certain verses (how could Moses write, "and Moses died there") and the time frame of Job, the Talmud does not reject any work as not Divinely inspired. Parenthetically, the debate whether Moses wrote the final eight Torah verses (matters subsequent to Moses' death) intends to enlighten us about "ideas." This is not a simple debate over historic fact. Rabbi Yehuda says Moses did not write the last eight verses; he is not concerned that some of the Torah's verses are of different status. Rabbi Shimon contends that Moses wrote those last eight verses, but with tears. Rabbi Shimon's position is that the Torah must all be written by Moses, as his level of prophecy and writing by God's dictation bestows halachik significance to the Torah over all other works. But in order not to be accused of writing fallacy, as Moses was not yet dead when he wrote of his death, Moses wrote these verses with tears as an admission that he desired not to write a falsehood. Therefore, he differentiated these verse from all previous verses by not using ink.

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Discussing these remarks above with a friend, he asked the following important questions. I respond after each one. But please note that his questions below were actually made "during" our discussion noted above. So some questions are already answered. I am merely repeating them as received, in a cohesive list:

QUESTION: To the best of my knowledge, nowhere does King Solomon claim within the writings that his words are prophetic or that they should be included in any canon.

RESPONSE: Talmud Baba Basra discusses which prophet wrote which of our Prophets and Writings. Rashi comments, "Ezekiel did not write his own book, possibly due to his living outside of Israel where prophecy was not granted. In that case, Ezekiel was not given prophetic direction to write his own book." What Rashi teaches thereby, is that these works were written by God's directive. Although King Solomon does not say so "within" his work, as he was already proven to be a Prophet, nothing more was required. If he tells us his work is prophetic, the Rabbis deem it part of the Torah. Jeremiah 36 commences with an example of God directing him to write his prophecies. The Talmud teaches us that the Prophets — men who received God's communications — would not have written books as God's word, unless it was so. We trust men inspired by God to be ruthless, that their words demand to be studied as divinely inspired texts. A fellow Rabbi added that the Talmud seems to indicate the Prophets wrote "their books" by Divine directives. This explains why its says "Moses wrote 'his book'", Joshua wrote "his book," etc. "His book" means the Prophet was guided (Divinely) to write discrete sections and form a book.



QUESTION: When you say that the writings of a prophet are "Divine", I don't know what that means. Does that mean that every word is specifically selected by God? Does that mean that every word has the same importance and depth as the written Torah? If not, how is its "lesser" status defined?

RESPONSE: Yes, the words of every Prophet — from Moses to Malachi — are equally God's messages. Every word has the same importance and depth as the written Torah. They both have the same Author. The only difference, as Rabbi Chait taught, is that Prophets and Writings do not add any new idea that is not already part of the Five Books. They come to elaborate the Five Books.

QUESTION: I'm not clear what the "proof of Divine origin" is that you refer to. If it's the proof of 2M people hearing God's voice at Sinai, that isn't a proof of the Divine origin of the Torah, my argument being that 2M people didn't see the written Torah; they just heard God's voice. In fact, we don't seem to know exactly when the written Torah was actually written, as you indicated.

RESPONSE: Our confirmation that all of Torah was Divinely given, is derived from Moses' continual miracle of his face shining light. God would not endorse Moses, had he fabricated the entire Torah, or parts of it. But as God produced this miracle as Moses wrote the entire Five Books, we know that all Moses' transmission are of Divine origin.

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QUESTION: The only indication that I've seen regarding the Rabbis' judgments in a matter seems to be in Deuteronomy 17:8, when it says that if you have a "matter of judgment", then you are supposed to "do according to the word that they tell you, from that place that Hashem will choose." My reading is that this is referring to matters of law judgment, and I can't see a justification for expanding this to include other matters.

RESPONSE: This applies to all areas of Torah. It is our Mesora, our transmission, that this is its accurate application.

QUESTION: How does accepting Koheles as Divine help us? The commentators appear to be all over the map with regard to their interpretations. As we discovered if I recall correctly, Ibn Ezra had a particular interpretation on one verse, while Rashi said the verse refers to human organs. So how would anyone know what the Divine intent is? At that point, I'm quite tempted to throw up my hands and say to the commentators, "Who says YOU guys know what you're talking about, if your views differ so widely?"

RESPONSE:: You are correct. None of the commentators can say, "I know God's intent of this verse." Prophecy has ceased, so such statements cannot be made by honest people. But we must say this is precisely God's plan! Man can only use his intellect to derive what he can. If his idea is reasonable, then he has learned a truth, regardless of whether God intended "that" specific meaning, or another. In act, God could have intended "all" of the meanings the various Rabbis suggest.

QUESTION: I don't mean disrespect to the scholars here, but I am concerned that there is such a lack of cohesiveness amongst scholars - and apparently of almost any generation - that one starts to wonder if anyone really has the correct ideas. Judaism is a small group. Orthodox Judaism is even smaller. Microscopically smaller within that are those of your thinking. I've listened to orthodox Jewish rabbis who seem to be all over the map, which makes me wonder what to think, other than to trust my own reasoning. Rabbi Soloveitchik had a point of view. So did Rabbi Kotler. So did Rabbi Feinstein. So did Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Schneerson, and on and on. And those views are not consistent. Is only one accurate, but the rest are heretics? If so, who gets to name the heretic? If not, what is anyone to do but trust in what is clear to their own mind?

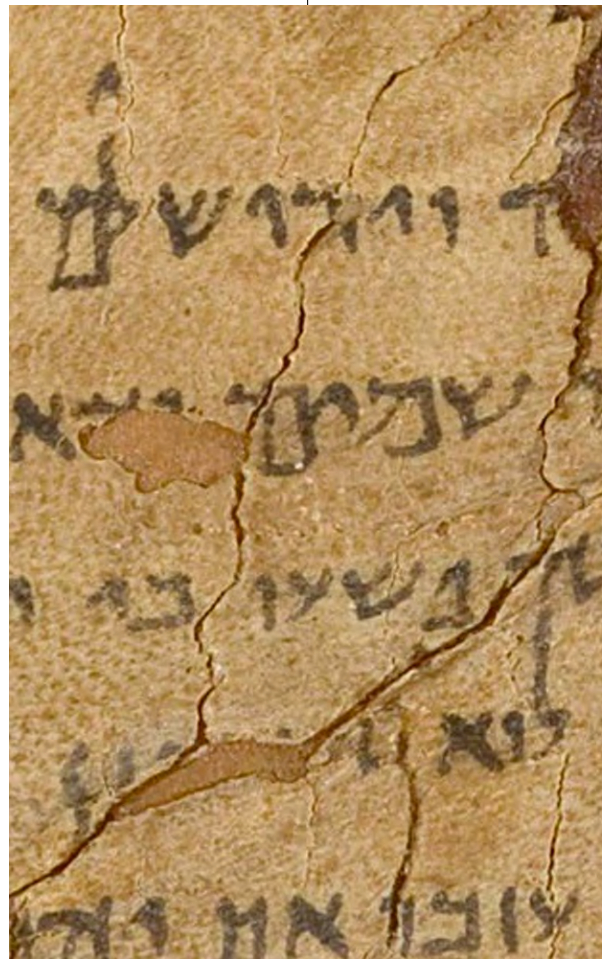
RESPONSE: If Rabbis suggest contradictory ideas in the sphere of halacha - Jewish Law - then their rulings must be followed by those seeking their leadership, despite their debate. You referred to this above citing Deuteronomy 17:8-11, this refers to matters of "law." Of course, two Rabbis with opposing views cannot both be correct; either one, or both are incorrect, in the "absolute" sense of God's knowledge. But you must understand that in the area of law - halacha - the very "law" is to be created by human intelligence.

