

JewishTimes

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# GOD'S PLAN

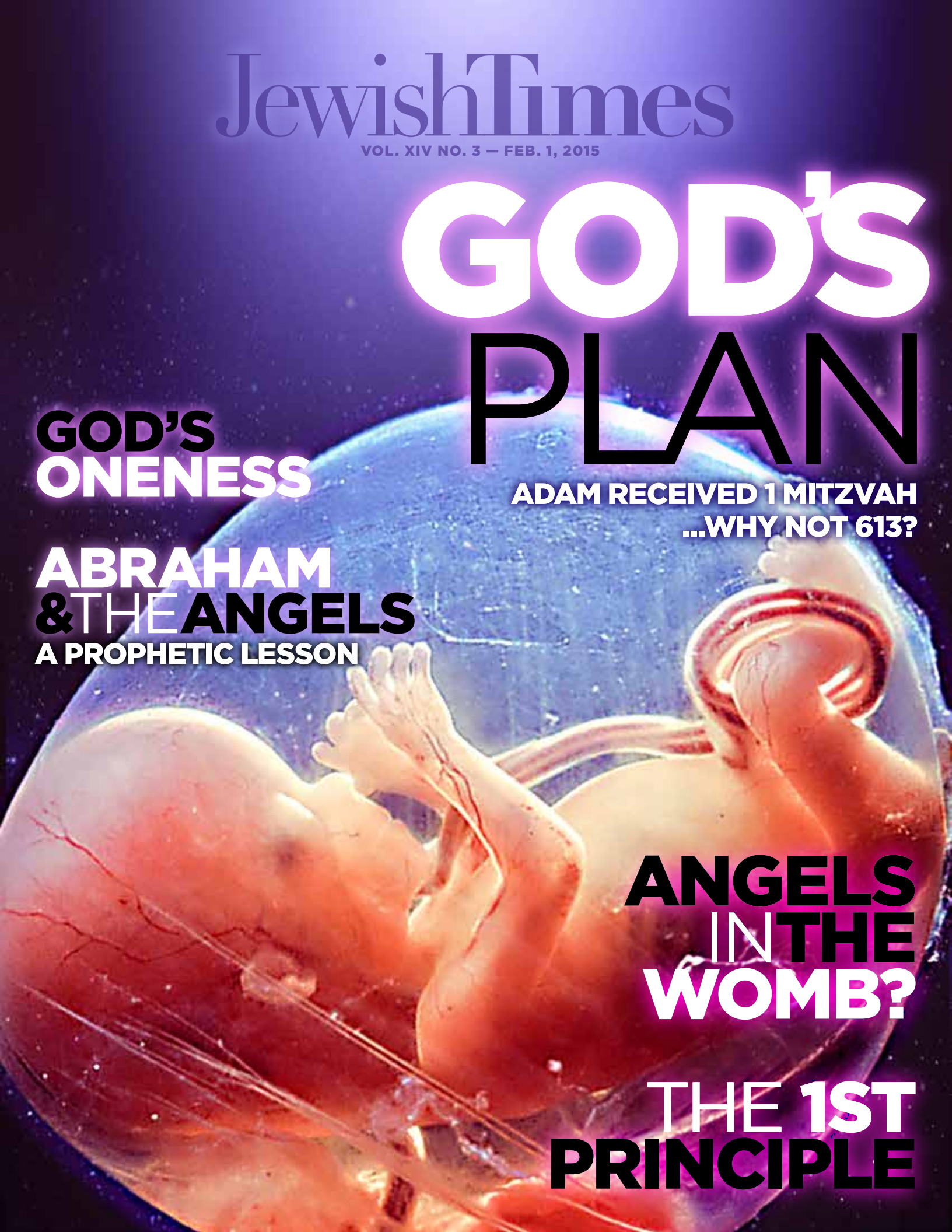
**GOD'S  
ONENESS**

ADAM RECEIVED 1 MITZVAH  
...WHY NOT 613?

