

# JewishTimes

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**HAREDIM:**  
Torah Values?

**TZARA'AT**  
and Stinginess

# GOD'S JUSTICE

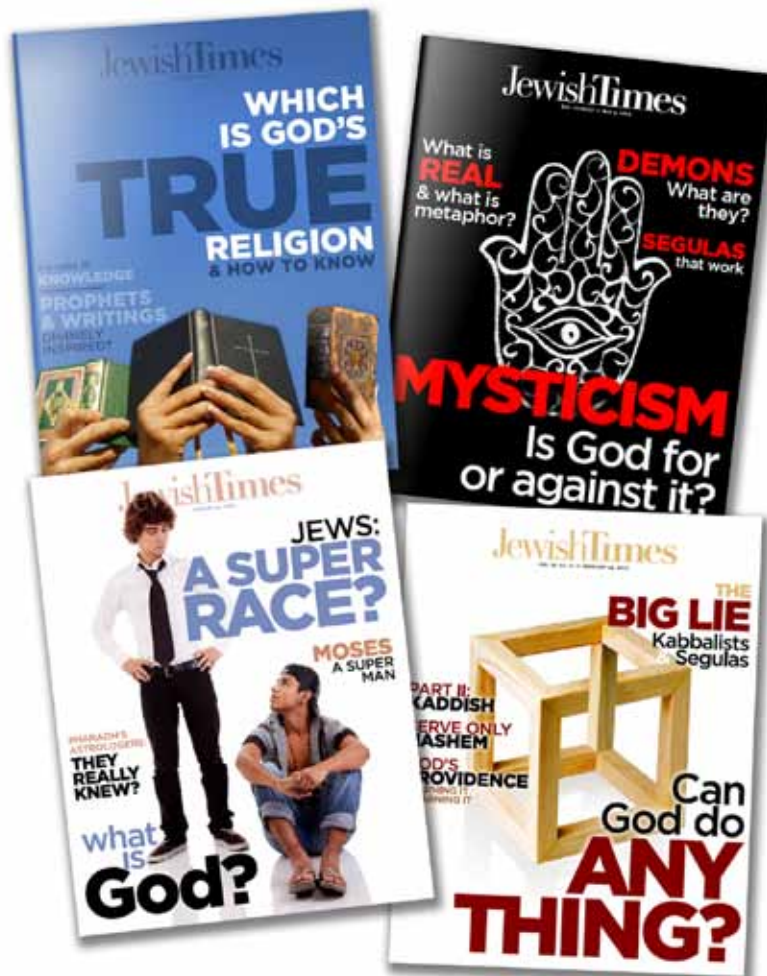
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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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## LETTERS

### Kabbala

**Reader:** Why do you take issue with parts of Kabbalah? Through Kabbalistic study, many great Rabbis were known to have deep insights into reality with ability to "see from one end of the world to the other."

**Rabbi:** I do not know your meaning of "seeing from one end of the world to the other." If an idea is true, it doesn't matter where it is found. If a notion is false, claiming "it forms part of Kabbala" cannot make it correct.  $2+2=5$  is false, regardless of the book in which it is written. When discussing written works other than God's word – which is where Zoharistic

Kabbala falls as a fallible human creation – we must evaluate ideas based on their own principles.

**Reader:** Their [Kabbalistic Rabbis] prayers, time and time again were found to be potent. They did not credit themselves with magical powers but with the ability to pray more effectively, having learned it from their studies. They would rebuke others for not applying themselves to pray sufficiently, clarifying that anyone can achieve these levels of response.

(continued on next page)



All we needed to do is understand Who we speak to and have an honest conversation with Hashem, understanding that He does hear us.

**Rabbi:** This idea does not originate with Kabbala. It's the basic premise of tefilah, "Know before Whom you stand." And God's response does not depend on one's study of Zoharistic Kabbala. Tanach is replete with examples.

**Reader:** These same Rabbis invariably studied Kabbala, be they Chassidim, Sefardim or any other sect. How do we reconcile these seeming contradictions: They trust a text [Kabbala] that is questionable, but it does appear to help them develop a closer relationship with Hashem.

**Rabbi:** One's "closer relationship with Hashem" is not something anyone can validate about another person. And it is arrogant and baseless for anyone to suggest he or she is now "closer to God." How does one know this? A tznuva [modest person] which is what Moses was, would never make such a claim. God alone knows whether one person gets closer to Him. You will never find any Prophet of truly righteous person boast, nor boast about which he cannot know. And others cannot know if a given Rabbi is close or distant from God. Either way, such claims are baseless and contrary to Torah. Torah is complete, and we are not to add to, or subtract from it. Suggesting Zohar contains more than Tanach and Torah She B'al Peh, through which one gets closer to Hashem, is a wrong concept.

Whatever in Zohar is valid, meaning, what is synonymous with Torah, teaches us nothing new and it may be followed. Whatever in Zohar opposes Torah, must be rejected.

