

JewishTimes

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LETTERS

The World is GOD?

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What does this mean and
what does Torah say?

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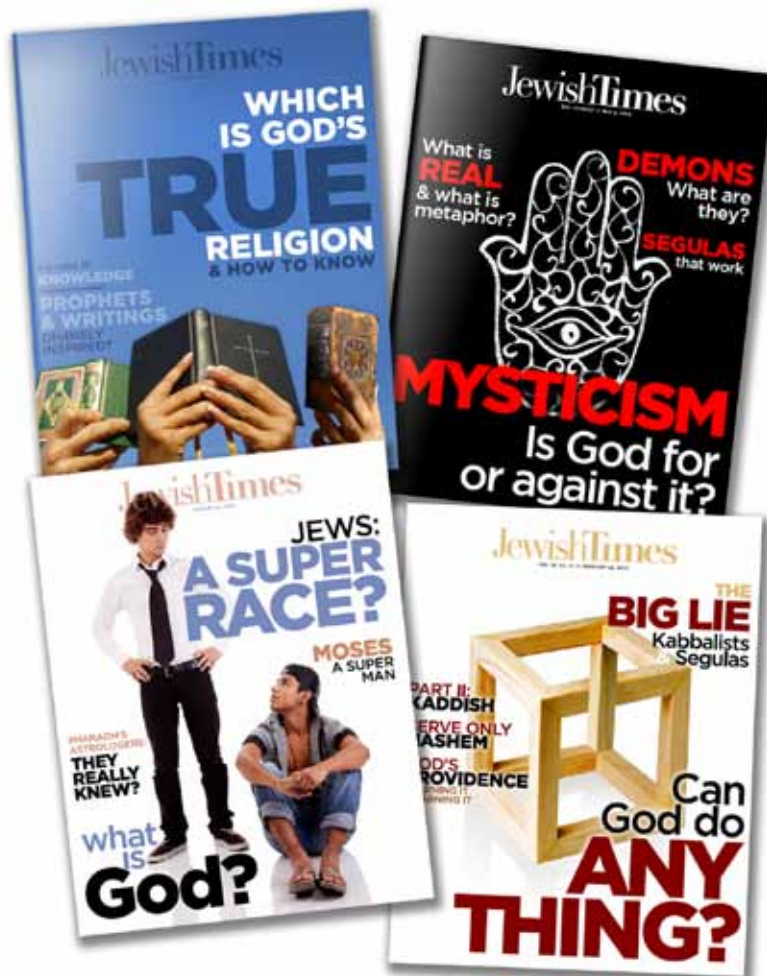
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LETTERS

All is God?

Reader: Shalom, rav. I'd like to know if the view that G-d is physically present in every Jew's body is an opinion shared by the whole Jewish world, or only by chassidim. Many thanks.

- Giorgio

Rabbi: Giorgio, I was already writing on a very similar topic, but I'll answer you first and include in this article.

Our intelligent Rabbis and Sages rejected such heresy. Those who accept this have no basis in Torah, and in fact, Torah speaks against it. God is not physical or subject to division, as Maimonides wrote in his 13 Principles. This view "G-d is physically present in every Jew" is not the Torah's opinion. It is meaningless how many Jews buy into this nonsense. We must follow reason and God's words, not the foolish masses and Jewish cults. Pay no attention to this false notion, or others, even if found in books. I believe Maimonides

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calls the belief in anything written a "disease."

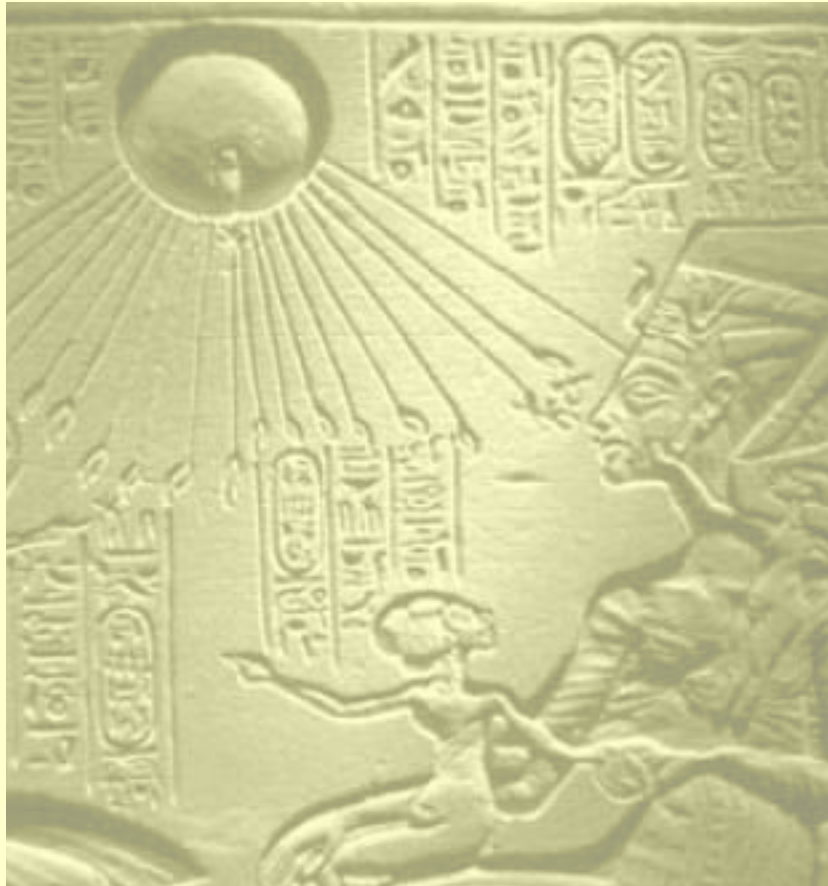
Coincidentally, I recently heard that a Rabbi lectured about this topic. He cited the familiar theory of God is one to mean, "all that exists is God." Let's analyze this intelligently.

First, we accept the Torah that commences with God's statement that He created the universe. This means that there now exists "something new which is other than God." Therefore, all (the universe) is not God, but something new.

