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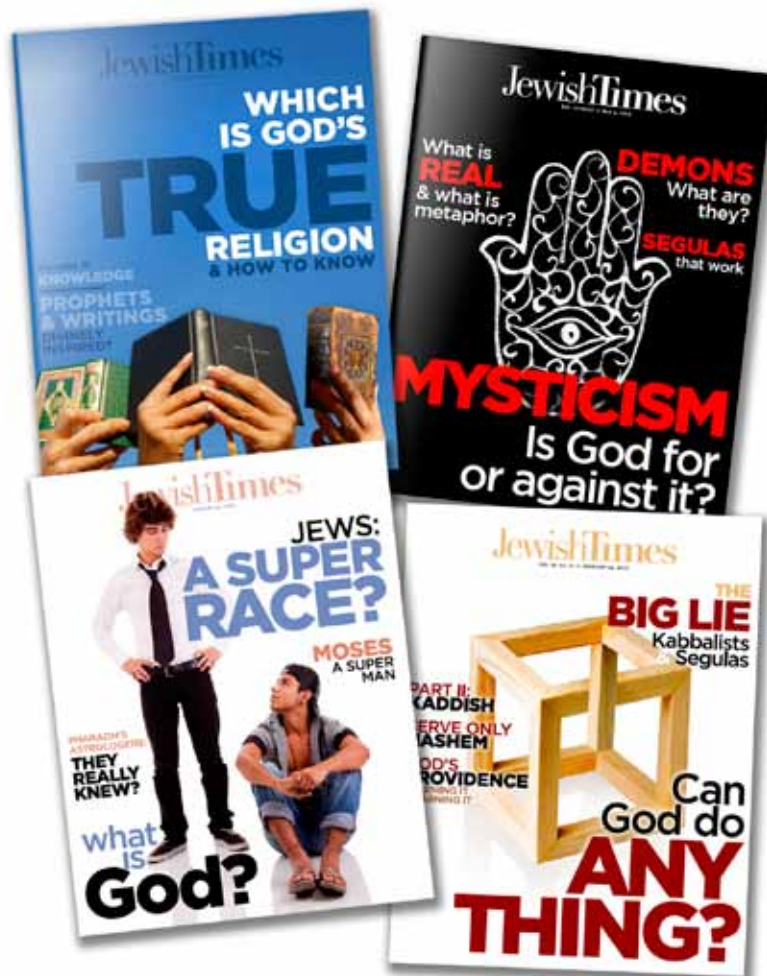
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LETTERS

A Reality to Finality?

Reader: Is there a reality to finality? We pray daily, to Hashem, "Please do not make our life's efforts be in vain."

We also experience daily negative input from life's experiences, for example, "Man plans, and G-d laughs!" and when we study King Solomon's Koheles, "All is futile!" We are constantly made aware: no one has ever come back from the deceased! This awareness has instilled into mans' psyche the "finality" of death. How do we overcome all these negative inputs which we observe through our

lives? And as we get older, "the Promise of the Future" wanes.

How can a person who has just lost a close friend or relative, and surmises he might be next, and has become spiritually distraught, overcome their "down" state of mind, and keep from focusing on nothingness? Mans' natural instincts, especially "the delusion of personal invulnerabil-

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ity" removes his focus on his own death to focus on something else. So the important idea here is, what should man train himself to focus on?

Answer by Rabbi S.R.Hirsch: "People who have lost their *raison d'être* of their lives can find it again in the bond of the Community." Can you explain this? Rabbi S.R.Hirsch's additional answer (Horeb, Chapter 43, Edoth, page 214): "and if He takes away, recognize in the taking, as in the giving, the same loving Fatherly hand, and with what is left to you, in whatever condition you may be, rise to live fulfilling the will of G-d, pursuing it and blessing Him, until He calls you away to another existence, and to a new life."

What counter-thoughts, understanding, Torah Concepts, should we lean on, when we experience these negative, depressing, hopeless thoughts of "nothingness"? Is there a reality to finality?

Rabbi: Rabbi Hirsch's words, "People who have lost their *raison d'être* of their lives can find it again in the bond of the Community" mean that self worth is found when we view ourselves as part of the Jewish people. When our sense of purpose is not tied to our subjective plans, or our small or meaningless involvements, but to the purpose of the Jewish people – a nation that possesses God's words and whose role is to educate the world – we find great purpose.

The Rabbis taught, God said concerning Creation, that it is "good", so King Solomon cannot contradict God. King Solomon's "All is futile!" refers only to the life where one pursues the physical as an end in itself, as taught by a wise Rabbi. However, as a means to a Torah life, all is certainly good.

Regarding the human condition of death, this too must be a good, and the Rabbis actually say God's sentiment in Genesis of "it is good" refers to the day of death. In the future, the Rabbis say we will no longer feel negative about death. When hearing of one who passed on, we will stop reciting the current "Baruch Dayan Emes" (blessed is the true Judge, thereby accepting His decree of death) but we will recite "Baruch Hatove U'Mativ; blessed is the One Who is good and does good" – no

longer viewing it as unavoidable justice, but as true positive. The reason we currently do not view death as a positive is not based in wisdom. Our distorted world is attached to the physical, so the end of our physical existence is viewed with great sorrow. But with his arrival, the Messiah will teach the world God's truths, enlightening mankind, including the positive nature of the soul's state after death, where our existence will be even greater, more closely bound to God and His wisdom. The Rabbis actually anticipated death, for they knew they would be perceiving great wisdom and reaping their reward for a Torah life.

If now, we immerse ourselves in what King Solomon teaches is the greatest command – Torah study – we can, even now, experience the great level of enjoyment derived from this pursuit. Study is the greatest pursuit, and not without good reason. That being the greatest pleasure a human being can experience. But one steeped in the physical life may not find these words alone convincing.

If we care about our one existence, if we care about an eternity more than a temporal Earthly stay; if we are convinced that the afterlife can be a great experience, then we are wise to follow the advice of the greatest minds, our numerous Rabbis, who urge our immersion in Torah study. King Solomon tested all lifestyles and pursuits, yet concluded that the Torah life is most cherished. And he was a man to whom God granted miraculous wisdom.