That is God's will. Both Rabbis must be followed, as they are adhering to the system of discerning the Law. We are not trying to arrive at Moses' or God's absolute knowledge. That is impossible. What we are bound to do is arrive at our best understanding of interpreting the Law.

But in matters of philosophy, opposing views are not both correct. If Rabbis argue here, someone is wrong. His views are not endorsed by Deut. 17:11. We are fortunate that most Rabbis do not debate matters that border on heresy. Those matters are quite clear to intelligent people learned in Torah and natural sciences. The Torah is clear on fundamentals, so Torah "names the heretic." The ultimate arbiter is God's words. We don't find intelligent Rabbis debating whether God is physical, has emotions, had assistance in Creation, if He knows all, whether Moses was a true Prophet, and other clear matters. We do find debates concerning the Afterlife, for example: is it here on Earth, or is it a metaphysical existence? But no one debates the existence of the soul after life.

In philosophical debates, one of the Rabbis must be incorrect. But again, we must tread lightly, as their debates are not like ours. They are debating over deep ideas, and despite their conclusions, there is great insight to be derived by patiently studying their words. (And I refer to the great Rabbis, Maimonides, Ramban, Rashi, Saadia Gaon, not today's Rabbis.) If we don't agree with either Rabbi, we are honest and accept that we don't have a decision for ourselves. Rabbi Chait explained that in matters of philosophy, "You cannot be told what to think. No one can tell you that you believe some notion, when you do not." So until we see a side that makes sense, we cannot say "I agree with so and so." That would be a lie. But if we do see one Rabbi as making sense to us, then we say "I don't agree with the other Rabbi", regardless of how great he is.

We see a great cohesiveness among the Rabbis. I do not see any of them with doubts concerning major Torah themes. The great Rabbis spoke words of wisdom that ring true. It is today's teachers who have done a grave injustice to Torah; spreading false and even superstitious notions. When truth is clearly seen, we pay no attention to numbers. There are even greater numbers of Christians and Muslims. Yet, we know they follow belief, and not proof. Numbers are meaningless, when truth is what we seek. Additionally, other religions differ greatly as having no original proof, upon which to lay claim to Divine origin. Judaism has proof of Divine origin; others do not. So although it appears both groups follow a system of relying on the leaders' decisions, Judaism alone possesses an original event of proof, while all others do not. And Judaism's act of relying on the Rabbis is actually a Divine mandate. The mandate to follow the Prophets and Rabbis is equal to every other command God gave us at Sinai. There is no reason to differentiate. ■



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The Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought

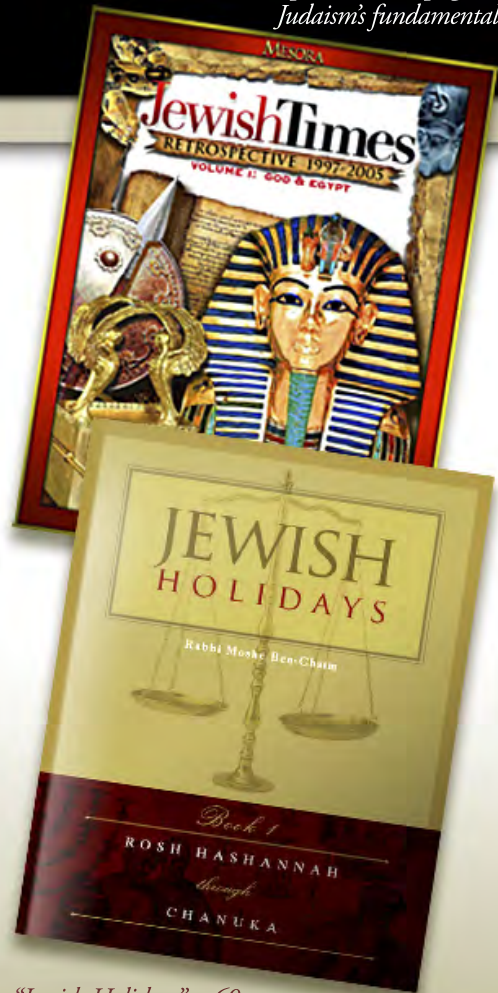
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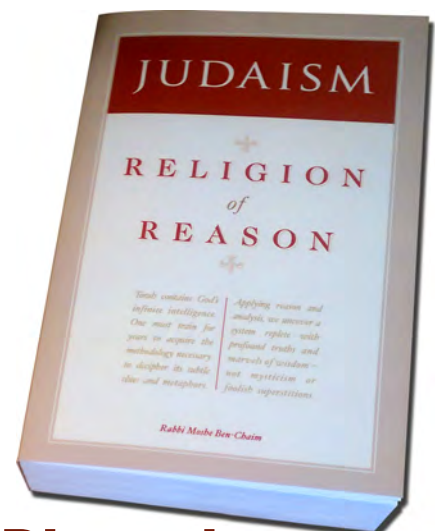
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**Disproving
astrology** (pg 199)

The Rules of KNOWLEDGE

In Jewish education for 25 years, my experience repeatedly teaches me that the most primary “Rules of Knowledge” are not taught. Rebbeim and teachers fail to provide students with the tools to think properly.

Vital lessons not being taught :

- The only 3 criteria for accepting truths, outlined in Maimonides' Letter to Marseilles (reprinted in this issue): 1) reason, 2) perception, and 3) Torah transmissions. I quote Maimonides verbatim: “Know, my masters, that it is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is a clear proof deriving from man's reasoning—such as arithmetic' geometry, and astronomy. The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses—such as when he knows with certainty that this is red and this is black and the like through the sight of his eye; or as when he tastes that this is bitter and this is sweet; or as when he feels that this is hot and this is cold; or as when he hears that this sound is clear and this sound is indistinct; or as when he smells that this is a pleasing smell and this is a displeasing smell and the like. The third is a thing that a man receives from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15).”