Secondly, our Rabbis and Sages, starting with Maimonides, taught that creation was *ex nihilo* – from nothingness. Meaning, creation was not God taking "part of Himself" and fabricating it into the universe. The "all is God" theory rejects creation *ex nihilo*, a view held by original Orthodox Judaism and by all our greatest minds throughout time. Suggesting, "all is God", one places himself outside the camp of authentic Judaism.

Third in order, but most primarily, Maimonides explains this view is heresy: God cannot possess parts, since only physical elements are subject to division. Isaiah too shares Maimonides' sentiment, quoting God, "To what can you equate Me, and I will be similar (Isaiah, 40:25)?" Meaning that God cannot share anything with His creation. To suggest, "all is God", denies God's words to Isaiah.

Creation *ex nihilo* means that God, the omnipotent, is not limited by the natural laws He created. Therefore, He can in fact create something from nothingness. This is a marvel, not to be misconstrued. It must amaze a human being that God possesses this ability. This is no small matter either, since this is the very reference we use for God – i.e., the "Creator." To suggest, "all is God," is to deny the greatness of Creation.



We must be vigilant against this infantile mindset, which is unable to view anything outside one's own physical categories. This causes man to project a spatial relationship onto God, foolishly forcing God into our physical laws, viewing God as somehow "sharing our space." It is from this foolish notion that God occupies space, that man arrives at another fallacy, "all must be God."

In truth, we follow God's very words to Moses, "Man cannot know Me while alive (Exod. 33:20)." Meaning, we have no basis of understanding what God is. Therefore, trying to suggest that the universe "is God" violates God's very words.

We also don't know how God works. But we trust His words to the Prophet, that He created the universe, and that the universe is not God. It is a new creation, from nothingness. God is not the universe.

I understand the emotion that causes such false thinking: man wishes to view God as "great." This is good, but this attitude must be tempered by intelligence. Torah exists to guide our minds, and Torah rejects this notion that "all is God." That the universe is not God, must not be viewed as a limit on God. God is not limited in any manner by creating something other than Him. Overstepping reality and intelligence by suggesting God's greatness is "God being everything, everywhere" violates Torah, and reason.

Sadly, those who defend the "all is God" view, do so by suggesting, "it is a very deep and abstract idea, that cannot be fully grasped." As such, one is a fool to defend what he does not know.

This is yet another example of how man's errors stem from his ignorance of Torah combined with loyalty to his unexamined notions carried over from youth. ■

THE CODE OF

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

MOSES' STAFF





Also, if God accepted Aaron to act as emissary, why was Moses needed any further? What consideration prevented Aaron to speak to Pharaoh alone, without Moses? We notice God says that Moses will feed Aaron his lines. (Exod. 4:15)

CLUES ABOUT THE STAFF

Ibn Ezra teaches that 4 of the 10 plagues were performed without the staff (Exod. 8:12). They were Mixture (wild animals), Pestilence, Boils and First Borns. What consideration demanded the staff not be used in these 4 plagues? Let's define what these 4 plagues addressed:

Mixture = man's life (beasts killed him)

Pestilence = man's property (death of livestock)

Boils = man's status (astrologers were defamed)

First Borns = Egypt's leaders were killed

The first three plagues performed by Aaron (Blood, Frogs, Lice) taught that God controls the Earth. These plagues demonstrated God's rule over water and land. The last 3 plagues performed by Moses (Hail, Locusts and Darkness) demonstrated God's reign over the heavens. But why was man required? God could perform the plagues alone!

A reason God performed the plagues through man's involvement is to demonstrate that (human) wisdom is required in understanding reality, in contrast to the idolatrous view of Egypt. Pharaoh and his nation imagined a reality where inventions of human fantasy were accepted as reality; inanimate statues were believed to possess control over the universe; insects were more powerful than men.

It was essential that men (Moses and Aaron) were involved in the onslaught of the plagues, just as Prophets are essential for delivering God's words in general. And that the level of each human performer indicated the level of wisdom within that sphere. Thus, Aaron performed miracles in the lower world, while Moses performed miracles in the heavens. Taking this cue from the respective performers, hopefully Pharaoh and his people would recognize that human wisdom is the only tool for understanding how the universe operates.

But we find something intriguing. Not only was the staff absent in the 4 plagues noted above, but also God's instruction to Aaron and Moses differed. God tells Aaron during Blood, Frogs and Lice to wave the "staff":

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The book of Exodus commences with God prophecy to Moses. God wanted the speech-impaired Moses to be His sole emissary to Pharaoh. Torah's repetitive recording of Moses' impediment is no accident. God wishes us – the Torah student – to pick up on primary messages. God is not simply recording every Prophet's conversation. We see gaps of decades within the accounts of the Prophets. Why then, select someone with poor verbal skills?

God also gave Moses signs – proofs of his encounter with Him. But only one sign incorporated Moses' staff: the staff transformation into a live snake. Other than this sign, the staff was absent. It was only after Moses declined to act as emissary, that God said Aaron will accompany Moses, and only then God added, "And this staff take in your hand to perform the signs (Exod. 4:17)." It appears, had Moses initially accepted the mission without Aaron, the staff would be used just once, and not with the subsequent plagues. What was the staff's true significance?

“Speak to Aaron that he take the staff and raises it on the waters...(Exod. 7:19).”

“Speak to Aaron that he raises his hands with the staff on the rivers...(ibid 8:1).”

“Speak to Aaron that he lift his staff and smite the dust...(ibid 8:12).”

But when addressing Moses' plagues, God does not say to wave the staff, but to wave his "hand":

“And God said to Moses, “Raise your hands on the heavens...” (Exod. 9:22).”

“And God said to Moses, “Raise your hand...” (ibid 10:12).”

“And God said to Moses, “Raise your hand on the heavens...” (ibid 10:21).”

God always told Aaron to use the staff and God always told Moses to use his hand. Why?

Interesting, Moses didn't stop using the staff until Darkness. It seems to me that Moses initially thought that when God said, "wave your hand" to bring the Hail and Locusts, that it meant to use the staff. But when, for a third time God said, "wave your hand" Moses realized it meant literally his hand. Then, Moses stopped using the staff and waved his hand. The first time God said, "wave your hand," Moses thought that's no different than saying "wave the staff." By the third time, Moses heard God say "wave your hand" he now realized that was a different command than the three times God said to Aaron, "wave the staff." Therefore in Moses' third plague – Darkness – when God said to Moses to "wave his hand", he did so, "And Moses raised his hand on the heavens...(Exod. 10:22)."