We should immediately change the course of our lives, invest greater time in Torah study than other pursuits, and we will attest to the truth of the Rabbis' words. We will begin to view all other pursuits as meaningless, and recognize greater and greater wisdom as our studies progress. We will abandon the accumulation of objects that we cannot take with us, and the chase for fame. And we will desire to invest in our eternal afterlife, the state of existence that is purely spiritual, where only our minds continue on. We will abandon all things temporal, desiring only that which is eternal.

Is there a reality to finality? No. There is no finality. Death is the beginning of something quite grand, something we must anticipate! ■



The Rabbis: A Monopoly on Truth?

Reader: There exists an idea amongst many, that questioning great Rabbis from previous generations is a taboo, prohibited, not encouraged, etc. I refer not to the Tanaim and/or Amoraim, but to the Rabbinic commentators throughout the

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subsequent time periods, i.e. the Rishonim and Acharonim. Usually when one responds that these Rabbis held many mutually exclusive ideas on certain topics, one is met with an answer to the effect of, "That doesn't mean they were wrong, we just don't understand it at our level."

As an example, my question was, "Can we view Rashi as having erred?" I was given the response, "It seems wrong to us, but at his level it is not" whatever the heck that means.

Furthermore, we can challenge such an idea with an example: the Vilna Gaon, who was known to have expressed to his students differences in opinions with the Rambam, Shulchan Aruch, Rama, Rav Chaim Vital, and even to have differed with Amoraim on how a certain mishna is to be understood. It seems that the Gra encouraged his students not to be afraid to challenge Rabbinic opinion from eras long gone. Usually the response I am met with here is that "the Gra and Rav Chaim Volozhin had broad enough shoulders to do this." Of course I don't buy into this silly defensive notion either.

What do you say about challenging Rabbinic opinion? Is it allowed, to be encouraged, or taboo and only done by people with bad education or heretical notions? Didn't the Rabbis always encourage critical thinking and therefore would have been happy with us challenging them, especially when we have perhaps updated scientific understanding and the like behind us?

Rabbi: To the response you received, "We just don't understand it at our level," I say, "There is only one level of truth." Their primary error is suggesting that opposing views are not opposing, merely to save the reputations of both debating Rabbis. Thereby, they ignore their mind. Such a person cannot be talked to. For they will misconstrue when you say "Yes," and suggest you say "No."

Above all else, in the search for truth, one must be truthful. One must be able to rise above his fear of reputations and say, "One of the Rabbis must be wrong, or they are both wrong, but two opposing views cannot both be correct." Reason demands this, and God granted each person reason, for the purpose of using it.

When it comes to psak – a halachik ruling – the student/congregant must follow his specific Rabbi. Here, the objective is not to know what God knows, but Halacha works wherein each Rabbi determines the law to the best of his abilities. His pronouncement of a law, now becomes binding on those who follow him. But, if a student sees the ruling different than his Rabbi, provided he studied the areas thoroughly, he may rule differently for himself privately; he need not follow his Rabbi, but he may not teach others his own ruling. This is halacha, and a prime example of how God desires we act based on our best reasoning.

But in areas of philosophy – not halacha – there is no psak, no ruling. Nothing in Torah coerces us to follow a given philosophical idea. In fact, as a wise Rabbi said, "One cannot be forced to believe what he does not believe." Here, in philosophical matters, either we arrive at what we see as true, false, or what we are not certain of. No one can tell us we believe demons are literal, if we do not believe such nonsense...we cannot be made to accept as true, a notion with which we disagree, or cannot grasp. And when two Rabbis oppose each other, one suggesting reincarnation is true, and the other saying it is false, how in the world can they both be right..."on some higher level?" This is ludicrous. This statement shows a mind that is not working. One Rabbi must be wrong.

You ask, "Can we view Rashi as having erred?" Of course! Even Moses erred! No man possesses a monopoly on truth. God alone is always correct. Unfortunately, Jews have developed into a mindless bunch, where they deify their Rebbes, assuming them to be infallible, miracle-working, angel-like beings. This is despite God's many lessons of how the greatest men and prophets erred. It is this great distortion of the mind and emotion that lead people to deify a dead Jesus, and leads Jews to think the Lubavitcher Rebbe and others read notes in their graves. People don't pray directly to God anymore, even though He is running the world alone. They cannot detach themselves from the man of the Rabbi, just as the ancient Jews could not detach themselves from the man of Moses, and created a Gold Calf. Tragically, we rarely hear Rabbis denouncing this

Torah prohibition of "consulting the dead."

God demands we use our minds, and this applies to any idea, and any person's statement. If we detect an error, we cannot ignore our minds. Talmud Chullin 124a states that a Rabbi said, "I would not accept a certain opinion even is Joshua son of Nun said it." The Talmud is teaching us this case, since this idea is sound: reputations do not render statements into truths. An idea is true based on its content, not its author.

You ask, "Didn't the Rabbis always encourage critical thinking and therefore would have been happy with us challenging them, especially when we have perhaps updated scientific understanding and the like behind us?" The answer is yes. Maimonides asked his readers to inform him if they found any errors in his writings. What greater example is needed to prove that all men err, that rabbis knew they erred, and that Maimonides agreed that lesser individuals can determine when a great sage erred? ■

VAUESCHANAN: An Intelligent Torah

Rabbi: Deuteronomy 4:8 says the nations will witness our commands and say "How righteous they are." Can this be the nations' response when watching Jews throw notes into Rabbis' graves, falsely thinking the dead read them and talk to God? Is this the response to wearing red bendels considered to be protective, or believing in unproven powers? In fact what does God mean later in Vaueschanan (4:39) with His words, "there is none other?" This means God claims exclusive power. God is the *only* force in the universe. We are to turn to Him alone, and cease this foolish manufacture of amulets and segulas that are a stain on Judaism and prevent the nations from saying, "*How righteous is the Torah.*" ■



THE 10 COMMANDMENTS

Rejecting a Heretical Hypothesis

Rabbi Dr.
Darrell Ginsberg

The Torah is replete with seemingly “contradictory” statements and varying degrees of “inconsistencies”. To some, such writing is evidence of multiple authorship; after all, how and why would one author compile such a confusing type of narrative? For those who accept the Divine authorship of the Torah, these instances present themselves as great opportunities. Is this due to some type of intellectual sadism? On the contrary, the chance to read and understand the answers given to us by talmidei chachamim is the possibility to uncover the incredible and infinite fountain of ideas contained within the Torah.