- “All that is in print is true,” must be rejected. Rambam writes this too. Students are taught to accept that books other than Torah, Prophets and

Writings are true, as they too are in print. When in fact, many Jewish authors, even Rabbis, write falsehoods and even heresy. Teachers do not train students to challenge; to use their minds to determine truth. They must learn to question what is in print. This is a grave injustice to students. Students are not asked to take a stand on a position. This develops a weak-minded, insecure Jew; a Jew who will not be able to make decisions about his or her Judaism.

- The 13 Principles are not taught.

- Jewish ideas must be “Jewish.” Sounds humorous, but many students are not taught that we go back to the Chumash to determine philosophical truths to reject popular “Jewish” notions. God's word trumps any Rabbi's word. And many today are not true to the Chumash.

- Shivim Panim L'Torah does not mean “all” views are correct. The Rishonim admit this in their rejection of other Rishonim. Have you taught students that as Moses erred, so too all others below his stature are certainly not infallible? We must encourage students to select a position when confronted with Rabbinic arguments. They must be taught that a Rebbe can be wrong. Torah's principles must be their guide.

- Comparative religion, how Judaism is distinct from all others and provable, must be taught. Students do not know this most fundamental truth of Judaism.

Do YOU know these matters and possess the answers? If not, become intimately familiar with these topics. Train students to think.

The Purpose of the **Ten Plagues**

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“And Hashem said to Moshe: I will bring one more plague upon Paroh and upon the Egyptians and afterward they will send you forth completely. They will chase you out from here (Sefer Shemot 11:1).”

The Plague of the Firstborn was intended to secure Bnai Yisrael's freedom

The above passage introduces the last of the ten plagues – the Plague of the Firstborn. Hashem describes the plague to Moshe. Moshe then warns Paroh that this terrible plague will be brought upon him and Egypt if he does not allow Bnai Yisrael to leave the Land. Paroh refuses to heed Moshe's warning and the plague strikes Egypt. The impact of the plague is unbearable and Paroh is forced to release Bnai Yisrael.

In the above passage, Hashem tells Moshe that this plague will force Paroh to release Bnai Yisrael. This suggests that although Hashem was prepared to force Paroh and the Egyptians to liberate Bnai Yisrael, for some reason, He delayed this horrible plague until this point. In other words, Hashem's intent in bringing the plagues upon Egypt was not solely to secure the freedom of Bnai Yisrael. If this were His sole purpose, this outcome could have been secured much earlier.

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For now, I could have sent out My hand and struck you and your nation with pestilence and you would have been removed from the land. But in truth, for this reason I have sustained you – in order to demonstrate to you My strength and in order that My name will be declared in all the land. (Sefer Shemot 9:15-16)

The first nine plagues were not designed to secure Bnai Yisrael's freedom

The above passages are part of the warning that Moshe delivered to Paroh after the Plague of Pestilence and before the Plague of Boils. The Plague of Pestilence decimated the Egyptians' livestock. However, this pestilence did not affect humans – only animals. Moshe tells Paroh that had Hashem wished, He could have extended the plague's affect. He could have directed the pestilence against the Egyptian people and not only against their livestock. However, He fashioned the plague in a manner that limited its damage and allowed the Egyptian people to survive. Hashem spared the Egyptians from eradication.

This passage provides additional confirmation of the message implicit in the first passage above. Hashem did not bring the plagues upon the Egyptians solely to coerce Paroh to release Bnai Yisrael. Some other objective was served through the plagues.

This means that the Plague of the Firstborn was fundamentally different from the other plagues. The Plague of the Firstborn was intended to secure the release of Bnai Yisrael. This plague was preceded by nine other plagues. These plagues were not designed to secure Bnai Yisrael's release. These plagues had some other objective.

And you should say to Paroh, "So says Hashem: Israel is My firstborn son. I say to you send out My son that he may serve Me. If you refuse to send him out, I will kill your firstborn son." (Sefer Shemot 4:22-23)

Hashem revealed to Moshe the Plague of the Firstborn when He assigned him his mission

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik Zt"l notes this distinction between the Plague of the Firstborn and the preceding plagues. He adds that this distinction explains an odd set of passages found earlier in Sefer Shemot. Hashem commands Moshe to return to Egypt and assigns him the mission of redeeming Bnai Yisrael. He tells Moshe to confront Paroh; demand the release of Bnai Yisrael, and warn him that if he resists, he will be subjected to the Plague of the Firstborn. It is odd that Hashem tells Moshe of the final

plague before revealing to him the preceding nine plagues. Furthermore, Hashem describes the warning Moshe will deliver before the final plague is brought upon Egypt. However, Moshe is not instructed to deliver this warning until all of the preceding plagues have been brought upon the Egyptians. Why does Hashem describe to Moshe the plague and its warning at this point? It would have made more sense for Hashem to wait until the time had arrived for the final plague. At that moment, He should have revealed the plague to Moshe and instructed him to warn Paroh.

Rav Soloveitchik responds that in the context of the discussion described in the passages these instructions are relevant and appropriate. Hashem is sending Moshe to Egypt with the mission of leading Bnai Yisrael forth from bondage. He assigns Moshe this mission and reveals to him the instrument through which the mission will be fulfilled. This instrument is the Plague of the Firstborn. It is this plague that will coerce Paroh to release the people. This is not the function of the other plagues. Therefore, in charging Moshe with his mission, he communicates to him the instructions regarding the final plague and does not mention those that will precede it.

What was the function of these preceding plagues?

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And Hashem said to Moshe: Behold, I have appointed you as a judge over Paroh and Aharon your brother will be your spokesperson. (Sefer Shemot 7:1)

Moshe was Paroh's judge

Hashem speaks to Moshe. He tells Moshe that he has been appointed as Paroh's judge. Rashi comments that with this statement Hashem transmitted to Moshe the authority to judge and punish Paroh. This means that the process that unfolded with Moshe's arrival in Egypt was not only one of redemption for Bnai Yisrael. Moshe was charged with a second mission. He was appointed as judge and executioner of the Paroh and the Egyptians. Rav Soloveitchik explains that this appointment reveals the role of the first nine plagues. These plagues were not intended to secure the release of Bnai Yisrael. These plagues were intended to punish the Paroh and his people for their persecution of Bnai Yisrael.

And He said to Avram: You should know that your descendants will be aliens in a land that is not theirs. They (the inhabitants) will subjugate them and afflict them for four hundred years. But this nation that they will serve I will judge and afterward they will go forth with great wealth. (Sefer Beresheit 15:13-14)

The dual objective of the plagues was revealed to Avraham

These passages were part of a prophecy and a covenant entered into by Hashem and Avraham. Hashem foretold Avraham of the bondage of his descendants in Egypt. Also, He revealed to Avraham that his descendants' bondage will end with the judgment of their oppressors and their own redemption. Rav Soloveitchik explains that this covenant was the basis for the design of the plagues. The plagues fulfilled this ancient promise. They punished Bnai Yisrael's oppressors and they secured their release from bondage.