My view is that the ancient Rabbis who supported Kabbala did not have the same Kabbala that exists today that contains false and heretical ideas. Ibn Ezra spoke of Kabbala. There existed a body of transmission, which is what is meant by the word "kabbala." Nothing more. Once one projects mystical notions onto Zohar, Kabbalah and Torah, he no longer follows Torah. ■



# GOD'S JUSTICE

## WHY BELIEVE IN HIM?

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

**Reader:** Why should one believe in God?

**Rabbi:** Judaism does not "believe" in God, but "knows" that a Creator exists. This is based on Revelation at Sinai.

**Reader:** Why should one believe that God is good and does good, when we observe an imperfect world with much suffering? With times of famine, disease, wars, the Holocaust and every day problems? Why does He either allow these things, or Himself makes such things in the World?

**Rabbi:** While we can't answer everything, or know if or when God intended some event without clear miracles, we do know that God created an abundance of good for mankind. He created mankind. He created necessary air, water and food, and materials for clothing and shelter. He even created their quantity in proportion to our needs. Air is most vital, so it is everywhere. Water is required next, and it too is plentiful. Foods are inexpensive and grown anywhere with a little labor. And wood, stones and dirt for shelter, and clothing materials are next in availability. And He

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*“Do unanswered questions  
alter the Torah’s correctness  
of being charitable, honest,  
just and treating all  
others equally?”*

*Do our questions  
turn Torah truths  
into falsehoods?*

created such varied tastes for our pleasure. He also created beautiful scenery, flowers and birds of song. He created us with a psychological design precisely that we experience joy, such as the sunrise, nature. He crafted our emotions in a manner that we can invent and appreciate music, and that we enjoy friends and family. He implanted in us so many emotions that are pleasurable. He created the phenomenon of healing, physically and mentally. And most of all He created us with intellect to enjoy His immense wisdom that He permeated throughout the universe. Einstein marveled that man's intellect can grasp the wisdom of the universe.

We understand God is good. What seems bad to us, is what man brings upon himself, and not what God does. God desires we use free will and choose our choices. He doesn't stand in the way of what we choose.

We cannot answer why He allowed the Holocaust; we do not know His mind. But Torah does warn of God

hiding Himself from us when our actions fall below a certain positive threshold. And even when calamity strikes, God has no shortage of means to save those He wishes to save. Noah and his family were saved from the Flood, the Jews did not receive certain Plagues, Lot was saved from Sodom, and the list goes on. King David's Ashray recounts God's justice. He was extremely wise and had no question about God's justice. We must pause and consider why he viewed God as perfectly righteous and just. It must be due to King David's accurate knowledge of history. And God taught Abraham His justice regarding Sodom, so he might teach others. God desires justice be spread.

Maimonides[1] cites Torah verses to prove that God's providence is in line with perfect justice; each person receiving what he deserves based on his perfection. And as he says, there are those who receive no protection from God, and experience what harm might come their way due to their lack of

perfection. Additionally, even good people who make poor choices, at times suffer the consequences that nature brings. A righteous man lacking business acumen might become very excited about a business venture, fail to study it properly, that he invests too much, and loses it all. God does not prevent our use of free will. But in this same case, the "intelligent" righteous man will discover areas of risk and invest with greater discretion, limiting his losses, or not investing at all. And if the matter is not in man's control, God will step in to protect those who have reached a certain level of perfection.

We know all the good God performed in saving the Jews from Egypt, and in countless other cases He performed with His prophets.

The rule is that God does good for man. If leaders ran this imperfect world properly and teachers spoke up more, there would be far less heartache, crime and war. We need to point the finger at ourselves, not God. And I repeat, when we arrive at questions like the Holocaust, it is wise that we review how the Prophets and our brilliant leaders approached the subject. That is, they did not discount all God's goodness due to a question.

What shall we do when we can't answer some questions? Does this in any way alter the Torah's correctness of being charitable, honest, just and treating others equally? Do our questions turn Torah truths into falsehoods? Of course not. What is true or proper remains that way. So although

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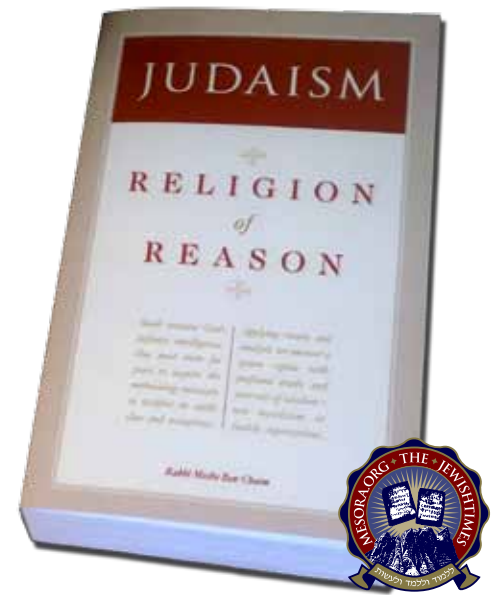
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## RELIGION of REASON

by JewishTimes' publisher  
Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

### REVIEWS



**RABBI REUVEN MANN** — Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has written extensively on Jewish philosophy for many years. His ideas are rooted in a rational approach. He follows the great philosophers like Rambam and Saadia Gaon. He is opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition and contrary to reason. This work covers a wide variety of topics, of interest to contemporary; insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the significance of many mitzvot. Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions as he is convinced that Torah is the Word of God and 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.