GOD IS THE FOCUS

The preferred emissary was Moses, with his speech impediment. God highlights in His Torah that Moses was concerned about this, but God nonetheless desired Moses. Why? Moses' flaw would prevent him from Egyptian deification. Imagine seeing someone waving his hands in front of the superstitious, Egyptians and miracles occur. The Egyptians would readily view him as a deity. Not so Moses. His speech impediment prevented the Egyptians from deifying him, and this served God's objective. He possessed a flaw, while gods are perfect. God's objective was to teach Egypt that one God exists. God must retain the limelight. Moses was the perfect candidate as emissary, as he would not obscure God's focus.

However, Moses declined the mission. Aaron was selected. But Aaron's articulate persona threatened to overshadow God, operating in the

"background." The solution: Aaron had to be obscured through the use and presence of the staff. Just as a magician waves his magic wand to redirect the audience's attention away from his other hand reaching in his pocket...the staff redirected Egypt ways from the man Aaron, and kept them focused on God's miracles. Moses was not told wave the staff, since his speech impediment did not threaten a loss of focus on the miracles that he performed.

This staff represented God's exclusive reign over all creation. It is for this reason that the staff did not transform into a snake, while Moses still held it. It transformed only once on the ground. Similarly, the Nile's waters transformed into blood, but only once on the ground. This removed any notion that Moses used sleight of hand like Pharaoh's astrologers. Moses was not responsible for these miracles: it was God.

Now that the staff represented God's sole reign, Aaron was instructed to employ it when the plagues commenced, lest the Egyptians deify Aaron and attribute to him some role in the plagues. Waving the staff signified, by association, that each new plague was God's exclusive performance, just like the original transformation of the staff into a snake. It refocused Egypt away from the articulate man, Aaron, and on God's miracles. And Moses feeding Aaron his lines further removed the possibility that the Egyptians deify Aaron. Aaron was taking orders, not a fit role for a deity.

REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

Why were there 4 plagues without a staff, or man's hand waving? These 4 plagues were unlike all others, which were broad phenomena, affecting even the Jews. These 4 directly targeted individuals. To repeat:

Mixture = man's life (beasts killed him)

Pestilence = man's property (death of livestock)

Boils = man's status (astrologers were defamed)

First Borns = Egypt's leaders were killed

As such, man cannot share the limelight. Reward and Punishment – God's justice – is a realm exclusively under God's guidance, and cannot tolerate any association with man. God alone possesses total knowledge of each individual, his actions and his thoughts, that God alone must mete out justice. Thus, Moses and Aaron could not take part in any act in these 4 plagues. So it was not that the staff was absent in these 4 plagues, but that man was absent.

Proof that these specific plagues were to teach God's Reward and Punishment is derived from the

verses. God says he will set a "salvation" (Exod. 9:19) for the Jews during Mixture. In Pestilence, "And God distinguished between the cattle of the Jews and the cattle of Egypt (ibid 9:4)." And only the first born of Egypt died.

But you will ask, was not Moses commanded to throw the soot into the air to create boils? Was not Moses' involvement a danger? Perhaps this exception was necessary, as the intent of Boils was to diminish the astrologers' status in relation to Moses. Thus, Moses had to be the one who initiated a plague, one, which the astrologers could not remove. And so it says, "The astrologers could not stand before Moses, because the boils were on the Egyptians and the astrologers (Exod. 9:11)." This emphasizes the equation between the astrologers and regular people: they both had boils, and the astrologers could not remove this plague, just like the regular people. Thereby, the astrologers were exposed as charlatans. They were too embarrassed to stand before Moses, who initiated this plague.

THE ORDERING OF THE PLAGUES

Perhaps God chose the middle set of plagues to address His control of man, to demonstrate that this realm (God's justice) is no less out of His control than natural law. These 3 plagues sat amidst the other 2 sets of plagues that addressed natural laws. Perhaps Egypt harbored a view where they baselessly distinguished between nature and man. This could explain why God says regarding the Mixture, "In order that you shall know that I am God in the midst of the land (Exod. 8:18)". These words aimed to teach Egypt that God's reign has no limitation. This was something the Egyptians never realized, as they prayed to inanimate objects and human creations that never responded. Now they understood that not only does God respond, but also His reign is not limited to the heavens. His will equally penetrates one's very home and body. (Mixture attacked Egyptians in their homes).

SUMMARY

We further appreciate God's precision in the plague's design: who performed each one, whether a staff was used, and many other considerations. We must arrive at an increased appreciation for God's complete knowledge and control over the universe. He knows precisely how to set certain nuances that direct a studious mind towards deeper lessons. And the lessons are not elusive, but rather, their subtle form teaches us that to gain God's wisdom, we must search below the surface of the Torah verses. ■



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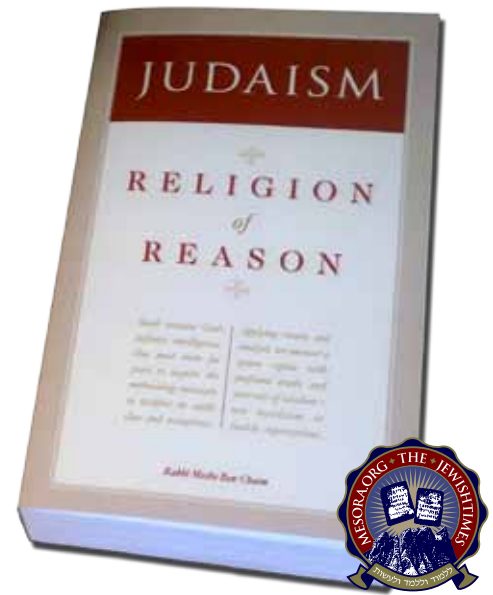
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REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN — Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix

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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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Makas Bechoros: Culmination or Transition?