One of the greatest mysteries of the Torah's account of Bnai Yisrael's redemption is its description of Hashem suspending Paroh's freewill. The Torah explains that Hashem instructed Moshe to warn Paroh of the consequences of continuing to enslave Bnai Yisrael. Before many of the plagues, Moshe goes to Paroh and warns him. He tells Paroh that if he does not release the people, he will experience another plague. However, the Torah also reveals that Hashem hardened or strengthened Paroh's heart. He deprived Paroh of the volition to

heed Moshe's warning. A bizarre routine evolved. Moshe warned Paroh; Paroh was prevented from acquiescing; the plague was brought upon Paroh and Egypt.

In itself, this suspension of volition implies that the first nine plagues were not designed to secure Bnai Yisrael's freedom. If that was their design, it would not make sense for Hashem to deprive Paroh of the capacity to surrender Bnai Yisrael. Rav Soloveitchik's conclusions provide a simple solution for this mystery.

It is possible that a person will commit a great sin or many sins and the judgment of the True Judge will be that the punishment for this willfully committed sin or sins will be that he is prevented from repenting. He (the sinner) is not provided the volition to repent from his wickedness. This is in order that he should die and be destroyed for the sin he has committed... Therefore, it is written in the Torah, "I will strengthen the heart of Paroh". Because he first sinned by his own volition and acted evilly to the people of Israel who dwelled in his land... it was the judgment that repentance should be denied him so that he should be punished. Therefore, Hashem strengthened his heart... (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance 6:3)

The suspension of Paroh's freewill

Maimonides' comments respond to a difficult issue. One of the fundamental principles of the Torah is that human beings are endowed with freewill – the capacity to make their own moral decisions. Because we have freewill, Hashem revealed to us His commandments, rewards us for our observance of them, and holds us responsible for their violation. Maimonides asks: How can we reconcile the principle of free choice with various passages in the Torah that indicate instances in which specific individuals or people have been deprived of their freewill? Maimonides cites as an example the Torah's description of Hashem strengthening Paroh's heart and depriving him of the ability to respond to the plagues by releasing Bnai Yisrael. In other words, the Torah tells us that Paroh would have surrendered Bnai Yisrael in response to the plagues if he had freewill. However, he was deprived of the ability to choose freely. Therefore, despite the suffering that he and his nation experienced, he could not release Bnai Yisrael.

Maimonides responds that in this instance Paroh was only deprived of volition after he had acted with terrible wickedness. He made freewill choices to oppress, afflict,

and murder Bnai Yisrael. As a consequence of these freewill choices, he was punished by losing the ability to repent. His freewill was suspended in order to assure that he would be punished for his wickedness.

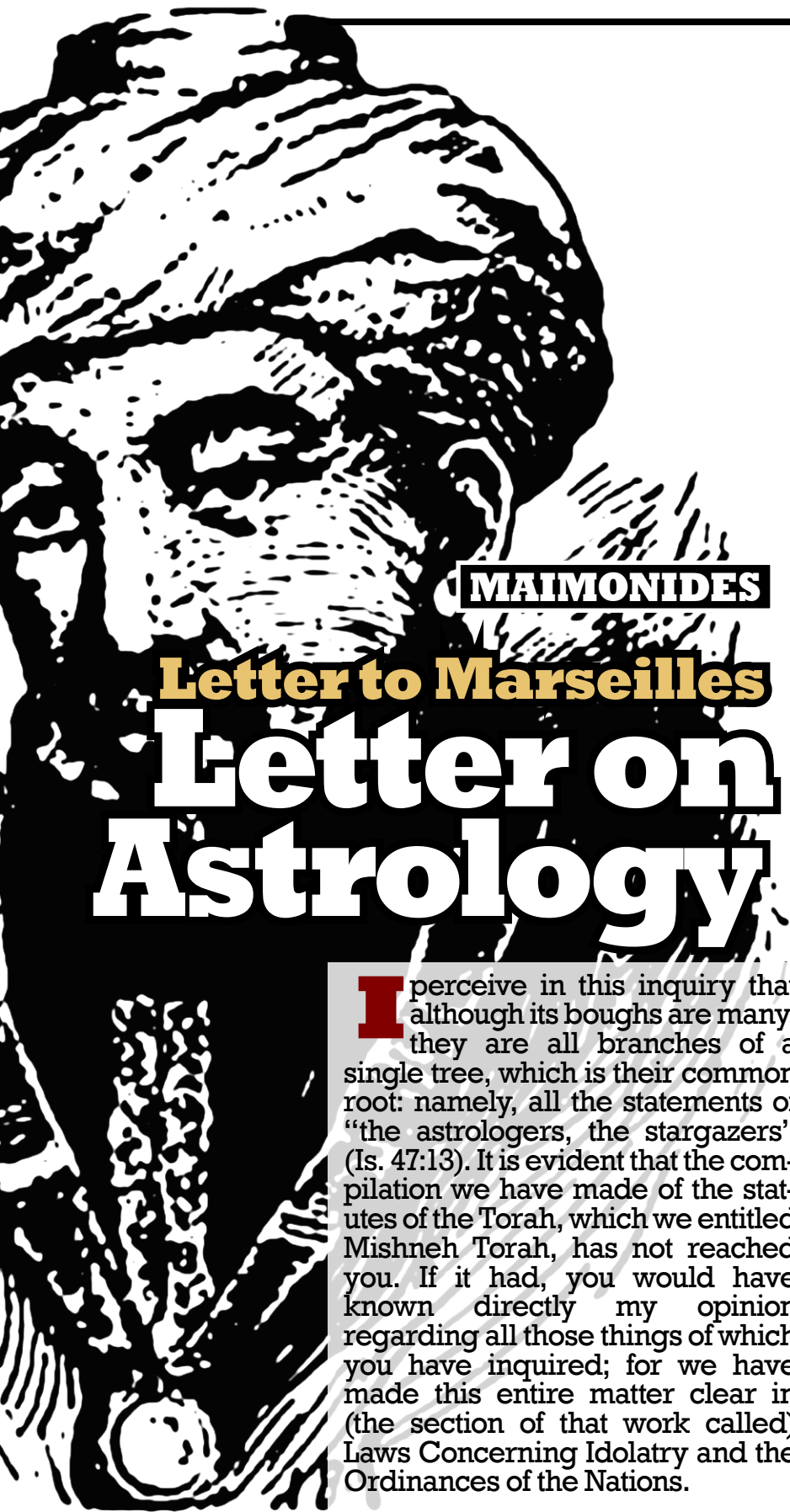
With these comments, Maimonides reconciles the principle of freewill with the passages in the Torah that suggest that freewill can be suspended. He also provides an important insight into the mystery of Hashem's treatment of Paroh. Hashem deprived Paroh of freewill as punishment for his willful wickedness. He then brought the plagues upon him. Moshe's warnings demonstrated Paroh's helplessness. Even after being warned by Moshe, he could not repent. His volition was suspended.