**RABBI STEVEN WEIL** — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you 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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<b>Reincarnation</b>	<b>Kabbala</b>
<b>Praying to the Dead</b>	<b>Mysticism</b>
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we cannot answer everything, we must follow what makes sense; Torah commands and lessons are based on reality, reason and proper morality.

**Reader:** Where does it say our Egyptian bondage was a response to our idolatry? I always thought it's about the Covenant with Avraham and God telling him that his children will be slaves in a land that is not theirs.

**Rabbi:** Sforno (Gen. 15:13) says the Prophet Ezekiel blamed the Jews' idolatry as the cause of the bondage in Egypt: *"But they rebelled against me and would not hearken to Me; they did not — every man — cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt; then I said I would pour out My fury upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt (Ezek. 20:8)."* Sforno adds (ibid) that the while tribes (Jacob's sons) were alive, no servitude began, as they were righteous individuals. Thus, the Jews lived in Egypt freely and without sin, for a while. Eventually they were attracted to the Egyptian idolatry, as Ezekiel teaches, and were oppressed due to God's will, as punishment.

**Reader:** Anyway, even if it was idolatry...what about the children born into slavery?

**Rabbi:** God can save anyone who raised himself above idolatry. Perhaps the children too followed in their parents' sin. In fact, the Levites were not oppressed, and they were the one's following the righteous ways of our ancestors; the patriarchs and matriarchs.

**Reader:** Children who have not yet sinned are born retarded (literally) or with injuries etc. Their are many many examples of injustice. The "kabbalists" at least provide simple answers in that those were "reincarnated sinners" and one cannot disprove them because we cannot go back.

**Rabbi:** So anything unproven like reincarnation, is acceptable to you? You cannot prove that a rabbit's foot "wont"



protect you, so walk in traffic blindfolded carrying a rabbit's foot! But you won't, since you do not truly believe your argument, the evidence being that you do not live this way. Might you be trying to escape following God with these questions?

Children born with injuries many times are due to alcoholic or drug-abusive mothers. Nature has a definite system. I have seen these children live happily, they aren't as sad as you think. God designed people to accept who they are. And many times these children surpass the achievements of others. Some born without legs use prosthetics and race in the olympics.

Retarded children may simply remain "happy children " their entire "adult" lives. God knows how to treat an innocent soul.

But your error is in asking on the minority of cases. You fail to realize that most of the time, children are born healthy, and the Torah shows how the wicked are punished and the righteous are saved.

Kind David and the prophets were wiser than us. Why didn't they have your questions? Please answer this to yourself.

**Reader:** Also how do you answer those who do not pray, do not keep Shabbat and other things...and they still get what they want and need. While those who live properly are not getting answered. Therefore, why not be a Rasha instead?

**Rabbi:** Study Koheles to learn how all the wealth, possessions, servants and drinking could not satisfy King Solomon. He experimented on himself as a lesson for mankind. He saw through the facade of such a vexed life. A rasha harms himself. He corrupts his values and only momentarily feels pleasure. But even that pleasure is not happiness. He then forfeits his eternal life through all his sins. Whereas one who engages in wisdom finds the greatest satisfaction in life, despite not being wealthy.

See Rashi on Mizmor shir lyom shabbos. He explains that wicked people who did some good, receive their reward in this life. And righteous people who did some wrong, get their punishment here.

There's more to discuss, but please see a recent article where I addressed God's justice: [mesora.org/jewishtimes](http://mesora.org/jewishtimes) (issue #439).

In truth, God is not only just, but He is kind, generous, charitable, merciful and all the accolades placed upon Him by King David in Ashray. Additionally, King David's praises are in the absolute sense: "Abundant" kindness; God is good to "all"; His mercy is on "all" His works; He supports "all" who fall; He straightens "all" who are bent over...etc. The lesson is that nothing prevents God from doing complete good to all who are deserving.