A perfect example of this very opportunity lies in the famous differences found in the fourth commandment of the aseres hadibros (the Ten Commandments), the command of Shabbos observance. Nearly everyone is familiar with the use of “zachor” (remember), as found in parshas Yisro, vs “shamor” (guard), found in parshas V’Eschanan. In fact, there are other differences as well. In Parshas Yisro, we see the following (Shemos 20:10):

“For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.”

This implies that the reason for Shabbos is tied to creation. However, when we look at the way it is presented in parshas V’Eschanan, there is what appears to be a completely different reason offered (5:15):

“And thou shalt remember that thou was a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God brought thee out thence by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day”

In this version, we see the reason for Shabbos tied to the exodus from Egypt. At this point, there are those who would stop and ascertain that this clearly indicates a different author. Maybe one author offered the creation rationale due to living prior to the Exodus, while the second one wrote it as a result of his own personal experiences in and out of Egypt. Maybe. Before dwelling on such hypotheticals, we should turn to the words of the Rambam and Ramban. Each presents a different viewpoint regarding this variance in reasons.

The Ramban (ibid) quotes the Rambam’s explanation (found in the Moreh Nevuchim 2:31) for these two reasons:

“And the Rabbi [Moshe ben Maimon] stated in the Moreh Nevuchim that the ‘first statement’ [i.e., citing the Creation, as given in the Book of Exodus] expressed the honor and distinction of the day, just as He said ‘therefore the Eternal hath blessed the Sabbath-day, and hallowed it’, and hence He mentioned the reason ‘for in six days’ etc. But there he warned us to observe the Sabbath because of our having been slaves, working all day against our will and never having rest, and he commanded us now to abstain from work and rest in order that we remember the kindness of God towards us in bringing forth from slavery to rest. Thus, the Sabbath in general has two reasons: that we believe in the creation of the world [creation ex-nihilo], that the world has a God who is the Creator, and that we remember further the great kindness that He did with us, that we are His servants, since He acquired us for Himself as servants”

The Rambam appears to be agreeing that in fact there are two separate reasons for Shabbos. The first is linked to creation, while the second involves us recognizing the kindness of God in taking us out of Egypt. In a sense, he is simply answering the question with the very question itself. Why were there two versions written in the Torah? Because, in fact, there are two reasons. However, it would seem logical to assume that there is something that ties the two together. What exactly is the mechanism allowing for the individual to see God’s kindness concerning the Exodus...specifically on Shabbos? It is difficult to understand how, according to the Rambam, one is supposed to “balance” these two ideas concerning Shabbos.

The Ramban is bothered by the Rambam’s approach, albeit for a different reason. He questions how the purpose involving remembering Egypt functions in the structure of Shabbos. The abstention from melocho, or work, and its bond to creation are evident; in a simple way, just as God “rested”, so too we rest. The abstention from work, however, has no

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clear tie to the Exodus. There is nothing obvious in one's behavior on Shabbos that would offer a clear demonstration that this is related to the Exodus. As such, the Ramban proceeds to offer his own explanation for the two reasons:

"Rather, the Sabbath is like all the other commandments, but it contains a reminder of the Creation because we rest on the day that God 'ceased from work' thereon and 'rested'. And it is more fitting to say that because the Exodus from Egypt is evidence of the existence of an eternal God, who caused everything to come into existence through His will and who has supreme power, as has been explained in the first commandment – therefore he stated here: 'If there ever arises a doubt in your heart concerning the Sabbath that evidences the creation of the world by the will and power of God, you should remember what your eyes saw at the exodus from Egypt which is, to you, the evidence [of His infinite power] and the remembrance [of His deeds]'. Thus the Sabbath is a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, and the Exodus from Egypt is a remembrance of the Sabbath, for in it [the Sabbath] they remember and say that it is God who makes new signs and wonders in everything and does with everything according to His will since it is He who created everything at the beginning of creation. This, then, is the sense of the expression, 'therefore the Eternal your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath'."

The Ramban sees one underlying idea tying the two reasons given in the Torah. A person sees God through the experience of Shabbos. He also can see God through the Exodus from Egypt. In fact, according to the Ramban, the primary objective of the entire Exodus was a "proof" of the existence of God. He writes in Shemos concerning the first commandment of the aseres hadibros (Shemos 20:2):

"He said 'who brought you out of the land of Egypt', because His taking them out from there was the evidence establishing the existence and will of God, for it was with His knowledge and providence that we came out from there. The Exodus is also evidence for the creation of the world..."

Clearly, according to the Ramban, the experience of the Exodus served as "evidence" of God. Therefore, as he writes above, it is in a sense no different than Shabbos.

This would seem to be a fundamental argument between the Rambam and Ramban as to the overall purpose of Shabbos. However, with some analysis, the reality is that they are not really that far apart. What is the nature of their debate? The Rambam seems to keep the two reasons separate. Indeed, there is a differentiation between the two, as they reflect disparate ideas.

The Rambam (Maimonides) begins with an emphasis on a realization as God the Creator, being the objective of Shabbos. The structure of abstention from work on the day of Shabbos creates a unique environment, where the Jew's mind turns away from the inventiveness of the physical world to the creativity of the abstract and metaphysical world. In this state, he can come to see

ideas about God obstructed by a "work-filled" week. This does not mean man is incapable of thinking of God during the week. Rather, he competes for time away from the normal work routine; the world of the physical is a constant presence in his thoughts. Shabbos, devoid of this part of his life, allows him a level of focus he cannot achieve during the week. Thus, the tie between Shabbos and recognizing the Creator. When the Jew enters into this state, he faces a degree of self-awareness, knowing full well this is an incredible interruption in his daily routine. It is at that moment that he can truly appreciate the idea of the Exodus. The idea of Shabbos, where man discards melocho (work), cannot exist in the mindset of the enslaved. His time belongs to someone else. He has no ability escape this reality. His existence is intrinsically one of physical work. This is in direct contrast with the state of mind on Shabbos, his mind free to focus on God. Without question, the opportunity to engage in this mindset is the ultimate act of chesed (kindness) from God. The two concepts can now be seen as one process. The Jew first sees God in this unique state, and he then reflects on how the Exodus from Egypt allowed for this state, on a practical level, to come into fruition.