**ABRAHAM  
& THE ANGELS**  
A PROPHETIC LESSON

**ANGELS  
IN THE  
WOMB?**

**THE 1ST  
PRINCIPLE**

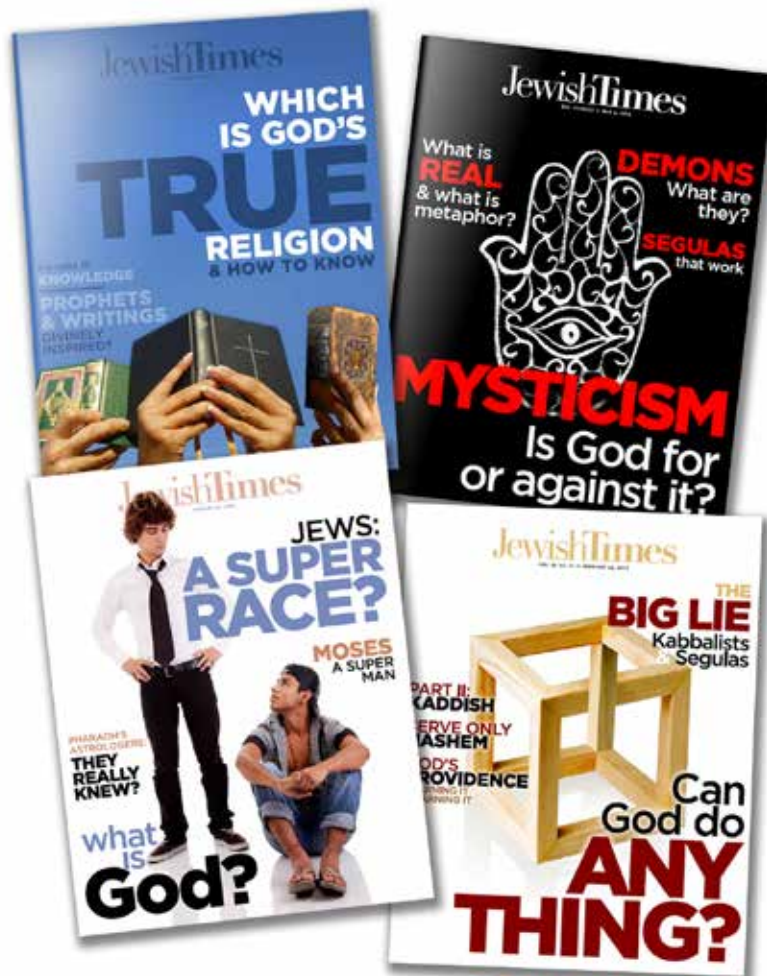


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# Feb. I

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## LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## Maimonides' First Principle

**Lance:** Greetings to you. I have a question regarding Maimonides and his 13 principles. Basically, my question boils down to this: What is the first principle?

Some sources — such as the Jewish Virtual Library — seem to indicate the first principle is nothing more than "God exists." Admittedly, this does seem to be pretty primary in the structure of monotheistic faith, so it is an apt first principle. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

However, other sources — such as Chabad — appear to posit something more along the lines of “God is the Creator” or “God is the (First) cause of existence.” Your own website seems to concur with this interpretation of the first axiom of Maimonides.

Maybe I’m making a fuss about nothing; but to me, “God exists” and “God is the Creator” are two very distinct assertions. Moreover, the differences between one online source and another in portraying the first principle of Maimonides makes the matter quite confusing to me. Therefore, I’d appreciate your own clarification in this matter.