Study the Torah; you will find God's laws govern the utmost sensitivity, like returning collateral to a poor man so he can cover himself at night. Not cursing parents. Not speaking Lashon Hara. Not taking revenge, and removing hatred from one's heart. Loving the convert, and not abusing widows and orphans. Breaking Shabbos for health purposes. Judges must not show any bias. "Righteousness, righteousness you must chase (Deut. 16:20)." ■

[1] Guide, book III, chap. xviii





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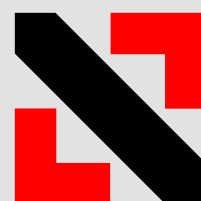
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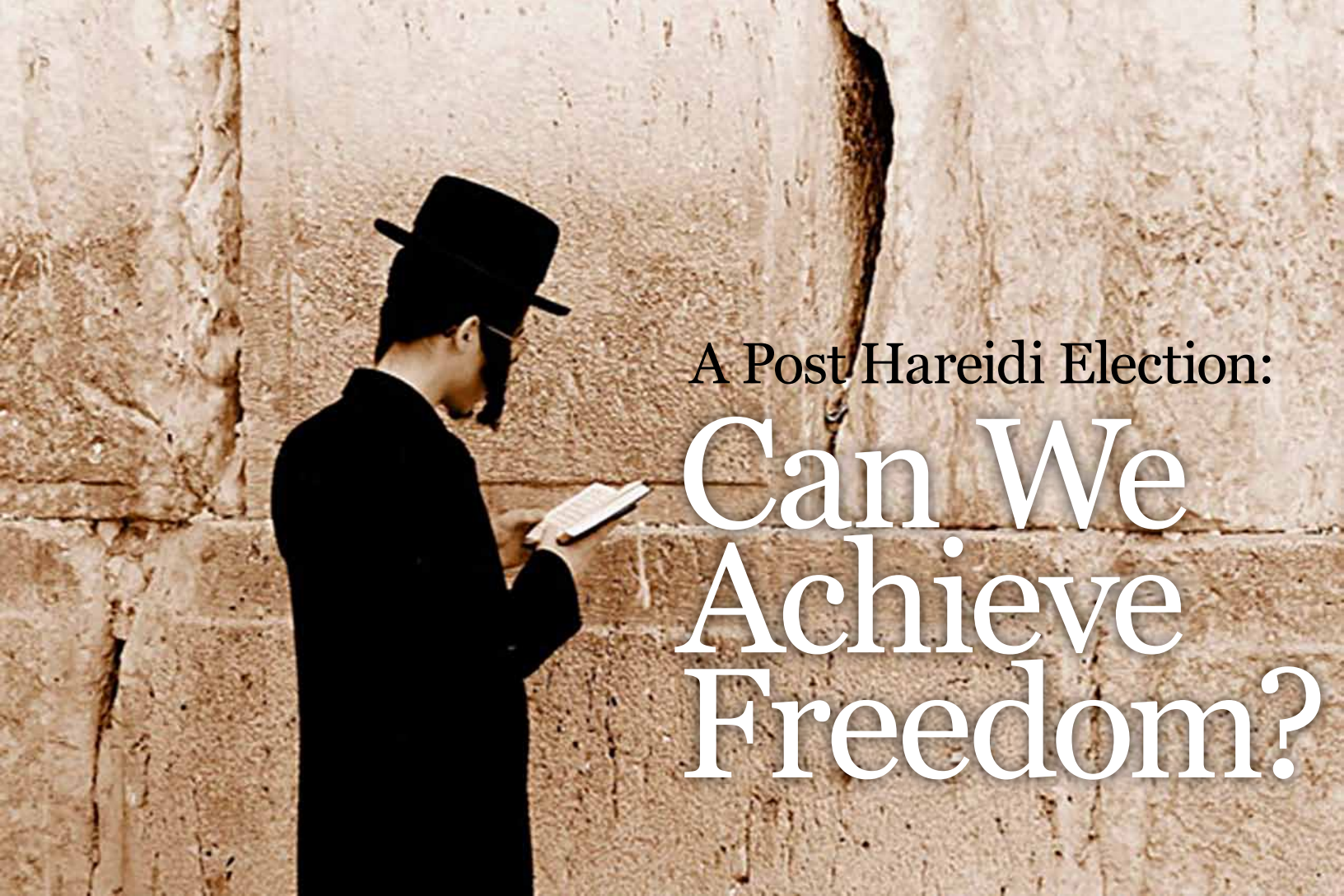
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# A Post Hareidi Election: Can We Achieve Freedom?

**RABBI YEHUDA OPPENHEIMER**

**W**ell, it has finally happened.

It looks like the dust has settled, and the new government in Israel is about to form. Contrary to all the trumpeting self-congratulatory talk following the last election – when the Hareidi parties boasted that they had gained more power than ever with 18 seats between UTJ & Shas, based on which they were in a great position to influence the Israeli politic to their desires – they have been left out of the coalition to lick their wounds and fear what is in store the Hareidi sector. And it was so pathetically predictable.

We have been, and will be treated to more and more talk about how everyone else is to blame for this turn of events: Shas head Aryeh Deri placed the blame on Binyamin Netanyahu, Netanyahu placed the blame on Naftali Bennet, and so on and so forth.