The Ramban (Nachmanides) does not dispute every contention offered by the Rambam. He does start at the same basic point as the Rambam, noting that Shabbos serves as a vehicle to recognizing God. It would seem as well that he agrees with how this emerges due to the construct of the day, much like the Rambam. The Ramban, though, sees the role of the remembrance of the Exodus in a different way than the Rambam. According to the Ramban, the primary objective of the Exodus was to prove the existence of God. God was seen as Creator and all-knowing. Yet this does not mean that this should be seen as overlapping or superfluous on Shabbos itself. It could be the Ramban maintained that using the day of Shabbos as a vehicle to recognizing God is a very abstract type of pursuit. The removal of melocho leaves a void; the Jew must then try and fill that void by turning to God. A gap of sorts exists; no positive mechanism is in place, no clear path. This is where the Exodus comes into play. The Jew needs to turn to the experience of the Exodus. He reflects on the specifics of the event, and he sees God's guidance of the event. He now finds himself with the necessary stepping stone to understand the reality of God. In a sense, the Ramban is advocating the use of the experience of the Exodus as the stepping stone to the more abstract pursuit of knowledge of God.

Two reasons are given for Shabbos in the Torah. Two insightful answers are offered by two of the greatest minds of Judaism. Both the Rambam and Ramban do not shy away from this apparent challenge. There is no inclination to see the words on a literal level and conclude that there was more than one author of the Torah. Instead, using the methodology from Sinai, they uncover the ideas lying underneath the surface. It is not just that those who deny the reality of the Divine origin of the Torah are in essence denying a fundamental idea in Judaism. They are also closing the door to the beautiful ideas contained within. ■



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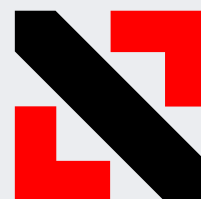
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Moshe & Aharon Two Leadership Models

RABBI BERNIE FOX

And I besought Hashem at that time, saying: O L-rd G-D, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness, and Your strong hand; for what God is there in heaven or on earth, that can do according to Your works, and according to Your mighty acts? Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill-country, and Lebanon.

But Hashem was wroth with me for your sakes, and hearkened not unto me. And Hashem said unto me: Let it suffice you. Speak no more unto Me of this matter. (Sefer Devarim 3:23-26)

1. Moshe's rejected plea to Hashem

In the opening passages of Parshat VaEtchana, Moshe describes one of the most moving tragedies in the Torah. Moshe recounts his petition to Hashem to allow him to enter the Land of Israel. Moshe had promised Bnai Yisrael that he would lead them to the land promised to their forefathers. He had led them to Mount Sinai. There, they had received the Torah which was designed to be implemented in the Land of Israel. Moshe had led the nation in the conquest of Sichon and Og. Bnai Yisrael had taken possession of the lands of these two kingdoms. Now, Bnai Yisrael was poised to cross the Jordan and take possession of the rest of the Land of Canaan. At last, the long-awaited moment had arrived for the fulfillment of the ancient promise made to the Patriarchs. Moshe beseeches Hashem to allow him to accompany Bnai Yisrael into the land.

Hashem responds to Moshe that his request cannot be granted. He will die and be buried east of the Jordan. He will not enter the land that he has devoted himself to securing for Bnai Yisrael. Hashem directs Moshe to offer no further petition and not to continue to beseech Him. The degree is final. He will not enter the land.

2. Moshe prayed alone

Moshe had secured Hashem's pardon of Bnai Yisrael after the sin of the Egel – the Golden Calf. He persuaded Hashem to spare the nation from immediate destruction when the people rebelled and refused to enter the Land of Israel. Moshe had succeeded in his advocacy on behalf of the nation but he failed when he prayed on his own behalf.

Midrash Rabbah comments that Moshe failed to secure Hashem's pardon because he prayed alone. Moshe prayed but Bnai Yisrael was silent.¹ The nation did not pray for Moshe. The people did not plead with Hashem to allow its leader to enter the Land of Israel with the nation he had delivered from the bondage of Egypt and led through the barren, terrible wilderness. The midrash implies that had the people pleaded with Hashem on Moshe's behalf, their prayers would have been accepted. Why were the people silent? Why did they not beseech Hashem to spare their leader?

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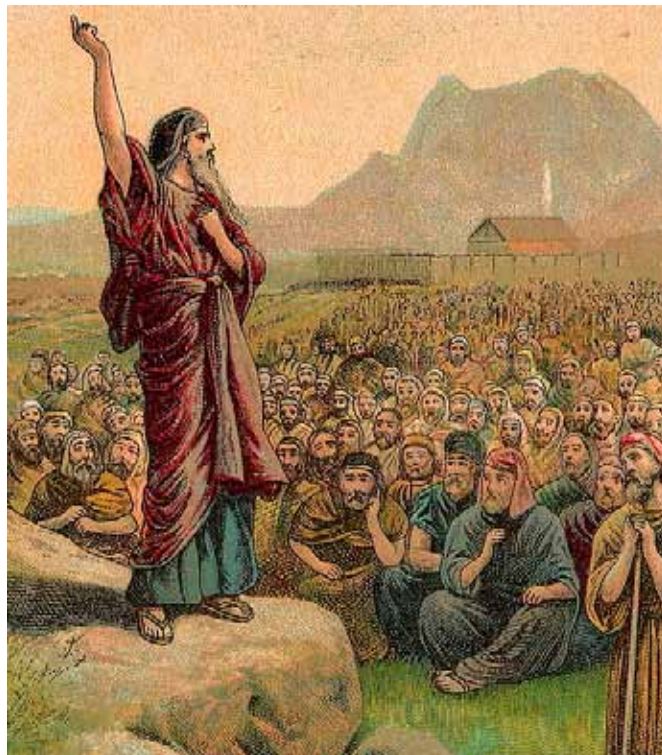
And when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, they wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel. (Sefer BeMidbar 20:29)

And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. So the days of weeping in the mourning for Moses were ended. (Sefer Devarim 34:8)

3. The entire nation felt the tragedy of Aharon's death

The Torah recounts the deaths of Aharon and Moshe. In both instances the Torah tells us that the nation mourned its fallen leader for thirty days. However, Avot D'Ribbi Natan notes a slight variation in the Torah's descriptions of these two events. In describing the communal mourning and anguish over the death of Aharon, the Torah emphasizes that the entire nation participated. In its description of the mourning that followed the loss of Moshe, the Torah does not emphasize the involvement of the entire nation. The contrast in the passages suggests to the Sages that the anguish over the loss of Aharon was universal. Moshe's death did not elicit the same response. What is the reason for the people's varying responses?