Thank you,  
Lance

**Rabbi:** Lance, thank you for raising this important question. As you are questioning Maimonides’ formulation, the answer will lie in his words:

*Principle I. To know the existence of the Creator*

*To believe in the existence of the Creator, and this Creator is perfect in all manner of existence. He is the cause of all existence. He causes them to exist and they exist only because of Him. And if you could contemplate a case, such that He was not to exist...then all things would cease to exist and there would remain nothing. And if you were to contemplate a case, such that all things would cease to exist aside from the Creator, His existence would not cease. And He would lose nothing; and oneness and kingship is His alone. Hashem of strength is His name because He is sufficient with His own existence, and sufficient [is] just Him alone, and needs no other. And the existences of the angels, and the celestial bodies, and all that is in them and that which is below them...all need Him for their existence. And this is the first pillar and is attested to by the verse, “I am Hashem your God.”*

We see, neither suggestion “God exists” or “God is the Creator” accurately represents Maimonides’ precise formulation. For there is much more Maimonides includes in his words...

**1) We must first “believe in the existence of the Creator”**

That is, we must first realize:

A) the universe in fact owes its existence to an ultimate “Cause.”

B) This further means this cause is a single cause.

C) Additionally, we must not subscribe to the alternate view of an eternal universe.

**2) “The Creator is perfect in all manner of existence”**

What does this mean? This means we must recognize that as the Creator, God has a certain “type” of existence. When the term “existence” is applied to both the universe and God, typically, one understands the existence of both as equal. Maimonides second point is to distinguish between God’s existence, and the existence of all other things. All other things exist only accidentally. Meaning, of their own ‘nature’ (which too is not due to their own doing) all else has “dependent” existence. All else but God, was ‘given’ existence, and at one point in history, did not exist. This means that the universe’s existence is not mandatory or absolute: it cannot exist on its own...it requires God’s will to exist. In contrast, God’s existence is not dependent. His very nature is to exist, whereas all created things by definition do not have existence as part of their nature.

**3) Due to this distinguishing quality, Maimonides states “and oneness and kingship is His”**

But can there be a king without subjects? This means that man — the only intelligent creature — must view God as king. The knowledge of God’s unique nature to (eternally) exist, and that He is the Creator (2 complementary truths) must generate in man a respect for God, as the king.

**4) “Hashem of strength is His name”**

Here, Maimonides says God has a name. A “name” by definition, is that which distinguishes one being from another. When applied to God, Maimonides means to teach that God’s uniqueness is “known,” it is famous. As in, “he made a name for himself.” Maimonides teaches an idea similar to that of Rav Hai Gaon, who said the first of the Ten Commandments — “I am God” — is in fact not a command. Rav Hai

Gaon said that God’s existence is so apparent, it would belittle the honor due to God, had there been a ‘command’ to know Him. God intentionally designed the universe precisely to reflect His existence and wisdom, so that mankind would stand in awe of God and all His marvels, and enjoy a life pursuing sciences, truths, and morality, to better understand the Creator. Thus, the overwhelmingly apparent wisdom reflected in the universe makes God’s existence undeniable. A command to know God would thereby belittle the obvious nature of His existence.

**5) “because He is sufficient with His own existence”**

We must not assume creation was made due to anything lacking in God, as if He has a motive, or a need, or loneliness. For motive, need and loneliness are all human traits. And, as God created humans, He is not governed by human traits.

**6) “And the existences of the angels, and the celestial bodies, and all that is in them and that which is below them...all need Him for their existence”**

Finally, Maimonides teaches that although the earthly creations may not be on par with God’s existence, man might falsely equate higher beings’ existences to God’s existence. Therefore, Maimonides dispels this fallacy as his final lesson of his First Principle.