But the greatest amount of blaming came from Hareidi spokesmen against Naftali Bennet and Yair Lapid. The invective and vitriol was intense. Bennett's Bayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home) party is "a party of Gentiles", and anyone who votes for them "denies the Torah", according to a major Hareidi Rabbinic figure. Yair Lapid and his party Yesh Atid are "haters of Torah". Submitting to the plans for drafting many of those now learning full time must be resisted "at pain of death" (Yehoreg v'al Ya'avov), according to a leading Hareidi Rav. The "Sitra Achra" (Mystical Dark Side) has overtaken Bennet according to another Hareidi leader. Calls for a boycott of anything produced in the yishuvim of Yehuda and Shomron are being made to exact revenge against Bayit Hayehudi. In short, it is a conspiracy against the Torah, whereby the various parties are trying to destroy the Hareidim,

and it is nothing less than an existential crisis for the future of Hareidi Jewry. There is endless self-righteous self-pity being expressed, as they play the part of the victim of anti-semitic hatred of Torah and religious Jews.

I don't know about you, but I find this all very uncomfortable at best; while maddening and disappointing are better words to describe my feelings. After all, many people might classify me as Hareidi. I wear a black hat, identified as a member of Agudas Yisroel, went to "Black Hat" yeshivos, looked to the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah as the voice of Torah Authority, do not say Hallel with a bracha on Yom HaAtzmaut, have several brothers in law and a son who learn or learned in Kollel, and so on and so forth. Most of my family in Israel now consider themselves Hareidim.

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At the same time, I am proud of the State of Israel, and consider it among the greatest blessings that Hashem has given our people in the last 100 years. I stand in awe of the accomplishments this little country has achieved against incredible odds, feel deeply appreciative to the soldiers of the IDF for their heroic protection of my people, and would consider it an honor to be a citizen of the State of Israel. Furthermore, it seems self-evident that the predicament which most young Hareidim in Israel face, whereby they must learn after marriage for many years whether or not they show particular promise as future scholars or Rabbonim, living in poverty while being supported by a combination of overburdened wives, overextended in-laws and government welfare, is insane, unsustainable, and in fact cruel to those forced into the system. I am proud of those who are serious about Torah learning and Mitzva observance while working in a profession or business to support their families. I feel totally distanced from most of the pronouncements of Hareidi spokesmen, both Rabbinic and political.

Furthermore, I daresay that there are, at least, tens of thousands of people who feel similar to me hashkafically, both in Israel and the Diaspora, certainly here in Queens, whether or not we say it out loud. So I ask you: are we Hareidim? Do the parties presenting themselves as Hareidi represent our points of view and those of the Rabbonim that we have always looked to for guidance?

But there is more that troubles us. Not only do we find the statements and positions of the Hareidi parties distasteful, but we are aware that these positions have created enormous animosity against Hareidim, where recent polls indicate “that 76% percent of the Israeli public support a coalition made up of the Likud, Yesh Atid and Bayit Yehudi” without Hareidim, and only “four percent of Israelis want a new government that would include the Likud together with the Hareidi parties”. This points to an abysmal failure on the part of the Hareidi public to persuade fellow Israelis of the beauty and integrity of their way of life – the exact opposite is true. It is a Hillul Hashem of epic proportions.

And it is not anyone's fault but their own. I do not have the space here to go into this at length, but it is clear to me that this happened NOT because the secular parties hate religion, or are trying to destroy Torah and the Yeshivos, but rather due to the fact that they are sick and tired of being what Israelis call “friers”. (A frier in Israel is what in America would be called a “sucker”, a naive dupe who is taken advantage of by others.) They feel that they are being taken advantage of by the Hareidim – that they have done so much to provide for the Hareidim financially, militarily, building the infrastructure that they use, etc. and receive no gratitude in return, but instead constant ridicule – they are sick and tired and want to stop being frier-im. They simply want the Hareidi public to contribute their fair share of the national burden and to stop looking out only for themselves and their interests, while pretending to believe that it is mandated by Halacha and necessary for the State for every single able bodied young man to be learning full time for many years.

But here is the rub – all of this angst that I bear is so unnecessary! Why should I, and others, feel that we need to carry the label Hareidi? Is that the only label that a non-Mizrachi oriented Orthodox Jew can bear? Is my only choice to self identify as a Hareidi or Mizrahi/Modern Orthodox? (Not that there is anything wrong with Modern Orthodox, but that is not where I and many others feel at home). Did there not used to be a large middle ground that proudly held the positions I described above, and clearly was not part of the anti-Zionist, anti-any-accommodation-with-the-secular-world of Satmar, Neturei Karta, Eida Chareidis? Where is our voice? Where is the voice of those who could come to a reasonable middle position, whereby a small percentage of promising scholars would learn full time, and others would take responsibility for their families relatively soon after marriage, as has ALWAYS been the Mesorah of Klal Yisrael until recent times?