In the course of answering his own question, Maimonides confirms Rav Soloveitchik's position that the plagues were intended as a punishment for Paroh and the Egyptians. Hashem gave Paroh the ability to withstand the plagues so that he would be punished with additional plagues. Clearly, Maimonides understands the plagues as an instrument of punishment and not merely as a coercive measure designed to force Paroh to release Bnai Yisrael.

To the One Who struck the Egyptians through their first born – for His kindness is eternal. (Tehilim 136:10)

Understanding Hallel HaGadol

It is customary to recite the 136th chapter of Psalms on Shabbat and festivals. This chapter is referred to as Hallel HaGadol – the Great Praise. The chapter begins with a number of more general praises. The tenth passage begins a series of praises that focus on the acts of kindness Hashem performed for Bnai Yisrael – beginning in Egypt. The first of these kindnesses is identified as the Plague of the Firstborn. The chapter does not mention the nine preceding plagues. This implies that these plagues were not performed as a kindness towards Bnai Yisrael. This characterization and the contrast between the first nine plagues and the final plague conforms to Rav Soloveitchik's conclusions. The first nine plagues were intended as punishment for the Egyptians. They were not designed as a kindness towards Bnai Yisrael. In contrast, the final plague – the Plague of the Firstborn – was intended to force Paroh and the Egyptians to release Bnai Yisrael. This plague was a kindness performed on behalf of Bnai Yisrael. ■



MAIMONIDES

Letter to Marseilles Letter on Astrology

I perceive in this inquiry that although its boughs are many, they are all branches of a single tree, which is their common root: namely, all the statements of “the astrologers, the stargazers” (Is. 47:13). It is evident that the compilation we have made of the statutes of the Torah, which we entitled Mishneh Torah, has not reached you. If it had, you would have known directly my opinion regarding all those things of which you have inquired; for we have made this entire matter clear in (the section of that work called) Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Nations.

It seems to me that it will come to you before this reply, since it is already widespread on the island of Sicily, as well as in the West and in the East and in the South. In any case, I myself need to make this clear to you.

Know, my masters, that it is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is a clear proof deriving from man’s reasoning—such as arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses—such as when he knows with certainty that this is red and this is black and the like through the sight of his eye; or as when he tastes that this is bitter and this is sweet; or as when he feels that this is hot and this is cold; or as when he hears that this sound is clear and this sound is indistinct; or as when he smells that this is a pleasing smell and this is a displeasing smell and the like. The third is a thing that a man receives from the prophets or from the righteous. Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy, and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three species, of him it is said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15).

Thus you ought to know that fools have composed thousands of books of nothingness and emptiness. Any number of men, great in years but not in wisdom, wasted all their days in studying these books and imagined that these follies are science. They came to think of themselves as wise men because they knew that science. The thing about which most of the world errs, or all of it—save for a few individuals, “the remnant of whom the Lord shall call” (Joel 3:5)—is that thing of which I am apprising you. The great sickness and the “grievous evil” (Eccles. 5:12, 15) consist in this: that all the things that man finds written in books, he presumes to think of as true—and all the more so if the books are old. And since many individuals have busied themselves with those books and have engaged in discussions concerning them, the rash fellow’s mind at once leaps to the conclusion that these are words of wisdom, and he says to himself: “Has the pen of the scribes written in vain” (Jer. 8:8), and have they vainly engaged in these things? This is why our kingdom was lost and our Temple was destroyed and why we were brought to this; for our fathers sinned and are no more because they found many books dealing with these themes of the star gazers, these things being the root of idolatry, as we have made clear in Laws Concerning Idolatry. They erred and were drawn after them, imagining them to be glorious science and to be of great utility. They did not busy themselves with the art of war or with the conquest of lands, but imagined that those studies would help them. Therefore the prophets called them “fools and dolts” (Jer. 4:22). And truly fools they were, “for they walked after confused things that do not profit” (I Sam. 12:21 and Jer. 2:8).

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מעג ברב מיטען

Know, my masters, that I myself have investigated much into these matters. The first thing I studied is that science which is called judicial astrology—that is, (the science) by which man may know what will come to pass in the world or in this or that city or kingdom and what will happen to a particular individual all the days of his life. I also have read in all matters concerning all of idolatry, so that it seems to me there does not remain in the world a composition on this subject, having been translated into Arabic from other languages, but that I have read it and have understood its subject matter and have plumbed the depth of its thought. From those books it became clear to me what the reason is for all those commandments that everyone comes to think of as having no reason at all other than the decree of Scripture. I already have a great composition on this subject in the Arabic language (namely, the Guide of the Perplexed) with lucid proofs for every single commandment but this is not required of us now. I now return to the subject of your inquiry.

Know, my masters, that every one of those things concerning judicial astrology that (its adherents) maintain—namely, that something will happen one way and not another, and that the constellation under which one is born will draw him on so that he will be of such and such a kind and so that something will happen to him one way and not another—all those assertions are far from being scientific; they are stupidity. There are lucid, faultless proofs refuting all the roots of those assertions. Never did one of those genuinely wise men of the nations busy himself with this matter or write on it, no (nation) wrote such compositions or committed the error of calling it a science, other than the Chasdeans, Chaldeans, Canaanites, and Egyptians, for that was their religion in those days. But the wise men of Greece—and they are the philosophers who wrote on science and busied themselves with all the species of science—mock and scorn and ridicule these four nations that I have mentioned to you, and they rally proofs to refute their entire position “root and branch” (Mal. 3:19). The wise men of Persia also recognized and understood that all that science which the Chasdeans, Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Canaanites produced is a falsehood and a lie. Do not imagine that those refutations are mere assertions and that we therefore should not put our trust in them; rather there are lucid and correct, faultless proofs to refute that entire position, and the only one who would cling to it would be “a simple one who believes everything” (Prov. 14:15), or one who wishes to deceive others.