So, what is Maimonides’ First Principle? It is this:

**To realize the Creator.**

**To know He is one.**

**To reject the eternity of the universe.**

**To distinguish His existence from all else, knowing that He exist by His very nature, and all else has dependent existence.**

**That honor is due to God.**

**That His existence is obvious.**

**Not to project human motive onto God for creating the universe.**

**That He is elevated over all else, including the heavens and angels.**

Thank you for your question, as you have enabled me to better understand this principle. ■



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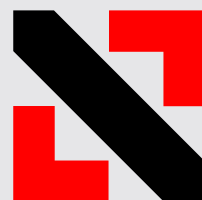
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# GOD'S PLAN

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**"Why am I  
here?  
What will  
fulfill me  
most and  
make me  
truly  
happy?"**

These questions gnaw away inside us. Can we arrive at a satisfying answer? We know that Judaism is God's only religion: this is proven like any historical fact,

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

and is based on mass revelation at Sinai. While other religions demand blind faith since they lack proof for their claims, Judaism demands intellect and reason, and is the only religion that provides proof of divine origin. So our question is not concerning “which” religion is true; this has been established and even affirmed by the other religions. Rather, our question concerns God’s intent...God’s plan for man. Why was Torah not given until year 2448? What does this say about God’s plan for those initial individuals and societies? What does this say about their capacities as thinking beings? Did God not desire the best life for them as well? And what does this say about us, who are created identically to those previous generations? There are a few sources that enlighten us to a fundamental truth about God’s will. I will cite those sources, through which I feel you will detect the answer that I will suggest at the end.

### 1. Maimonides

Maimonides wrote many brilliant works, including his Mishneh Torah and his Sefer Hamitzvos. Both works elucidate the Torah’s commands. However, when comparing his words in both works addressing the mitzvah of “Loving God,” we find a major discrepancy. In the Sefer Hamitzvos, Maimonides teaches the path to loving God is through Torah study. But in his Mishneh Torah, he says the path to loving God is through studying the universe. How do we explain this conflict? We also wonder why he wrote both works, if they cover the same topic.

Why does Maimonides derive Love and Fear of God from King David’s words? “When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers”...“what is man that You should be mindful of him (Psalms 8:4)?” What lesson may be learned from Maimonides’ selection of this specific verse as the source that identifies the love and fear of God? [1]

His Sefer Hamitzvos is a listing and elucidation of the 613 mitzvos. In contrast, the Mishneh Torah goes beyond this, as we find “Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah” and “Laws on Personality Traits”, two categories outside the sphere of God’s formalized 613 commands. In his Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah, Maimonides discusses a unique categorization of topics; not Torah “laws” as we might think. So we wonder what is Maimonides’ intent in his Mishne Torah. Maimonides commences this section with God’s unique existence as independent (eternal) in contrast to all else that is dependent existence. That is, all created things required God’s will to come into existence. But creation also requires God’s will that it might continue to exist. That is, “creation” alone does not endow any entity with permanence; it’s duration too requires God’s will. (That alone deserves a few moments to fully appreciate.)

(CONT. ON PAGE 9)

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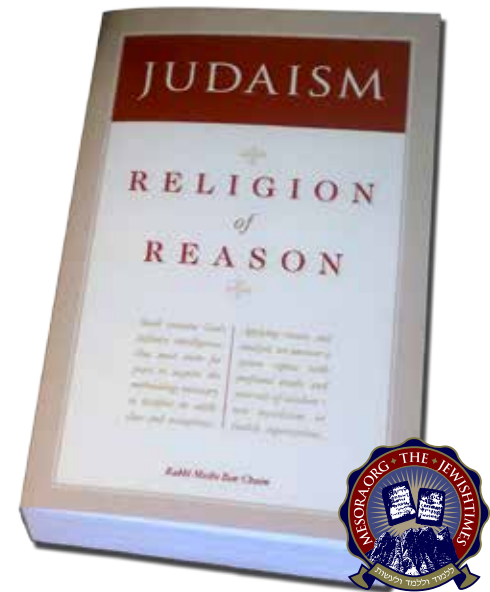


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Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



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Maimonides teaches that God alone must exist, and if He did not (were that possible) all else would suddenly cease existing. Conversely, all else need not exist, nor does it affect God at all if all else were to cease to exist.

In law 1:6 concerning the knowledge of God's role as the sole cause and only "true" existence, Maimonides says this is a positive command. We wonder: why didn't Maimonides discuss the "command" element at the very outset?