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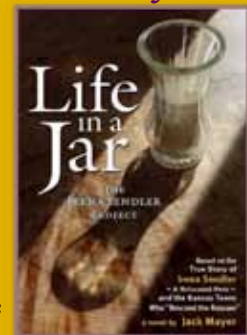
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Why do I, and so many others, have to continue to tolerate being associated with these views that make us so uncomfortable and exasperated?

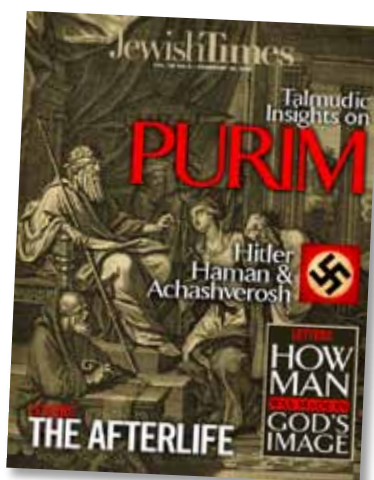
The truth is that much of the problem has come about because of the most unfortunate adoption of the title “Hareidi” by groups that were always much more moderate in their views than those that originally were known by that name, i.e. the Satmar/Eidah Chareidis/extreme anti-Zionists. The world that I grew up in, that of Torah Vodaas, Lakewood, Mir, Breuers, was not called Hareidi, and held views that were clearly different. I cannot imagine the Gedolim that I grew up revering, such as Rav Moshe Feinstein, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and others possibly supporting the positions and statements cited above. They were not Zionist, but not anti-Zionist; supported Kollel learning but also strongly felt that husbands should support their families; did not say Hallel on Yom Ha'Atzmaut but were appreciative and supportive of Jews of all types in the

State of Israel; believed in the importance of proper tznius standards, but were very careful to always honor and appreciate women and make sure they were treated with respect, dignity and caring . . . all this and more described a group that somehow has been swallowed into the large group known as “Hareidi” with all the negative baggage that goes along with it, much, in my opinion, to its detriment.

I have written about this in the past, and would ask anyone interested to please see that essay. But it is a lonely position. As a sense of how maddening it is, I could not get any of the various publications in the Hareidi world to publish that essay. Too controversial. Too out of touch with the way things are. But I know, deep down, that many agree with me, and wish that there was another way – a way in which the great majority of right leaning Orthodox Jews would feel that they are represented by reasonable and non-extreme views and personalities that bring honor and dignity to Torah and Torah Jews and their way of life.

We stand now after the great Yomtov of Pesach, in which we celebrate our freedom and independence from tyranny, and the liberty to serve Hashem without restraint. May we merit to be free of those who force us into extremism, so that we might serve Hashem with delight and joy, and be the positive example that we ought to be to our all our brothers and sisters here and in Medinat Yisrael. May leaders arise that have the courage to stand apart and proudly encourage thousands of serious Jews to live by the credo “Her Ways are ways of Pleasantness, and all of her Pathways are Those of Peace.” May we be able to stand with our heads held high, as we focus on Kiddush Hashem, and cringe no longer at being associated with the Hillul Hashem that is all too often being made by the group we are purported to belong to. May the coming changes in Israeli life proceed in a way that will help the many moderate people now trapped in the “Hareidi world” find their voice and help all to build a better and more respectful Israeli society for all of our fellow Jewish Brethren. ■

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Tazria-Metzora

# Implications of Stinginess

Rabbi Bernie Fox



*When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot, and it become in the skin of his flesh the plague of tzara'at, then he shall be brought unto Abaron the priest, or unto one of his sons the priests. (Sefer VaYikra 13:2)*

## 1. Tzara'at and its various forms

The Torah sections of Tazria and Metzora deal primarily with the laws of tzara'at. Tzara'at is a plague that is experienced by an individual as a consequence of improper behavior. It is often described as leprosy. This is because one of its forms is an affliction of the skin. The above passage describes one of the various skin afflictions that are symptomatic of tzara'at. The condition described in the passage is a bright, white-colored discoloration of a portion of the person's skin.

However, tzara'at differs from leprosy not only in the particulars of its symptoms but also in treatment. Leprosy should be treated on a medical basis. Tzara'at can only be alleviated through the repentance of the afflicted individual. However, the Torah reveals another very fundamental difference between tzara'at and leprosy.

*And when the plague of tzara'at is in a garment, whether it be a woolen garment, or a linen garment... (Sefer VaYikra 13:47)*

*When you come into the Land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, I will put the plague of tzara'at in a house of the land of your possession... (Sefer VaYikra 14:34)*

The Torah explains that, unlike leprosy, the plague of tzara'at can afflict inanimate objects – one's clothing and dwelling. Of course, the discolorations that are symptomatic of each form of tzara'at are unique. Skin, clothing, and dwellings each has its own characteristic discolorations. Also, the plague's consequences differ according to the object afflicted. A person afflicted with tzara'at must engage in a period of mourning and repentance. A garment or a dwelling which is afflicted with the most advanced stages of tzara'at is destroyed.