And know, my masters, that the science of the stars that is genuine science is knowledge of the form of the spheres, their number, their measure, the course they follow, each one’s period of revolution, their declination to the north or to the south, their revolving to the east or to the west, and the orbit of every star and what its course is. On all this and the like, the wise men of Greece, Persia, and India wrote compositions. This is an exceedingly glorious science. By means of it the onset of the eclipses of luminaries may be known and when they will

be eclipsed at any given place; by means of it there may be known the cause for the moon’s (yareah) appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full, and then gradually waning; by means of it there may be known when the moon (levanah) will or will not be seen; and the reason why one day will be long and another day short; and the reason why two stars will rise as one, but not set together; and the reason why a given day at a given place is thirteen hours long and in another place fifteen or sixteen or twenty hours long, yet being a single day. (In one place the day and the night will be of equal duration; in another place the day will be like a month or two months or three—so that a place may be found where the entire year is a single day, six months daytime and six months nighttime.) How many amazing conditions are made intelligible by this science, all of which is undoubtedly true. It is this calculation of astronomical cycles of which the (Talmudic) sages said that it is wisdom and understanding in the sight of the (Gentile) peoples (Shabbat 75a). But as for these assertions of the stupid astrologers, they are nothing. I am now making clear to you the main points of those matters that are the mystery of the world.

Know, that all the wise men of the Gentile nations—and they are the great philosophers, men of intellect and science—were all in accord that the world has a Governor; He makes a sphere revolve, the sphere not revolving of itself. They have many books advancing a lucid proof for this; on this point there is no controversy among men of science. There is, however, a great controversy among them regarding this entire world, namely, the sphere and what is beneath it.

(1) Most of them say that it is not subject to generation and corruption, but that as it is now, it was and it will be forever and ever. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, who was always the same as He is now, is making it revolve, so was He always making it revolve, and it was always being revolved; the two of them were always together, never was one without the other.

(2) Among them there are those who maintain that this sphere has come into being and that the Deity has created it, but that there is a single thing that exists together with the Creator, “like the clay in the potter’s hand” (Jer. 18:6). From that thing which exists together with Him, He makes whatever He pleases. Sometimes He will use some of that clay, as it were, to make heaven and some of it to make earth; and sometimes, if He pleases, He takes some of that out of which He has made heaven and makes something else out of it. But to bring forth something out of nothing is impossible.

(3) Among the philosophers there are those who maintain—just as the prophets maintained—that the Holy One, blessed be He, created all created things out of nothing and that there is no other thing with the Creator aside from the creation that He has brought forth.

Now the great controversy is over this point, and this is the very point that Abraham our Father discerned. A thousand books have already been written on this, with proofs that each and every one of them rallies to support its position. It is the root of the Torah that the Deity alone

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is primordial and that He has created the whole out of nothing; whoever does not acknowledge this is guilty of radical unbelief and is guilty of heresy. I myself have already written a great composition in Arabic (Guide of the Perplexed) on these matters. I have explained the lucid proofs of the existence of the Creator and that He is one and that He is not a body or corporeal in any respect. I have shattered all those proofs that the philosophers advance as proving that the world was not created. In addition, I have resolved all the great difficulties that they have raised against us on account of our maintaining that the Deity has created everything that exists out of nothing.... All these, then, are the three sects into which the wise men of the world fall, from the earliest antiquity down to now.

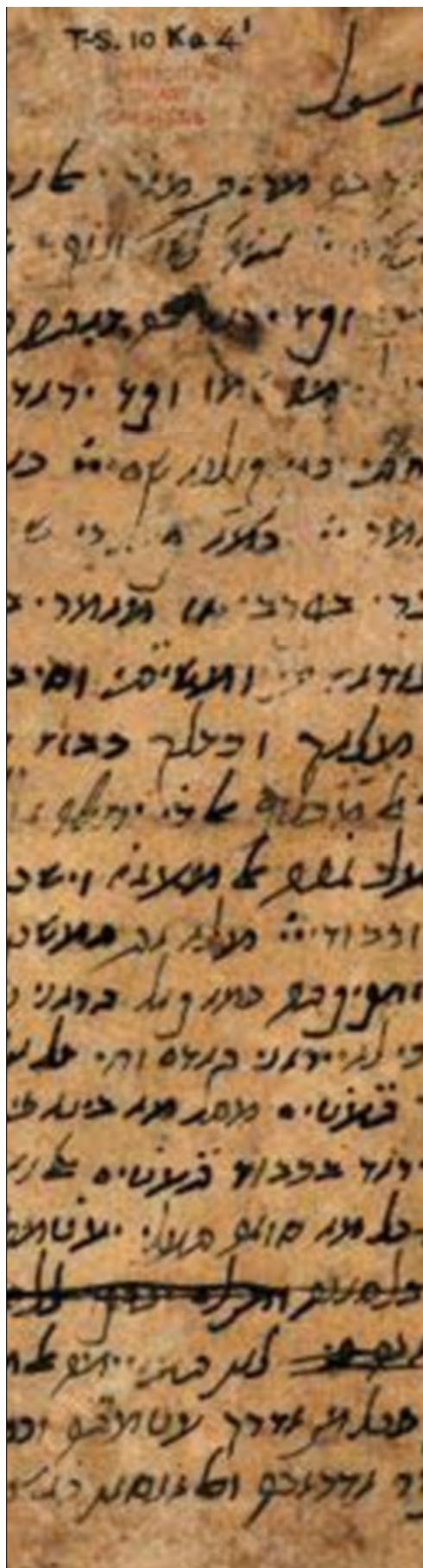
(1) Those who maintain that the sphere is not a created thing, but that it eternally has been and will be just as it is.

(2) Those who maintain that the Deity has created it out of that matter which always exists by Him.

(3) Those who maintain—just as all the prophets did—that there is no other thing that is with the Deity, just He Himself, and that when He wished, He brought forth this world out of nothing, in conformity with His will.

All of these three sects are in accord on the following point. Everything that comes into being in this lower world—namely, every “living soul” (Gen. 1:30) and every tree and every species of grass and every one of the species of minerals—the whole has the Deity as its maker, through a power coming from the spheres and the stars. And they are in accord that the power of the Creator flows first upon the spheres and the stars; from the spheres and the stars it flows and spreads through this (lower) world—everything that is, thereby coming into being. Just as we maintain that the Holy One, blessed be He, performs signs and wonders through the angels, so do these philosophers maintain that all these occurrences in the nature of the world come through the spheres and the stars. They maintain that the spheres and the stars possess souls and knowledge. All these things are true. I myself have already made it clear, with proofs, that all these things involve no damage to religion. And not only this, but what is more I have understood from the sayings of the sages in all of the Midrashim that they maintain as the philosophers maintained. There is no controversy whatever between the sages of Israel and the philosophers on these matters, as I have made clear in those chapters [in the Guide of the Perplexed, a philosophical treatise].