Avot D'Ribbi Natan responds that Aharon's death was universally recognized as a tragedy because he had been a peacemaker within the nation. The Sages explain that he reconciled husbands and wives, and he mended relations between friends. Moshe demanded the nation's obedience to the Torah. He sternly warned them of the serious consequences of deviating from the mitzvot. He rebuked and chastised the people for their failings and shortcoming. The different roles of Moshe and Aharon evoked very different responses.² The people loved



"And when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, they wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel."

both. However, their relationship with Moshe included a degree of ambivalence that was absent from their untainted affection for Aharon.

This raises an interesting question. Why did Moshe not adopt the more conciliatory methods of his brother Aharon. Why did Moshe resort to rebuke whereas Aharon sought to foster healing and reconciliation?

4. Moshe and Aharon's different styles of leadership

The Sages provide a well-known example of Aharon's method. Aharon would approach each of the parties to a bitter dispute and describe to him the terrible pain and agony that the other party is experiencing over the rift. Each of the parties would be moved by the pain and regret of his perceived adversary and seek to

bring an end to the conflict.³

This example provides an important insight into Aharon's priorities. Aharon's priority was to restore the relationship between two alienated parties. He made no effort to determine which party had been wronged and which had acted improperly. If fraternity was restored without either party assessing his own culpability in the dispute or acknowledging wrongdoing, Aharon viewed his work as completed. Aharon was not educating the disputants; he was assuming the role of a conciliator.

Moshe was the nation's teacher and mentor. He taught the people the Torah and its mitzvot. His role was to educate the people. This required that he not only communicate the Torah's mitzvot but also facilitate their implementation. Therefore, whereas Aharon

pursued a path of conciliation, Moshe was assigned the role of serving as judge. Moshe's responsibility was to identify the proper behaviors and those not proper and to educate the nation regarding the distinction.

5. Together the two leadership styles create a healthy community

Moshe and Aharon shared a concept of leadership. Both understood that the role of a leader is to not only speak about and preach values and proper behaviors, a true leader must also work with the community to implement these values and behaviors. Without this element, the lessons taught by the leader are mere platitudes that will not find consistent implementation among the members of the community. However, Moshe and Aharon served different roles as leaders of the nation.

Both leadership roles are required. A community can only survive and prosper if its members coexist in an environment of mutual respect and appreciation. However, ultimately, the community must have purpose and meaning. In order for a community to identify, understand, embrace, and live by its purpose and values, education is essential. Lofty values that are not implemented are meaningless. Therefore, leaders of Moshe's mold are essential. They educate the community and encourage the implementation of Torah values in the actual fabric of the community's existence. Leaders of Aharon's type are also essential. They nurture peace and harmony and remind us that we are a single community and people. ■

1. Midrash Rabbah Sefer Devarim 7:10

2. Avot D'Ribbi Natan 12:4

3. Avot D'Ribbi Natan 12:3.



“RELIGIOUS” JEW: GOD’S DEFINITION

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

A few weeks back we read Parshas Balak. The Haftorah cited below also includes God's ridicule of enchanters or warlocks like Bilam, people who fool others with claims to altering natural law through curses and other "means." God rejects as undesirable the "thousands of ram offering and tens of thousands of streams of oil offerings." Why? Because Bilam's and Balak's sacrifices were based on a corrupt internal view of God and reality. Bilam and Balak were distorted people, thinking sacrifice alone gains God's favor. However, acts and appearances are not what God desires; they reflect no righteousness of themselves.

Despite the misguided Jewish masses, does God value attempts at externalizing religiosity? Doesn't He in fact punish those who do, and demand we are humble instead? Doesn't God prohibit adding more religious acts to His limited commands?

"It has been told to you man, what is good and what God seeks from you; only to perform justice, and loving kindness, and modestly walk with your God (Micha 6:8)."

Radak cites the Rabbis (Chazal):

"This term of modestly walking with God refers to taking out the dead and bringing in the bride. Now these, that are commands performed publicly, yet Torah says to act modestly in their performance, how much more so are we bound to act modestly with privately-performed matters."

This means that other commands that require no publicity, like charity, prayer, study, and certainly matters that are not commands (like our garment colors and hair styles) must certainly not be used to parade a false piety. Radak again comments on Tzefania 1:8 concerning God's punishment of people who wore "strange garments", saying this refers to people who sought to appear more righteous than their brothers in their

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dress. But Radak says, "their ways are evil." Such individuals are catering to their egos, under the guise of a false piety. For piety is the opposite of parading one's self. Their "evil", as Radak calls them, is using the Torah not to draw close to God, but to adorn the self. God is not their focus. Their focus is themselves. Rav Soloveitchik calls self aggrandizement idolatrous. But God Himself says this all so clear as He highlights Moses' praiseworthy trait of humility, "And the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than all men on the face of the Earth (Num. 12:3)."

We learn that Torah speaks against any type of practice – public or private – where we invent ways of calling attention to ourselves. In this week's Parsha Vaueschanan, God tells us not to add to the Torah. So if someone suggests that his actions, his clothing or any aspect of his appearance forms part of Judaism, we know they are wrong. For God commands just the opposite, and He also prohibits adding to His words, which contain no law of dressing in certain colors, or how to wear one's hair (viz. other than idolatrous manners that are limited to papal, priest/nun or cardinal garb). Their is nothing gained religiously either by abstaining from wearing a given color, or not wearing it. Again, one gains nothing religiously through hair/beard styles. Garment colors and styles, and short hair or long hair have not come under the Torah's laws. We must not add to God's perfect system.