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

When reading a novel, one usually looks for a thematic flow, a consistent development of plot and a clear path from one chapter to the next. The Torah, of course, is not a novel, and therefore need not conform to such wishes. Yet there are times when there is a thematic bump in the road, where the flow of an event is suddenly interrupted. In Parshas Bo, we see such an example of a deviation from the story line, a repetitive deviation no less, and it is noted by various commentators. As we will see, a fascinating debate between Rashi and Ramban as to the objective of this aberration redefines as one that in fact is a natural fit.

Moshe relays God's command regarding the final plague, that of makas bechoros, to Pharaoh. This section ends with a clear break, a pesucha, indicating the completion of one section and an introduction of a new section. The Torah then says (Shemos 11:9-10):

"The Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not heed you, in order to increase My miracles in the land of Egypt." Moses and Aaron had performed all these miracles before Pharaoh, but the Lord strengthened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the children of Israel out of his land."

Immediately following this verse is another break, and we are then introduced to the section concerning kiddush hachodesh, korban pesach, and issues concerning the upcoming exodus.

The information presented in these two verses seem repetitive – what new piece of knowledge

have we gained? Why the need for the thematic breaks, isolating these verses?

We also know that there is one remaining plague left, yet God refers to this in the plural – "increase My miracles". Why the "inaccuracy"?

Both Rashi and Ramban deal with these issues. Rashi, in commenting on the first verse, writes as follows:

"They are the plague of the firstborn, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the stirring of the Egyptians [into the sea]."

This interpretation is quite perplexing. Why is God discussing anything other than makas bechoros? Why is God alluding to future miracles?

The third miracle discussed, that of the "stirring of the Egyptians", is expanded on by Rashi when commenting on a verse in Shiras Hayam. He takes up the issue regarding the deaths of the Egyptians at Yam Suf being described in three different ways (ibid 15:5):

"like a stone: Elsewhere (verse 10), it says, "they sank like lead." Still elsewhere (verse 7), it says, "it devoured them like straw." [The solution is that] the [most] wicked were [treated] like straw, constantly tossed, rising and falling; the average ones like stone; and the best like lead-[i.e.,] they sank immediately [and thus were spared suffering]."

Thus, the stirring up of the Egyptians refers to the different deaths meted out, depending on level

of wickedness. How do we understand this idea? Why is it being told to Moshe at this juncture, prior to the onslaught of the final plague?

Returning to the second of the two verses above, Rashi remarks:

"It has already been written for us in reference to all the miracles, and it [Scripture] did not repeat it here except to juxtapose it to the following section"

Clearly, Rashi is saying there is no intrinsic new piece of information to be gleaned from this verse. Instead, it is functioning to tie this verse to what follows (ibid 12:1):

"The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying"

Rashi explains that Aaron was being included in the commandment with Moshe, an acknowledgment of sorts to the hard work Aharon had completed with Moshe previously.

How do we understand this juxtaposition?

Ramban takes a different approach to this area. He explains that in reality, Pharaoh should have been very scared when hearing the warning about makas bechoros, more than any of the previous plagues. Moshe had been correct about every prior prediction, so there was no reason whatsoever to assume he would be wrong here. Therefore, God let Moshe know He "hardened Pharaoh's heart", as Pharaoh certainly would have chosen to free the Jewish people. The objective of intervening here was due to the extent of the miracle of makas bechoros, affecting every living being in the land, as well as destroying the Egyptian gods. Ramban is interpreting the plurality of the miracle of makas bechoros (noted in the verse in the Torah) as the increased magnitude of the plague itself. What idea is Ramban introducing with his explanation?

Regarding the second verse, Ramban writes how the miracles performed via Moshe and Aharon were referring to the previous nine plagues. This verse was written to explain that Moshe and Aharon completed their jobs, and that they would not be involved at all with the final plague. Again, what is Ramban teaching us?

Obtaining an overall framework for this debate will be helpful in understanding the particulars. It is possible the central debate between Rashi and Ramban concerns the positioning of makas bechoros in relation to the other plagues. One way to view this plague is serving as the culmination of the entire sequence of plagues. It must be clear that this idea cannot be restricted to the plagues only being punishments hurled at the Egyptians; rather, the plagues were events of Divine intervention that allowed for the Egyptians (and Jews) to evolve in their understanding of God. In this sense, the final plague was the culmination of this intellectual progression. This would seem to be the crux of the position of Ramban. On the other hand, one could argue that makas bechoros was really the transition to a new phase of Divine intervention, an introduction of ideas about God

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that had never been revealed prior to this moment. In taking such an approach, Rashi is positioning this final plague separate from the prior nine.

Delving into the specifics, we see Ramban first describes how Pharaoh should have been extremely scared, requiring God to “harden his heart”. Implied in this is that Pharaoh was ready to send out the Jews, but was unable to due to God’s involvement. Yet wasn’t this the case with many of the plagues? Ramban also describes the increase in this plague as striking all beings, man and animal, as well as destroying their gods. How does this description make the plague so different? What makes makas bechoros so critical is the inability to apply any rational explanation other than God as the source of the outcome. A plague that strikes at a predicted time and place, involving a select group of people with no intrinsic similarity (first born), striking both man and beast, can have no explanation other than God. And this conclusion is what would obliterate any remnant of the idolatrous Egyptian outlook, the reference to their gods being destroyed. It was the clearest demonstration possible, within the setting of Egypt and the upcoming exodus, of the reality and subsequent supremacy of God. The intellectual advancement towards the recognition of God culminated with the final plague. When Pharaoh heard what Moshe was predicting, his fear, as Ramban describes it, was overwhelming. It is possible at this moment, intuiting the tremendous reality to be expressed in this plague, that he was not conflicted whatsoever in allowing the Jews to leave Egypt. In other words, the effect makas bechoros was felt by Pharaoh in the prediction Moshe offers to him, without the actual plague striking him. Therefore, God ensured that Pharaoh would keep the Jews in Egypt for one more plague, allowing for this idea to be experienced by all of Egypt and the Jewish people. This also explains Ramban’s explanation of the second verse. Since the idea of makas bechoros was one where the only identified source was God, there could be no involvement by man in its implementation. Moshe and Aharon had been an integral part in the previous execution of the plagues. They had now completed their assigned jobs, and the Torah notes this in the second verse. Their removal from makas bechoros helps accentuate how it is so unique as compared to the other plagues.