All three of these sects of the philosophers, which maintain that everything is made by means of the spheres and the stars, also maintain that whatever happens to each and



every human being is due to chance; it is not due to any cause coming from above, and neither the constellation under which one is born nor nature will avail against it. There is no difference for them between this individual who was torn to pieces by a lion that happened upon him, or this mouse that was torn to pieces by a spider. Neither is there a difference between a roof's falling upon and killing someone, or a rock's breaking loose from a mountain and falling upon a tree or upon another rock and breaking it. All this, they maintain, is simply fortuitous. It is said as well of those human beings who are warring with one another over a great kingdom, that they are like a pack of dogs warring over a carcass. This is not due to any cause coming from the stars. Furthermore, this one being poor and that one rich, this one having children and that one being childless—all the philosophers maintain that this is due to chance. The summary of the matter is that they maintain that what happens to each and every thing—be it man or beast or trees and minerals—is all due to chance. But the being of all the species and the things comprehended in the entire world—in which there is not the activity of a living soul—all of this stems from the power of the spheres whose root, in turn, comes from the Holy One, blessed be He. The controversy lies in this, that the true religionists, and that is the religion of Moses our Teacher, maintain that what happens to individuals is not due to chance, but rather to judgment—as the Torah says: “For all His ways are judgment” (Deut. 32:4). The prophet explained: “Whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer. 32:19). It is regarding this that the Torah warned and bore witness and told Israel: “But if you will not hearken to Me” (Lev. 26:14), I shall bring hardship upon you. If you maintain that that hardship is not an affliction brought on by your sins, but rather due to chance and one of those things that happen by chance, why then I Myself shall heap more of that chance upon you—as it is written: “And if you walk with Me in (the way of) chance, I too shall walk with you in the wrath of chance” (Lev. 26:27-28). This is a root of the religion of Moses our Teacher, that everything happening to human beings is a (just) decree and judgment. Hence, the sages maintained: “There is no death without sin and no affliction without transgression” (Shabbat 55a).

And know, my masters, that it is one of the roots of the religion of Moses our Teacher—and one that all the philosophers also acknowledge—that every action of human beings is left to them and that there is nothing

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to constrain or draw them. Rather, if he so pleases, a man will worship God and become wise and sit in the house of study. And if he so pleases, he will follow the counsel of the wicked and run with thieves and hide with adulterers. There is no influence or constellation under which one is born that will draw him in any manner toward any one of these ways. Hence it was commanded and told to him: "Do this and do not do that." We have made clear many of the things involved in these matters in most of our Arabic compositions, in the Commentary on the Mishna and in the rest of the compositions. Thus we ought to know that what happens to human beings is not—as the philosophers maintain—like what happens to the beast.

Three disagreements are to be found in these matters. Imagine this situation. Here is Reuben, a tanner, poor, and his children have died in his own lifetime. And here is Simon, a perfumer, rich, and his children stand before him.

(1) The philosopher will maintain that this is due to chance. It is possible that Reuben could become a perfumer, grow rich, and have children; and it is possible that Simon could become impoverished, turn into a tanner, and witness his children's death. All this is simply fortuitous. There is no nature in the world and no power emanating from a star that caused this individual to be or not to be thus. This is the position of the philosophers.

(2) The second position is that of those who believe in judicial astrology and whose sayings you have heard and whose follies are widespread among you. They maintain that it is impossible that a given thing should ever change. Never will Reuben be anything other than a tanner and poor and childless, for it was thus fixed by the power of the sphere at the time of his birth. Similarly, it is impossible for Simon to be anything other than a perfumer and rich and with surviving children, just as it was fixed by the power of the sphere at the time of his birth.

These two ways, or these two positions, are regarded as falsehoods by us. The position of the astrologers is given the lie by reason, for correct reasoning has already refuted, by means of lucid proofs, all those follies that they have maintained. It also is regarded as a falsehood by us because of the religious tradition, for if the matter stood thus, of what utility would the Torah and the commandment and the Talmud be to a particular individual? For in that event, every single individual would lack the power to do anything he set his mind to, since something else draws him on—against his will—to be this and not to be that; of what use then is the command or the Talmud? The roots of the religion of Moses our Teacher, we find, refute the position of these



stupid ones—in addition to reason's doing so with all those proofs that the philosophers maintain to refute the position of the Chaldeans and the Chaldeans and their associates. The position of the philosophers who maintain that these things are due to chance is also regarded as a falsehood by us because of the religious tradition.

(3) The true way upon which we rely and in which we walk is this: We say regarding this Reuben and Simon, that there is nothing that draws on the one to become a perfumer and rich, and the other to become a tanner and poor. It is possible that the situation will change and be reversed, as the philosopher maintains. But the philosopher maintains that this is due to chance. We maintain that it is not due to chance, but rather that this situation depends on the will of "Him who spoke, and (the world) came into being" (Ps. 33:9); all of this is a (just) decree and judgment. We do not know the end of the Holy One's wisdom so as to know by what decree and judgment He required that this should be this way and that that should be the other way; "for His ways are not like our ways, neither are His thoughts like our thoughts" (Is. 55:8). We rather are obliged to fix in our minds that if Simon sins, he will be punished with stripes and impoverished and his children will die and the like. And if Reuben repents and mends his ways and searches his deeds and walks in a straight path, he will grow rich and will succeed in all his undertakings and "see (his) seed and prolong (his) days" (ibid. 55:10). This is a root of the religion. If a man says, "But look, many have acted in this way and yet have not succeeded," why, this is no proof. [For] either some iniquity of theirs caused this, or they are now afflicted in order to inherit something even better than this. [But not afflicted in the senses that they are sinners, and a subsequent good will be a "reward". Maimonides means they are dealt a trail through which they will emerge with a greater good. An example is when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This was not commanded as a means of suffering so that Abraham might thereby be 'owed' a subse-

quent good. Rather, it was to actualize Abraham's potential, for his own good.]

The summary of the matter is that our mind cannot grasp how the decrees of the Holy One, blessed be He, work upon human beings in this world and in the world to come. What we have said about this from the beginning is that the entire position of the stargazers is regarded as a falsehood by all men of science. I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. (You surely know how many of the verses of the holy Law are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the translator [of the Aramaic Targum] rendered it in a form that reason will abide.) A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back.

Do not censure me, my masters, for the brevity of these remarks, for the writing makes it clear that I wrote it to fill a present need. For I was very busy with many Gentile affairs. The Deity knows that if Rabbi Pinhas had not sent a messenger who "urged me till I was ashamed" (II Kings 2:17) and did not leave my presence until I had written it, I would not be replying now since I have no leisure. On this account, judge in my favor. Farewell, my brothers, friends, and masters; may you increase and be exalted forever. Amen. ■

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Point of No Return

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Bo, begins with Hashem's instruction to Moshe to "Come to Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order to place my signs in his midst." We must ask, why did Hashem harden Pharaoh's heart? It would seem that the goal of the signs was to convince the Egyptians of God's existence and absolute mastery of nature and thereby inspire them to renounce idolatry and embrace the creator. This is clearly enunciated in the verse which states, "And Egypt will know that I am the Lord when I increase my signs among them." If that is the case, it is difficult to comprehend why Hashem would "harden" Pharaoh's heart as this would seemingly run counter to the stated objective of the signs.