## 2. The causes of tzara'at

As noted above, tzara'at is a consequence of improper behaviors. The Torah specifically identifies one behavior that may provoke the consequence of tzara'at – speaking about another person. The Torah tells us that Moshe's sister, Miryam, was afflicted with tzara'at as a consequence of criticizing Moshe to others rather than speaking to him directly regarding her concerns over his behaviors. The Midrash and Talmud explain that in addition to tale-bearing and gossip, various other inappropriate behaviors may provoke the punishment of tzara'at.

The Talmud suggests that one of the behaviors that is punished by tzara'at of one's dwelling is stinginess.<sup>1</sup> The Talmud does not elaborate on the relationship between stinginess and the punishment of tzara'at. In other words, the Talmud leaves unexplained why this character flaw should be punished by this specific affliction. However, the Midrash does provide a fascinating explanation. Before considering the Midrash's explanation, a brief introduction is required.

*And the priest shall look upon the plague in the skin of the flesh. And if the hair in the plague be turned white, and the appearance of the plague be deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is the plague of tzara'at. And the priest shall look on him, and pronounce him unclean. (Sefer VaYikra 13:3)*

## 3. The unique role of the kohen in the laws governing tzara'at

The task of applying the laws regarding tzara'at is entrusted to the kohanim – the priests. This means that the kohanim are responsible to examine a person, garment, and dwelling for the presence of tzara'at. The kohen determines whether the affliction is present or not. When the afflicted individual believes that the condition has abated, he must enlist a kohen to perform an examination and determine whether in fact the tzara'at has

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passed. However, one of the interesting elements of the kohen's role is that his pronouncement actually establishes the presence of tzara'at and renders the afflicted person, garment, or dwelling spiritually unclean. In this respect, the role of the kohen differs from the typical halachic decisor. In the more typical scenario, a legal issue is brought to the authority and he analyzes the facts to determine the law. His role is merely to apply halachic norms to the specific situation. For example, if he is brought a chicken and asked to determine its kashrut, he will examine the chicken and determine how halachic norms apply. His pronouncement does not make the chicken kosher or non-kosher. The chicken's actual characteristics are determinant. The authority only evaluates how these norms apply to the specific chicken in question.

The kohen plays a much more significant role in the determination of the presence of tzara'at. He must evaluate the person, garment, or dwelling based upon the principles outlined in the Torah. However, the presence or absence of tzara'at are actually established and determined by the kohen's pronouncement. In other words, a person who exhibits all of the symptoms associated with tzara'at is not deemed to have the condition until the kohen makes his pronouncement. Prior to the pronouncement – regardless of the degree of evidence of the presence of the affliction – the person is not regarded as unclean and is not subject to the regulation related to tzara'at. The kohen plays the same rule in determining that the condition has abated. The mere alleviation of the symptoms does not impact the stricken person's status. Only the pronouncement of the kohen can impact the person's status.<sup>2</sup>

spare the contents on the home from defilement, the kohen directs that the dwelling be emptied of its contents prior to his inspection. If the home is declared to have tzara'at, the contents – now outside the home – will be unaffected.

Now, the comments of the Midrash can be introduced and appreciated. What behavior defines a person as stingy? How is stinginess distinguished from common greed? In his comments on the above discussion in the Talmud, Rashi explains that a person is defined as stingy if he is troubled by the prospect of his neighbor enjoying his possessions. He treats his possession as exclusively designated for his own use and pleasure. He is unwilling to share or lend his possessions to others.<sup>3</sup> The Midrash suggests that a person afflicted with this failing will refuse to lend his possessions to others. He will claim that he does not have the object requested. His neighbor asks if he may borrow a shovel and the stingy person responds that he doesn't have one. When asked for the loan of a cup of flour, he claims that he has himself run-out. The Midrash explains that tzara'at is a fitting consequence for this person. In order to save his possessions from defilement, he will empty them from his house. All of his possessions will be exposed to public scrutiny. His stinginess will be revealed!<sup>4</sup>

Imagine the terrible paradox in which the stingy person finds himself when his home is afflicted with the symptoms of tzara'at. If he does not empty his dwelling of its contents, then his beloved possessions will be defiled. If he does empty his possessions into the street in front of his home, he will be exposed as the stingy, poor neighbor that he actually is! He is forced by his very love of his possessions to expose himself!