As noted above, Rashi disagrees, viewing makas bechoros as detached from the previous plagues. Yet one could argue that in fact he

agrees with a central tenet of Ramban’s approach. This final plague was a different degree of revelation by God, He being the sole source of its outcome. Rashi, though, uses this point to explain that makas bechoros heralded new revelations concerning God and our understanding His relationship to the universe. The plagues successfully demonstrated God as the dominant force in the universe, the critical starting point in recognizing God. Makas bechoros would now establish the exclusive power of God, a primary preface to His being Creator. This is a distinct, and in many ways more advanced, idea of God as compared to what was understood through the other plagues. It is for this reason that Rashi groups together the other two miracles with makas bechoros. The splitting of Yam Suf established God as melech, the true King. His role as savior, the Moshiya, was on full display when the sea was split. The Jews were now privy to this aspect of God’s dominion, His Kingship. The stirring up of the Egyptians reflected another idea of God, an extension of His Kingship. The point of emphasizing the fates of the Egyptians is to highlight that each person was judged in a manner reflecting true justice. It is a knowledge man could never possess, a system whose specifics we have no access to. The realm of *shar v’onesh* (Reward and Punishment), as seen in the individual demises of the Egyptians, is another fundamental idea about God and His relationship to the universe. Of course, each of these ideas requires further analysis; for purposes of this article, the main idea is the transition to this new phase in understanding God. Moshe is thus told that a shift was about to take place with makas bechoros.

What about the second verse? In keeping with the theme of a paradigm shift, we see this taking place with Moshe and Aharon. Previously, they were viewed by the people through their roles as bringing the plagues to the Egyptians. With the first commandments to the burgeoning nation of Jews on the horizon, it was critical to note that their parts were not to be limited to just agents of plagues. They were to be the vehicles of God’s commandments, responsible for teaching the Jewish people the Torah. They were building off their previous roles, moving into a new stage of leadership. This could be the juxtaposition Rashi speaks of, tying their roles together. They were evolving in their roles as leaders, and this was to be evidence in the upcoming commandments directed to the Jews. ■



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Don't Distort the Torah

RABBI REUVEN MANN

In this week's parsha, Bo, the plagues increase in their intensity, bringing great devastation upon the Egyptians. Moses' message, which was illustrated by the plagues, was that G-d ruled the world and that man had to yield to His will. Pharaoh's continued refusal to obey G-d's command brought the afflictions to the land. Before the plague of hail, Moses issued a warning that all inhabitants should bring in their slaves and animals from the field. This demonstrated the mercy with which Hashem treated the sinful nation. His desire was not to destroy, but to educate and save them from their harmful ways. Were any Egyptians inspired by these manifestations of Hashem's might?

The verse states that, prior to the onset of the hail, "one who feared the L-rd's word among Pharaoh's servants hurried his servants and livestock into the houses. The one who did not heed the L-rd's word left his servants and livestock in the field." While some Egyptians learned the lesson of the plagues, many others did not. Both groups of people are listed as Pharaoh's servants.

The evil of the leader has an effect upon the entire nation, as people are influenced by their role models. We should be very careful about being too much in awe of powerful people, as this can cause us to be affected by their corrupt values. Fortunate are the "servants of Pharaoh" who feared Hashem. These were the people who retained their intellectual independence and thought for themselves.

The ability to think for oneself and not be swept along with the tide of popular opinion is vitally important, especially for contemporary American Jews who live in a morally corrupt culture. The hedonistic philosophy of our society is categorically opposed to the ideals of holiness and perfection of the soul that is espoused by Torah.

In the last 50 years, our country has undergone a cultural upheaval that is also



referred to as the "sexual revolution." A completely new set of values has taken hold in our society. The attitudes toward premarital sex, adultery, divorce, and abortion have radically changed. Let us not be so naive as to imagine that the philosophy of "do your own thing," so contrary to the Torah way of thinking, has no effect on the Jewish community. A huge majority of American Jews do not study, observe, or identify with the Jewish religion.

There is, however, a more disturbing aspect to this story, for the impact of the new values has permeated all sectors of Jewish life. We can see the embrace of alien beliefs in certain segments of the religious community. Many Jewish religious denominations have adjusted their "theology" to reflect contemporary ideologies regarding feminism, sexual ethics, "choice," and so on.

One should not think that these religious "innovations" reside exclusively in the domain of the non-Orthodox movements. One should not imagine that all those who call themselves Orthodox subscribe faithfully to the Torah of Moses, as elucidated by the masters of the Oral Law

and codified in the Shulchan Arukh. Would that it were so. This is a new era we are living in, and some who call themselves Orthodox have espoused some unorthodox positions. Some repudiate the authenticity of Torah. Others even deny that the Patriarchs ever lived.

If one denies the existence of the Patriarchs, one nullifies all the fundamentals of the Jewish religion, such as the selection of their descendants as the Chosen People and the Covenant of the Land of Israel. Not to mention the absurdity of praying to "the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob."

Jewish theologians, especially those who claim to be Orthodox, should boldly assert the eternal truths of Torah in spite of their unpopularity in our present society. Our father Abraham was named "Ivri (Hebrew)," because he "was on one side, and all the world on the other side." He courageously affirmed the existence of the One G-d, the falsehood of idolatry, and the supreme importance of holiness in one's sexual behavior.

Today, Jewish religious leaders, even some "Orthodox" ones, timidly imitate the alien "values" of the primitive pagan society in which we find ourselves. There are those who have even gone so far as to advocate for the right of gay marriage, a position that cannot be reconciled with the clear and explicit teachings of the Torah.

The eternal truths of Torah are always at odds with the viewpoints of those who believe that the ultimate good is self-gratification, not perfection of the soul. The Jewish people cannot simply "follow the leader," but must be willing to study and seek out the genuine truth of Torah. They must not be misled by those who falsify it to make it more appealing to the contemporary mindset.