One of the most fundamental principles of Judaism is that of Free Will. Man is endowed with the divine soul which enables him to perceive truth and freely choose his life's path. There are no internal or external factors which pre-determine the choices he will make. Because man is the master of his moral destiny, he is subject to Reward and Punishment. The power of free will is such that man is never defeated by sin but always retains the capacity to correct his flaws and return to the path of righteousness. Thus for Judaism the ability of the sinner to repent is of paramount importance. Hashem says, "I do not desire the death of the sinner but that he abandon his evil path and live." The worst sinner has the option to do Teshuva at any point, even on his death bed. If it is genuine, it would be accepted and earn him a share in the world to come.

However, according to the Rambam, there is an exception to this rule. He asserts that there is a unique punishment reserved for a particular type of sinner whose evil is so egregious that Hashem removes his capacity to repent in order that he receive his just punishment. Rambam cites Pharaoh as an example of this phenomenon saying, "Therefore it says in the Torah, 'And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh', for he sinned of his own accord initially and did evil to the Jews who dwelled in his land. Justice demanded that repentance be withheld from him so that he be punished and therefore Hashem hardened his heart."

We can now make sense of the opening verse of Parshat Bo. G-d wanted to give the Egyptians a chance to obtain proof of His Existence and absolute power. This required numerous signs and wonders. Each plague displayed a different aspect of Hashem's supreme might and strengthened the growing belief of the people in His Existence. Had Pharaoh relented under the pressure of the blows and released the Jews, it would have been bad for the Egyptians as it would have terminated the "learning experience" of the plagues.

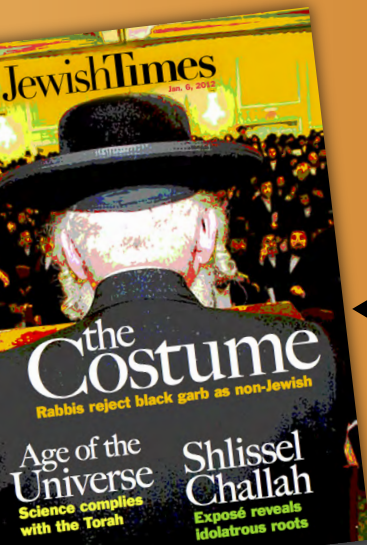
The demise of Pharaoh contains a sobering lesson. Our task in life is to perfect our souls through pursuit of truth and righteous behavior. Our most precious asset is the power to choose between good and evil. Every sin strengthens the forces of instinct and weakens our ability to overcome them. Every good deed empowers the soul and elevates our spiritual moral. Full confidence in our capacity for goodness is essential to our mission in life as individuals and people. May we always act in a manner which justifies this optimistic attitude. ■



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REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN

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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively about the philosophy and Hashkafa of Judaism for many years. As the title of his book, "Judaism; Religion of Reason" indicates, his ideas are rooted in an uncompromisingly rational approach to Judaism. He follows the guidelines of the great rationalist philosophers such as Rambam and Saadia Gaon in his exploration into the values and ideals of Torah Judaism. He is convinced that all of the teachings of Judaism and the statements of the Sages make perfect sense and are amenable to the rational, inquiring mind.

He is absolutely opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition or are contrary to reason. This collection of writings covers a wide variety of topics that are of interest to contemporary Jews. It also contains insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the underlying significance and relevance of many mitzvot.

Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. Indeed he asserts that one can only understand and appreciate Judaism by analyzing it in a logical manner in order to elucidate its deeper ideas. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions because he is absolutely convinced that Torah is the Word of God and thus based on the highest form of wisdom.

Jews who have a profound desire to make sense out of their religion will benefit greatly from reading this book. One need not agree with all of Rabbi Ben-Chaim's ideas, but his questions, analyses and original thoughts will open your mind to a new appreciation of the wisdom and logical consistency of Torah Judaism.

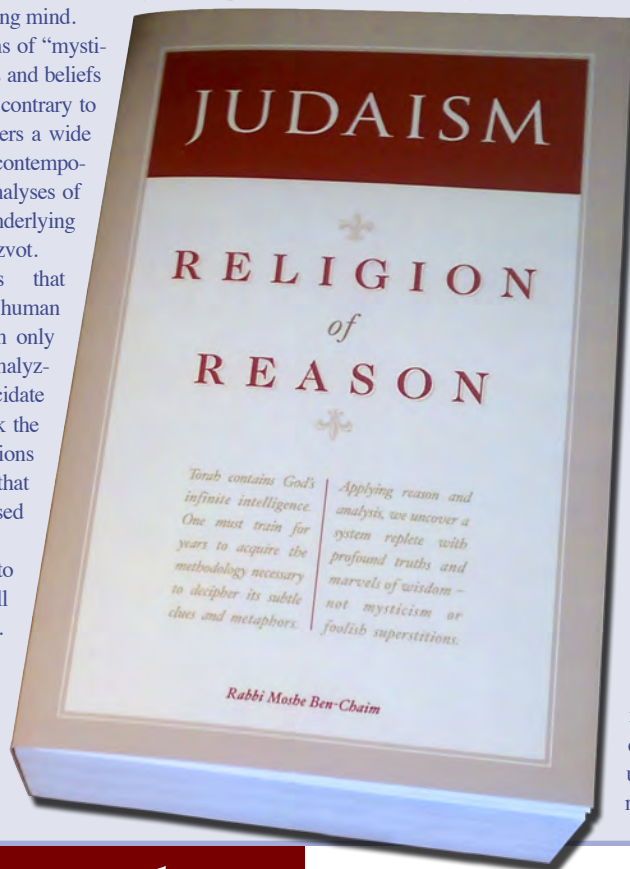


RABBI STEVEN WEIL

Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has followed in the footsteps of the great Medieval Rishonim (Rambam, R. Avraham ben HaRambam, etc.) in trying to explain, define and lay out the world outlook of Torah and the philosophy of Judaism in rational, logical terms. Rabbi Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. He is extremely critical of approaches to Judaism that superimpose external methodologies (such as mysticism, other religions) and project primitive emotions onto the

Almighty. Although one can disagree with some of the conclusions; his approach, his questions and method enable the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. When Chazal employ certain terms and convey certain images, the student is forced to conceptualize, extract and deduce profound psychological and philosophical principles. Unfortunately, many take Chazal at face value or project onto Chazal, motives and rationalizations they never meant. Rabbi Ben-Chaim following the method of the Rishonim, forces us to define, weigh and analyze each word and phrase of Chazal. Rabbi Ben-Chaim shows there is no contradiction between a serious investigation of Science and a serious investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking, seeking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike. Once again, one may not agree with specifics within the book but at the same time will appreciate it and gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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