*And the priest shall command that they empty the house, before the priest go in to see the plague, so that all that is in the house be not made unclean. And afterward the priest shall go in to see the house. (Sefer Vayikra 14:36)*

#### 4. Tzara'at as a fitting response to stinginess

When a dwelling is suspect of exhibiting tzara'at and the kohen is summoned to investigate, the kohen does not immediately perform his task. He first directs that the dwelling be emptied of its contents. This is because the kohen's pronouncement upon the dwelling will impact not only the home but also its contents. If the kohen determines that tzara'at is present, then the home and its contents will be rendered unclean. However, as explained above, it is not the existence of the symptoms that determine the existence of tzara'at. These symptoms – no matter how pronounced – do not make the dwelling unclean. Only the pronouncement of the kohen has the affect of conferring defilement. Therefore, in order to

*And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bait-Lechem in Yebudah went to sojourn in the field of Moav, he, and his wife, and his two sons. (Megilat Ruth 1:1)*

#### 5. Stinginess in the story of Megilat Ruth

The failing of stinginess plays an important role in the story of Ruth. Consideration of that role provides further insight into the impact of the trait. The above passage introduces Megilat Ruth. This passage and those that follow it tell the story of Elimelech and his family. Elimelech and his family left the Land of Israel to escape famine. His plan failed. Rather than saving himself and his family, Elimelech died in the Land of Moav. After his death, his sons married women from the region. The sons died thereafter. In addition to these tragedies, all of Elimelech's wealth was lost. His widow Na'ami and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, eventually returned to the Land of Israel completely destitute.

*(continued on next page)*





Na'ami recognized that the tragedies that befell her family were punishments. However, she does not explicitly express her understanding of the reason for these terrible punishments. The Sages and commentators suggest various explanations for Elimelech's punishments. Most of the explanations are based upon the above passage.

According to Midrash Lekach Tov, Elimelech and his sons were wealthy individuals. They were upright – even righteous – leaders. They cared for the people, providing food and support during the famine. However, as the famine persisted, they became alarmed. They feared that their personal resources would be exhausted through their support of their neighbors. Rather than allow themselves to be reduced to paupers, they decided to relocate to the Land of Moav. However, Lekach Tov explains the Sages differ as to the specific nature of their sin. According to Ribbi Elazar HaKafar, their sin was their stinginess. They could not turn away the poor. Yet, they could not bear to contemplate the loss of their wealth. Ribbi Eliezer disagrees. He argues that they sinned in abandoning the Land of Israel. He adds that they should have recognized that the famine was an expression of Hashem's displeasure with His people. Elimelech and his sons should have responded by praying on behalf of their brothers.<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Stinginess and its impacts

The dispute between these two Sages provides an important insight into the failing of stinginess. Ribbi Elazar HaKafar understands this sin to have been the cause of the punishment experienced by Elimelech and his family. Their attachment to their wealth was stronger than their compassion for their brothers. As a result, they abandoned their brothers in order to preserve their wealth. Of course, Ribbi Elazar HaKafar is not suggesting that Elimelech should have sacrificed the wellbeing of his own wife and sons in order to support the poor. He is suggesting that Elimelech acted prematurely. His attachment to his wealth and the resultant fears clouded his thinking. In short, Elimelech's shortcoming was his stinginess and the related deficiency in his compassion for his brothers.

Ribbi Elazar disagrees. According to Ribbi Elazar, Elimelech's sin actually involved a breach in his relationship with Hashem. The famine was not a chance occurrence. It was a Divine punishment. It was intended to communicate a message. It was intended to bring about a movement towards repentance. Elimelech and his sons – as leaders among the people – had an important role in this movement. It was their responsibility to lead the people in prayer and petition – the first step in the return to Hashem. They abandoned this role and acted as if the famine did not have a Providential character. Rather than responding to the call of Hashem's message, they attempted to sever their ties to His people and their destiny. Their sin was motivated and founded upon stinginess but it was expressed in a profound breach in their relationship with Hashem.

The message communicated by Lekach Tov is that stinginess and the associated lack of compassion and empathy are serious failings of character. However, they also inevitably lead to one's alienation from the community and its Divine mission. It discourages meaningful participation in charity and acts of kindness. Thereby, it severs the afflicted person's relationship with the community and its endeavors to serve Hashem and draw near to Him. ■

### Footnotes:

1. Mesechet Erachin 16a.
2. It is noteworthy that this aspect of the laws governing tzara'at is very fitting. As mentioned above, the Torah explicitly associates tzara'at with the sin of gossip or tale-bearing. One of the reasons that these sins are so pervasive and difficult to arrest is that they are committed through speech. Although people understand that speech can be harmful and damaging, it is somehow difficult to maintain constant cognizance of the destructive power of mere words. The person stricken with tzara'at is provided with a compelling lesson regarding the power of speech. It is not his physical condition that renders him unclean. It is the pronouncement – the words and speech – of the kohen that actually determine his status.
3. Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on the Talmud, Mesechet Erachin 16a.
4. Midrash Rabba, Sefer VaYikra 17:2.
5. Rabbaynu Tuvia ben Eliezer, Midrash Lekach Tov, Introduction to Megilat Ruth.

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