Shabbat shalom. ■

WALKING THE WALK

Lessons from the Parasha

Rabbi Bernie Fox



And they shall take of the blood, and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel, upon the houses wherein they shall eat it. (Sefer Shemot 12:7)

1. An unusual aspect of the Pesach sacrifice in Egypt

Parshat Bo is notable for a number of its characteristics. It is the penultimate parasha dealing with the redemption from Egypt. The plague of the firstborns is described. This plague brought Egypt to its knees. The Torah describes a broken and humiliated Paroh beseeching Moshe to lead forth Bnai Yisrael from Egypt and to end the devastation of the plague. The parasha also includes the first commandments that were given to Bnai Yisrael as a nation.

Among the commandments described in the parasha are those related to the Pesach sacrifice. This sacrifice was first offered in Egypt. However, it is to be offered annually as an integral element of the festival of Pesach. The initial version of the Pesach sacrifice differed somewhat from the version that was incorporated into normative observance. In general, animal sacrifices include an element of service involving the slaughtered animal's blood. This element includes sprinkling the blood on

the altar. However, the Pesach sacrifice of Egypt was offered without an altar. So, the typical service with the blood could not be performed. Instead, the people were commanded to place the blood upon their doorposts and lintel.

And the blood shall be to you a sign upon the houses where you are. When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and there shall no plague upon you to destroy you, when I smite the Land of Egypt. (Sefer Shemot 12:13)

2. The placement of the blood of the Pesach sacrifice

Rashi, quoting the Midrash Michilta, explains that the blood was to be placed on the inside surface of the doorposts and lintel. It was to be visible to those inside the home but not visible from the outside of the home.[1] Michilta offers two explanations for the requirement that the blood be visible from the inside of the home and not from outside. Ribbi Shimon suggests that the requirement is expressed in the above passage. Hashem tells Bnai Yisrael that He will see the blood and He will spare the household from the plague of the firstborn. In other words, the members of the household will be safe from the devastation of the plague. Ribbi Natan also suggests that the requirement is expressed in the passage. He notes that the passage states that the blood should be a sign "for you". He understands this to mean that the blood should be a sign and visible to those within the home but not to those outside.[2]

In summary, these Sages agree that the blood was placed on the inside surfaces. However, they disagree on the source for this requirement – each suggesting a

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different biblical reference. What is the basis of their dispute? What insight might be reflected in their references to different elements within the above passage?

In addition to these two positions that agree that the blood was placed on the inside surfaces of the doorposts and lintel, Michilta quotes a third opinion. Ribbi Yitzchak suggests that the blood was placed on the outside surfaces of the doorposts and lintel. He does not provide a passage to support his position. Instead, as an explanation for his position he offers an enigmatic comment. He explains that by placing the blood on the outside of the homes the Egyptians would see the blood and their "bowels would be severed"[3]. What does Ribbi Yitzchak intend to communicate by this comment?

And Moshe said: It is not fitting to do so; for we shall sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to Hashem our G-d. If we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? (Sefer Shemot 8:22)

3. The Pesach sacrifice was a rejection of Egyptian idolatry

Before addressing these two questions, it will be helpful to review the objective or function of the Pesach sacrifice offered in Egypt. Moshe provided an illusion to the function in an earlier conversation with Paroh. After the fourth plague – an infestation of wild beasts – Paroh summoned Moshe. He agreed to release Bnai Yisrael from their labors for a period suitable to serve Hashem. However, he was not willing to meet all of Moshe's demands. Moshe had told Paroh that they would travel into the wilderness and there offer sacrifices to Hashem. Paroh insisted that the service to Hashem should take place in

Egypt. Moshe responded that the Egyptians worshiped the animals that Bnai Yisrael would offer to Hashem. The Egyptians would never tolerate the sacrifice to Hashem of these deified animals.

In his response to Paroh, Moshe omitted mention of an important aspect of the planned sacrifices. From his comments to Paroh, one could conclude that the conflict between these sacrifices and the Egyptians' religious beliefs was merely coincidental. However, the Sages explain that the contradiction was intentional. Hashem required Bnai Yisrael to renounce the pagan beliefs and practices of Egypt. Toward this end, He directed them to sacrifice the very animals that their Egyptian masters regarded as sacred. Their participation in this service would announce their rejection of Egyptian idolatry and their initiation into service of Hashem.[4]

4. Bnai Yisrael's redemption was linked to the nation's spiritual awakening

In Parshat Bo, Bnai Yisrael is directed to offer the Pesach sacrifice. Through this sacrifice the objectives described above were achieved. The sacrifice of the Pesach lamb served as the beginning of Bnai Yisrael's spiritual redemption from the paganism of Egypt. Their participation proclaimed their spiritual awakening and their emergence from the darkness of Egypt. However, the sacrifice had another dimension. The blood on the doorposts and lintel protected Bnai Yisrael's homes from the devastation of the plague of the firstborns. The material safety of the people was linked to their spiritual renaissance.

However, the awakening that

would save Bnai Yisrael from the plague raging outside their homes and lead to their redemption was to be an intense and meaningful spiritual transformation. A superficial adoption of behaviors would not be adequate. Such a total metamorphosis is complex. It involves a capacity to and willingness to wholeheartedly embrace a new and alien perspective. Also, if this change is to be meaningful, the new perspective that is embraced cannot be vague or poorly grasped. It is only meaningful if its content is a clearly defined and understood value or perspective. Finally, the full embrace of a new and alien perspective requires tremendous intellectual and spiritual courage. This is not achievable by those who are faint-hearted or easily intimidated.

The Sages quoted by the Michilta all agree that the redemption required an authentic spiritual awakening. Also, they agree that this awakening was expressed through the Pesach sacrifice offered in Egypt. However, they differ on the role played by the placement of the animal's blood in the emergence of the new spiritual personality.

5. Bnai Yisrael were expected to internalize the lessons of the redemption

Ribbi Shimon and Ribbi Natan agree that that blood of the sacrifice was to be placed upon the inside of the homes. Ribbi Natan explains that this requirement is expressed in the passage cited above. The blood was to serve as a sign to those in the home. Therefore, its proper place was inside the home. According to Ribbi Natan the placement of the blood communicated a moving and profound message. It communicated the definition of authentic spiritual change. The salvation of the household

depended upon an intimate and personal transformation within its members. They must completely reinvent their worldview and their understanding of reality. They must abandon the familiar pagan perspective in which they had been raised and replace this primitive outlook with a strange new vision of the world. They must embrace Hashem as the only true G-d, as the Creator, and the source of all reality. No purely external, superficial, declaration can suffice for such a transformation. Their salvation depended upon achieving a real and meaningful change. Such a change must be an internal and personal realization.