This makes perfect sense, since perfection is an internal matter. Of course if one is preoccupied with any pursuit that does not aim towards bringing him closer to God, this is wasteful. Such pursuits can be dress, fame, wealth, for example, when sought for lustful or egotistical ends. Once, a man brought his hair as a sacrifice, and this was praiseworthy since in his specific case, he wished to become more modest by cutting the source of his elevated ego. But if one knows himself, and to be happy so as to live a Torah life, he needs a certain esteem attained through a specific level of attire, then not only is he correct to labor to purchase this level of wardrobe, but if he became impoverished, Torah demands we give him the funds necessary to return him to this very level of income and lifestyle:

"If he rode a horse with a servant running before him when he was wealthy, then became impoverished, we restore this level to him." (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Daya 250:1)

This means God endorses a man's need to live within a certain level of self-esteem. Thus, esteem cannot be generalized where one can legislate certain garments, hair styles or the like. Each man and woman must strive to know their level of esteem, and work with it, not going to any extreme in excess or limitation, so they each are at a happy equilibrium so as to serve God without any emotional stress. We all have different needs, and God justly does not legislate in this area. Anyone who does, suggesting certain styles are "Jewish values", violates God's words, and simple reason.

The need to externalize one's piety is generated from one's insecurity. For if one was secure with his actions, knowing he serves God perfectly, without adding or subtracting, and does so to relate to God alone...he will not seek to alter the Torah through dressing or acting for man's applause. An intelligent person knows from Micha's words above, that modesty – acting humbly – is God's way. His relationship with God does not depend at all on styles or acts, not contained in the Torah. He does not add to, or subtract from God's limited, choice words. He does not allow his emotions to distort God's Torah, despite the Jewish masses who do. He is pure, complete, secure, happy, and humble enough to know what God said, and not to falsely claim something is a Jewish value, when God and His prophets spoke against it so clearly.

A truly religious Jew follows God...alone. He is strong in his Torah convictions. He does not seek peer approval through public or external displays; certainly as God forbids favoring man's applause. A true Torah Jew "walks humbly" as God demands, seeking God's approval alone. His religious life is a private matter, as it must be. He does not distinguish himself from other Jews in any way, as this need to gain attention for his "piety" is disgraceful before God. God does not approve of egotistical people. In fact, Maimonides teaches the two traits we must never cater to are anger and arrogance. So as times and styles change within the Jewish culture, a righteous Jew will strive to blend in, not stand out. He must not hold on to former styles claiming their "Jewish" value, since God condemns this, read in Tzefania.

What is God's definition of "religious" Jew? It is one who leads a privately religious life with God; not chasing human applause through actions and externals, which God prohibits. ■

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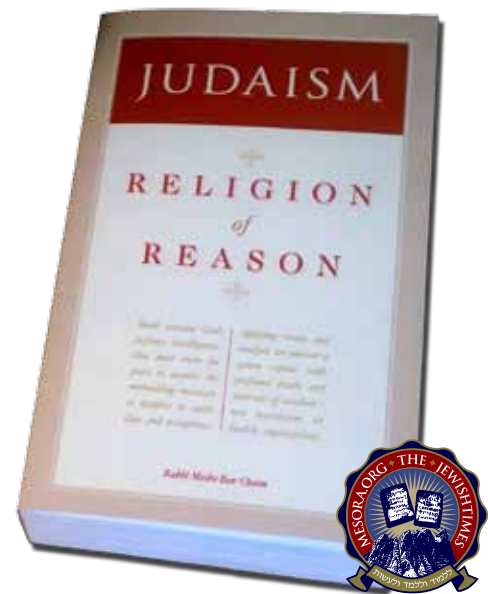


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JUDGED BY A HIGHER STANDARD

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's parsha, Va'etchanan, begins with Moshe recounting his intense plea to Hashem to be allowed to enter the Land. It is difficult to believe that the three great shepherds of Israel, Miriam, Aaron, and Moshe, who were responsible for leading them out of Egypt and guiding them in the Wilderness, were prevented from fulfilling the mitzvah of settling in Eretz Yisrael.

Moshe, who reached the highest level of prophecy ever to be attained by man, was punished for not sanctifying Hashem in the episode at Mei Meriva (Waters of Contention). He was commanded to speak to the rock so it would yield its waters. Instead, he used his staff and hit the rock twice, whereupon the waters came forth. For this infraction, he was punished by losing his privilege of joining in the conquest of the Land.

This matter was a source of great pain to Moshe, and he repeatedly beseeched Hashem to rescind the harsh decree. As we study the story, we have difficulty comprehending it. There are no "saints" in the Torah. Even Moshe Rabbenu is human and subject to sin. Moshe was the most humble of men and did not seek to deny his failing. He did Teshuva (repentance) and prayed to be forgiven. If ever there was a person who was deserving of Divine Mercy, it was Moshe Rabbenu. Why did his prayers go unanswered? Why did Hashem tell him, "It is enough. Do not talk to Me any further about this matter"?

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In the past, Hashem had been very generous in granting Moshe's requests for ever greater knowledge of Him and His "ways." Yet, in this matter, there was no yielding from the severity of the judgment. What lessons can we learn from this?

A major teaching of Judaism is that the righteous are judged by different standards than ordinary mortals. Rabbi Soloveitchik says, "Responsibility is always measured by the greatness of the person. G-d told Moshe to address the rock, and he hit it. For the ordinary person, this would not have been a sin at all, or even if it had been considered a sin, the ordinary person would not have been punished the way Moshe was punished. Because Moshe was the leader, however, he should have been more careful."

This is a very significant lesson that should have a chastening effect on all of us. Leaders must be extremely careful in the exercise of their leadership. The responsibility they have toward those they lead is very great. I do not believe that this applies only to great people like Moshe Rabbenu. Every one of us may view himself as a leader in a more restricted sense.

The Rabbi has a responsibility toward his congregants, the teacher must be concerned about his students, the parent is looked up to by his children. Anyone who is in a position of authority and responsibility regarding the lives of others must take this charge very seriously. We are not judged by the same standard of strictness in all the areas of our activity. Perhaps, in matters pertaining purely to ourselves, when no other people will be affected by our lapses, the judgment will not be as harsh. However, we must assume a different attitude in those areas of our lives that will have a profound impact on others.