6. Hashem's omniscience and the source of true security

Ribbi Shimon explains that this requirement is expressed in the passage previously cited. Hashem must see the blood and then He will spare the members of the household from the plague. Malbim notes that Ribbi Shimon's position is explained in a later comment of Michilta. Ribbi Yishmael notes that in the passage cited by Ribbi Shimon Hashem states that He will see the blood and spare those inside from the plague. Ribbi Yishmael asks, "Does Hashem need to see the actual blood in order to ascertain whether the members of the household should be spared?" He responds that Hashem does not need to see the actual blood. The passage is not to be understood in a rigorously literal manner. Hashem is stating that as a consequence of their participation in the Pesach sacrifice, the household will be spared.[5],[6]

Apparently, according to Malbim, the blood was placed inside to communicate the message that Hashem is omniscient. He is aware of everything

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– the external and the internal, our outward behaviors and our personal thoughts. The placement of the blood on the inside of their homes challenged people to seek security through a device only meaningful to an omniscient G-d. The forces of destruction outside of their homes would not be kept in abeyance by any manifest characteristic of the home but by the devotion of those inside the house to a service that was invisible from without. According to Ribbi Natan, the blood's placement communicated a specific message regarding Hashem and the true source of human security. A true spiritual metamorphosis can only be founded upon embrasure of specific values and perspectives. The blood's placement provided this specific lesson.

In summary, Ribbi Natan and Ribbi Shimon agree that the blood was placed within the homes. However, the sources they cite to support their positions reflect different interpretations of the requirement. According to Ribbi Natan, the blood was placed inside the home to communicate the nature of an authentic transformation. Adoption of external behaviors would not suffice. An intensely personal and intimate reorientation of the household members' worldview was required. Ribbi Shimon suggests that the placement of the blood was not intended to suggest the nature of the required transformation. Instead, it created the opportunity for meaningful change by providing the content of the new perspective. The fundamental content of this metamorphosis was acceptance of an omniscient G-d, the realization that our safety and security rests with Him alone, and that security is achieved through the fulfillment of His will.

7. Achieving physical and psychological freedom

Ribbi Yitzchak maintains that the blood was placed on the outside of the homes. His only explanatory comment is that by placing the blood on the outside of their homes they would "sever the bowels" of the Egyptians.

Ribbi Yitzchak's position seems to reflect the comments of another Sage, Rav Chiya the son of Rav Acha, quoted in another Midrash. He explains that the intention of the Pesach sacrifice was to engineer a confrontation between Bnai Yisrael and their Egyptian masters.[7] Akaydat Yitzchak expands upon this idea and explains that the redemption of Bnai Yisrael could not be complete if it only achieved release from bondage. The redemption required that they also break free from the psychological shackles imposed by slavery. They must reinvent themselves as a free people. They must replace the obsequious character of the slave with the confident outlook of the free person. This transformation could only be achieved through the emergent free individual confronting and humbling his former master.[8] This is Ribbi Yitzchak's message. The one-time slaves were required to stand up to those who fashioned themselves their superiors and "sever their bowels."

According to Ribbi Yitzchak the placement of the blood provided the people with the opportunity to reinvent themselves as a confident and courageous nation. Only through attaining this new healthy self-image would they be able to fully throw off the false beliefs of their former masters – the beliefs that they themselves had adopted – and embrace a new and revolutionary perspective.

8. Walking the Walk – the elements of meaningful change

These Sages disagree over the proper place for the blood and the message or lesson communicated by the blood's placement. However, the underlying message regarding meaningful change emerges from their collective views. Each sees in the blood's placement a different element of authentic change. Ribbi Natan sees in the blood's placement a lesson regarding the definition of meaningful change. The redemption from Egypt required Bnai Yisrael to progress beyond mere external expressions of change. They were expected to affect a fundamental internal change. Ribbi Yitzchak teaches us through the blood's placement that values are only meaningful when they are clearly focused and have substance and content. It is not enough to say, "I believe". We must understand what we believe. Finally, Ribbi Yitzchak reminds us that in order to serve Hashem wholeheartedly, we must free ourselves of subservience to other masters. ■

[1]Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 12:13.

[2] Michilta, Parshat Bo 12:7.

[3] Michilta, Parshat Bo 12:7.

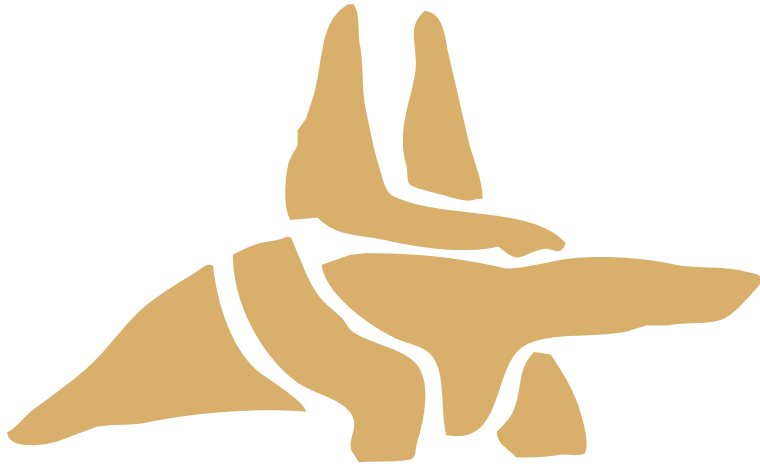
[4] See, for example, Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 12:6.

[5] Michilta, Parshat Bo 12:13.

[6] Rav Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (Malbim), HaTorah VeHaMitzvah – Commentary on Sefer Shemot, 12:7.

[7] Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher, Torah Shelymah on Sefer Shemot 12:21, note 427.

[8] Cited by Rav Yisachar Jacobson, Binah BaMikre, p 73.



DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

AGUR BIN-YAKEH

In Parashas Vaeira the Torah recounts the first of the many miracles performed by Moshe in Egypt:

Moshe came with Aharon to Paroh and they did so, as Hashem had commanded; Aharon cast down his staff before Paroh and before his servants, and it became a snake. Paroh, too, summoned his wise men and sorcerers, and they, too - the necromancers of Egypt - did so with their magic. Each one cast down his staff and they became snakes; and the staff of Aharon swallowed their staffs. The heart of Paroh was strong and he did not heed them, as Hashem had spoken. (Shemos 7:10-13)

The question is: Did Paroh's sorcerers do real magic? The answer to this question is a machlokes Rishonim (a disagreement between medieval authorities). Some Rishonim, such as the Rambam, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, maintain that there is no such thing as "real magic." All instances of magic, sorcery, and occult practices mentioned by the Torah were nothing but illusions and trickery, whether by sleight of hand or by sleight of mind. For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to this position as "the Rambam's view," [1] since he was more vocal about his position on this matter than many of the other Rishonim.

Other Rishonim, such as the Ramban, Sefer ha'Chinuch, and Rashi, maintain that magic – at least, some forms of magic – are real, and involve tremendous chochmah (wisdom). Of course, they do not believe (chas v'shalom) that magic involve powers other than Hashem. Rather, they conceive of magic as a method of manipulating natural phenomena in "unnatural" ways. This may be compared to the act of "hacking" a computer program: the program was designed to be used in a certain way, but the potential for the other uses exists within its code, and if one knows programming language, he can change the program to be used in an "unnatural" manner – that is, in a manner contrary to the intent of the program's original designer. We will refer to this position as "the Ramban's view," since he was one of the most vocal opponents of the Rambam's view.

Last but not least, there are Rishonim who are in doubt. They acknowledge both sides of the issue, but admit that they don't know which side is correct. One of these Rishonim is the Raibag [2], who writes:

I maintain that these "wise men [of Egypt]" were the men who were knowledgeable in the chochmas Mitzrayim (Egyptian wisdom). This chochmah enabled its practitioners to produce acts of sorcery to bring about strange and unnatural phenomena. They either (a) perform illusions which cause people to think they are doing what they are not actually doing; or (b) they devise natural mechanisms to produce strange phenomena that appear to be acts of sorcery; or (c) they did these strange actions by means of actual sorcery – that is, assuming these things are possibly by way of actual sorcery. Today, however, we lack knowledge of the nature and character of this [Egyptian] "sorcery," and so we have not seen fit to discuss it.

Whenever I present this machlokes between the Rambam and the Ramban to my students, I am inevitably asked two questions: "How do we know which view is correct?" and "What do you believe?"

My answer to the first question is: analyze each of the theories in depth, evaluate their relative strengths and weaknesses, and arrive at a conclusion with your own mind. If you are unable to conduct a full investigation or are unable to arrive at a conclusion, the most intellectually honest position to hold is that of the

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Ralbag, who said, “I don’t know.” Do not be intellectually irresponsible and adopt whichever belief you find most emotionally pleasing or the most stimulating to your imagination and fantasy.

My answer to the second question, “What do you believe?” is a bit more nuanced than the two basic Rishonic positions outlined above. I will say, without hesitation, that I believe the Rambam’s view to be correct. I do not believe that there is or ever was such a thing as “real magic,” and anything that appears to be real magic is the product of trickery, imagination, and/or ignorance. Not only that, but I maintain that if the Ramban were alive today, he would agree with the Rambam. There would be no machlokes.

In order to understand why this is the case, we need to understand why the Ramban believed in magic in the first place. The answer is not simply “Because the Torah talks about people doing magic, and prohibits magic, so magic must be real!” After all, the Rambam and other Rishonim were also aware of the references to magic in the Torah, and they still maintained that magic is fake.

The Ramban’s clearest statement of his reasons for believing in occult practices (such as magic, astrology, omen-reading, etc.) can be found in his commentary on Devarim 18:9. He writes that we ought to believe in these phenomena because “we cannot deny things [that] have been done publicly in the sight of witnesses” and because are based on “empirically verified science” – that is to say, they have been confirmed by observation and experience. Scientists [3] at the time of the Ramban believed in these occult phenomena, and the Ramban relied on their conclusions. To deny magic would be to reject science and sense observation [4], which is the basis of everything – including our acceptance of Torah.

The Ramban’s true position is now clear. Just as he relied on the empirical conclusions of the scientists in his times, so too, if he were alive today, he would embrace the empirical conclusions of modern day scientists. To my knowledge, there is absolutely no scientific evidence to support a belief in magic and the occult. Scientists today know what the Rambam wrote over 800 years ago:

Anyone who believes in these and similar things and, in his heart, holds that they are true and scientific but forbidden by the Torah, is nothing but a fool with a deficient mind, who belongs to the same class with others whose intellects are immature. Intelligent people, however, whose rationality is intact, know by clear proofs that all these practices which the Torah prohibited have no scientific basis but are senseless and empty; and that only those with deficient minds are attracted by these follies and, for their sake, leave the ways of truth.

In the Ramban’s time, the evidence wasn’t so clear. To deny magic was to take a stance on what was regarded as a two-sided scientific dispute. Today, however, there are no two sides. In this day and age, to believe in magic is to reject science and to deny sense observation. That, we can be sure, is a stance that the Ramban would never take, and never advocate. ■

1. See Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides), Mishneh Torah: Hilchos Avodah Zarah 11:16; Commentary on the Mishnah, Maseches Avodah Zarah 4:6; Letter to the Rabbis of Montpellier

2. Rabbeinu Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag / Gersonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemos 7:11 (Beur ha’Milos)

3. There wasn’t any “science” in Ramban’s time. They called it “natural philosophy.” I’m speaking in the vernacular.

4. This isn’t the only instance of the Ramban basing his interpretation of Chumash on empirical evidence. In our dvar Torah on Parashas Noach we saw that the Ramban relied on the explanation of rainbows given by the Greek scientists, even when their words undermined the plain pshat of the pesukim. The Ramban wrote: “We are compelled to believe the words of the Greek [scientists] that rainbows are a natural phenomenon resulting from the sun’s rays passing through moist air, etc.”

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