We must be cognizant of the great responsibility that we have to others, especially those who look to us for guidance. This should constitute an additional incentive for us to increase our wisdom and improve our behaviors. It is incumbent on all of us to realize that people are not as inspired by the magnitude of our knowledge as by the purity of our deeds. We perpetuate the wisdom of Judaism, not only by instruction, but by incorporating it into our actions and general behavior.

Unfortunately, we live in a time of immorality, when great leaders in all walks of life have become corrupted and committed great sins. This is true in the religious realm as well. Significant religious leaders have been caught up in terrible scandals. This appalling phenomenon has made its appearance in the Jewish world; we should not imagine that Jewish religious leadership is immune from disgrace. It is vitally important that we not be lax or lenient in excusing scandalous behavior in our religious leaders.

Hashem held Moshe to the highest possible standard and refused to indulge his momentary lapse, which could have been tolerated in someone of lesser stature. We must demand the same standards of our own contemporary leaders, especially the religious. As the Talmud teaches, "When it comes to desecration of G-d's name, we show no respect to any Rav."

May Hashem's name be magnified in His world, and may His chosen people be redeemed, speedily in our time.

Shabbat shalom.■



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AGUR BIN-YAKEH



PSHAT VS. DRASH

PART II

I previously presented my understanding of the difference between pshat and drash, "Pshat" refers to the meaning of the words as intended by the author, whereas "drash" refers to the homiletic use of the author's words as a platform for expressing an extrinsic idea which may or may not have anything to do with the author's original intent. I supported these definitions with sources from Ibn Ezra, Ralbag, Radvaz, and Shiltei ha'Giborim. In shiur this past Sunday my rebbi brought up two more sources which support these definitions: one from the Rashba in his commentary on aggadah, and the other from the Rambam's Moreh ha'Nevuchim. Since both of them make similar points, I decided to cite both.

Rashba: Commentary on Aggadah, Bera-chos 32b

The Gemara in Berachos 32b focuses on a pasuk in Yeshayahu 49:16. Here is the pasuk (bold) in context:

Zion said, "Hashem has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." **Can a woman forget her baby (ulah), or not feel compassion for the son of her womb (mayrachame ben bitnah)? Even these (ayleh) may forget, but I (anochi) would not forget you.** Behold, I have engraved you upon my palms; your walls are before Me always. Your children will hasten [to return], and your ruiners and your destroyers will leave you.

The Gemara expounds on the four Hebrew words I singled out above:

"Can a woman forget her baby (ulah), or not feel compassion for the son of her womb (mayrachame ben bitnah)?" [Hashem said:] "Can I forget the burnt offerings (olos) and firstborn offerings (pitray richamim) that Israel has brought before Me in the Wilderness?"

The Congregation of Israel responded: "Master of the universe, since there is no forgetting before the throne of Your glory, perhaps you have not forgotten the incident of the Eigel (Golden Calf)?"

Hashem responded: "Also these (ayleh) may forget" (the midrash alludes to the incident of the Golden Calf, in which the worshipers said, "These (ayleh) are your gods, O Israel, who took you out from Egypt!").

Israel said before Him: "Since there is forgetfulness before the throne of Your glory, perhaps You have forgotten the Revelation at Mount Sinai?"

Hashem responded: "but I (anochi) would not forget you" (the midrash alludes to the first of the Ten Commandments heard at Sinai, "I (anochi) am Hashem, your God, etc.>").

The Rashba prefaces his commentary with a general statement about midrashim.

There are those who mistakenly think that Chazal are actually interpreting the pesukim which are brought in their aggadah, in accordance with their explanations therein. For example, they explain ulah (baby) as olah (burnt offering), and they explain ben bitnah (son of her womb) as peter rechem haba min harechem (a firstborn issue of the the womb), and they explain ayleh (these) as ayleh elohecha Yisrael ("these are

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your gods, O Israel") and anochi (I) as anochi Hashem Elohecha ("I am Hashem, your God"). This leads to mass confusion.

These [mistaken individuals] can be divided into two groups. One group is inclined towards [belief in] the opinions of Chazal and rely upon everything they say; they think that [these midrashim reflect] the true interpretations of these pesukim, since that is how the Sages present them. Another group mistakenly inclines towards kefirah (denial) [of the Chazal's authority]; they think that this was Chazal's intent in explaining these pesukim, and they ascribe error to them. This, in turn, leads to a greater mistake, for they then ascribe error to everything that Chazal taught in their explanation of the Torah and mitzvos. These are true fools - "the opposite of men of understanding" (Yeshayahu 5:21). In order to remove these two errors, I must provide insight and explain their intent in all matters such as these.

The Rashba then goes on to give a beautiful explanation of the true meaning of the midrash (which we will omit here for the sake of brevity). He concludes by explaining why Chazal adopted this approach in their aggadah:

This is one style in aggadah, namely, that [the Sages] teach whatever it is they intend to teach, and they bring pesukim for their idea as if their intention is to interpret that pasuk in accordance with what they taught - but in truth, [the pasuk] only serves as an allusion and a mnemonic device for their own idea. For example, [they midrashically explain the pasuk "Their sovereignty over Cheshbon was lost" (Bamidbar 21:30) in the following manner:] "Vaniram" teaches us that the wicked one says, "ain ram" (there is no Exalted One); "avad Cheshbon" means "avad cheshbono shel olam" (the accounting of the world has been lost). In truth, the Sages had no intention to interpret these pesukim - which speak about the events of the war with Sichon - as speaking about the words, actions, and thoughts of the wicked; rather, their intention in this [midrash] and others like it is to remember the idea by remembering the pasuk, as a mnemonic device. This shows wisdom on their part, for they take important and necessary ideas which have tremendous value and firmly establish them in a language which will not be forgotten (i.e. the text of pesukim).



I'm going to hold off my comments on the Rashba until after we see the Rambam, since their statements are so similar. (It would surprise me if the Rashba didn't get his comments from the Rambam himself.)

Rambam: Moreh ha'Nevuchim 3:43

The final section of the Moreh ha'Nevuchim is devoted to the explanations of the reasons for the mitzvos. Before presenting his own explanation of the mitzvah of the arba minim (the Four Species), the Rambam addresses the popular midrashic explanations. Presumably, he is referring to the midrash that the arba minim represent the four different types of Jews, and the midrash that the arba minim symbolize four parts of the human body which should be utilized in our service of Hashem. Here is what the Rambam has to say:

As regards the arba minim, our Sages gave specific reasons for them by way of aggadic interpretation, the method of which is well known to those who are acquainted with the style of our Sages. They use the

text of the Torah only as a kind of poetical expression [for their own ideas] – not that these are the actual meaning of the text.

With regards to these midrashic interpretations, people are divided into two groups: some people think that the midrash contains the real explanation of the text, whilst others mock it and ridicule it, since it is clear and obvious that this is not the real meaning of the text. The former struggle and fight to prove and to confirm such interpretations according to their opinion, and to hold on to them as the real meaning of the text; they consider them in the same light as the received laws from the Oral tradition.

Neither of the two classes understood that our Sages employ biblical texts merely as poetical expressions, the meaning of which is clear to every reasonable reader. This style was widespread in ancient days; all adopted it in the same way as poets [adopt a certain popular style].

In reference to the words: "and you shall have a shovel (yasade) in addition to your weapon (azaynecha)" (Devarim 23:14) our Sages teach: "Do not read azaynecha (your weapon) but aznecha (your ear). You are thus told, that if you hear a person uttering something disgraceful, put your fingers into your ears."

Now, I wonder whether those ignorant persons [who take the midrashic explanations as actual interpretations] believe that the author of this saying gave it as the true interpretation of the text quoted and as the meaning of this mitzvah – that in truth, yasade (shovel) is used for "finger" and azaynecha denotes "your ear"? I cannot think that any person whose intellect is sound can admit this. The author employed the text as a beautiful poetical phrase in teaching an excellent moral lesson, namely this: it is as bad to listen to lashon ha'ra (evil speech) as it is to say it. This lesson is poetically connected with the above text. In the same sense you must understand the phrase, "Do not read so, but so," wherever it occurs in the midrash.

According to the Rambam, the midrashic explanations of the symbolism of the arba minim were never intended as interpretations of the pesukim or the mitzvos contained therein - just as the midrash about the shovel was never intended as an interpretation of the pasuk in Devarim. Nevertheless, people still take these midrashim as actual interpretations - both l'shvach (to praise Chazal) and l'gnai (to disparage them).

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The Root of the Problem

The Rambam mentioned the common denominator between the two groups: both of them fail to realize that Chazal were using the text of the pesukim as a poetic and mnemonic device to express their own ideas. But my rebbi asked a further question: What is the root of their error? The Rambam and Rashba paint a clear picture of the symptoms, but what is the underlying disease?

I answered my rebbi's question based on the Rambam's statement about the first group: "they consider [these aggadic explanations] in the same light as the received laws from the Oral tradition." In other words, both groups fail to realize that aggadic midrashim are entirely different than the halachos of Torah she'baal Peh. These groups believe that just as we are obligated to accept the mesorah (oral tradition) from Chazal that "an eye for an eye" refers to monetary compensation rather than corporal punishment, and "pri eitz hadar" refers to an esrog, and "ve'hayu l'totafos bein einecha" is an instruction to place tefilin on one's forehead above the spot between one's eyes, so too, we are obligated to accept Chazal's statements at face value when they write that R' Elazar ben Azariah miraculously grew a white beard at the age of 18, or that Yocheved was 130 when she gave birth to Moshe, or that Moshe Rabbeinu was 18 feet tall. Both of these groups are oblivious to the crucial premise of all aggadic teachings, namely, that they were not given at Sinai, but that they are Chazal's own interpretations, which they arrived at with their own minds and formulated in their own style.

Every student should be aware of Shmuel

ha'Nagid's explicit definition of aggadah in his Mevo ha'Talmud:

"Hagadah" (a.k.a. "aggadah" or "aggadic midrash") is any explanation from the Talmud on a non-mitzvah topic - this is hagadah, and we only learn from it that which makes sense. It is incumbent upon you to know that established by the Sages as halacha regarding any mitzvah was received by Moshe Rabbeinu who received it from the Almighty, and we should not add to it nor subtract from it. But as for all of the explanations of the Scriptural verses - each of the Sages explained according to the ideas which occurred to him and what he saw with his mind. We should only learn from these explanations that which makes sense, and the rest we should not rely upon.

The members of the first group feel compelled to accept aggadic explanations in the same way that they accept Chazal's halachic teachings from Torah she'baal Peh, whereas the second group reject aggadic explanations and ultimately reject Chazal's halachic teachings from Torah she'baal Peh. Both groups assume that these teachings are of the same nature, in the same style (i.e. interpretation), and are on the same level of authority. In truth, they are not. I fully agree with Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's statement that to believe that aggadah was given at Sinai is "a dangerous approach that poses a grave danger for the pupils who grow up believing this concept, for it very nearly opens the gates of heresy before them."

My rebbi gave a different answer. He said that the underlying disease shared by the two groups is a mistake about who Chazal are, namely, **both groups believe that**

Chazal were not chachamim. The Rambam openly states in his introduction to Perek Chelek that the members of the first group "think that the only meaning in the wise words of Chazal is what they, themselves, understand – namely, the literal meaning." It doesn't even occur to them that Chazal are expressing great wisdom which is utterly beyond their own grasp. Consequently, they drag down the words of Chazal to the low level of their own intellects, and assume that this is what Chazal actually intended. Likewise, the Rambam writes that the members of the second group "imagine that their own intelligence is of a higher order than that of Chazal, and that Chazal were simpletons who suffered from inferior intelligence were incapable of attaining genuine wisdom." Their arrogance (in contrast to the first group) renders them even more unlikely to uncover the true wisdom of Chazal's teachings.

Neither group recognizes the chochmah (wisdom) of Chazal. Both groups view Chazal as possessing inferior intelligence. This causes them to regard the statements of Chazal as simplistic and superficial. The members of the first group delight in this since it allows them to retain their own childish beliefs about Torah and reality, and the members of the second group enjoy mocking Chazal, rejecting their teachings, and rationalizing their own inclinations and ideas on the basis of their "superior" intelligence.

Unfortunately, these two groups are still at large, and the Jewish world is still plagued by the problems they cause. The best we can do is to turn to the Kadmonim (Early Sages) who truly understood Judaism, and look to them as our guides. ■



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