Maimonides continues...he teaches that God is not physical, and therefore all physical conditions and affects cannot apply to God. This includes God having no parts, location, He does not change, become tired, He does not eat or possess emotion. Maimonides describes the categories of all existences, from man to the stars, spheres and the angels, and elaborates on them.

Finally, what connects all these topics placed in Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah, i.e. God's existence, creation, metaphysics, angels, sanctifying God's name, not profaning God's name, prophecy, false prophets, revelation at Mount Sinai, the unchanging status of Torah and the prohibition to change it at all? What consideration demanded this compilation of topics?

## 2. Talmud

Another source directs us towards the answer. Talmud Sanhedrin states:

Rabbi Judah said, "Adam the First was commanded only against idolatry." Rabbi Judah ben-Besayra said, "Adam was also commanded against cursing God." Others say Adam was also commanded on setting up courts. With which opinion is this in accord? Rabbi Judah said in Rav's name, "God said to Adam, 'I am God,'" thereby teaching not to curse Me; "God said to Adam, 'I am God,'" thereby teaching do not exchange Me with another god; "God said to Adam, 'I am God,'" thereby teaching My fear shall be upon you (Talmud Sanhedrin 56b)."

Our interest is piqued as Adam was not

commanded on the 613 commands. Furthermore, the Talmud teaches a fundamental that can easily be overlooked. This fundamental is that through one phrase "I am God", God intimated to Adam a few other commands. But why intimate, instead of clearly stating each command outright?

Also, Talmud Niddah 30b teaches, "The embryo is taught all of Torah, and at birth, and angel smites its lip and he forgets it." What does this metaphor explain?

## 3. The Two Tablets

As we once discussed, the original two Tablets, the Luchos, were formed naturally, including their letters. Maimonides derives this from the Torah's verse:

"And the tables were the work of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16), that is to say, they were the product of nature, not of art: for all natural things are called "the work of the Lord." "And the writing was the writing of God (ibid)." [2]

Of what dire import was it that the first Tablets be "naturally" formed; not Moses' carpentry as in the second Tablets?

## 4. Torah

Torah starts with Genesis and the stories of the Patriarchs and matriarchs. Why not simply start with the first command?

Rashi's commentary on Gen. 24:42: "Rabbi Acha said, 'More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah (commands) of their children, as we find Eliezer's account (describing his encounter with Rebecca) doubled in the Torah, while many of the central commands of the Torah are only given by way of hints.'"

What lesson does this comparison teach?

## God's Original Plan

Why did God give Adam only one command, and Noah only seven? Why not give them the entire Torah?

The answer: because it was unnecessary. God's work is perfect; He created Adam with all that he required so as to live as God intended. Meaning, with intelligence alone, man is capable of deriving truths through independent thought. This is God's will, and His preferred state for man.

Here is the point: Functioning by design and not coercion (i.e., commands) is the most pleasing and perfected existence for us, and God wants man to live in the most pleasing state. When our minds grasp a truth through studying the natural world (as opposed to Torah study) this truth registers as something rooted in our experience...in reality. It impacts and impresses us most deeply. This realization in-turn propels one to non-conflicted action. We are most happy when we act in accord with what we see as real and true. Conversely,

coerced Torah adherence carries some conflict. The Rabbis say God held Sinai over our heads to threaten our Torah acceptance.

Nonetheless, man did require at least one command, for there is one idea that cannot be grasped through observing nature: human obedience to God. This relationship of God as Master and man as servant requires communication. Therefore, the Talmud teaches that God gave Adam one law: idolatry. From there, the Talmud teaches that man

can derive other lessons: "God said to Adam, 'I am God,'" thereby teaching not to curse Me; "God said to Adam, 'I am God,'" thereby teaching do not exchange Me with another god; "God said to Adam, 'I am God,'" thereby teaching My fear shall be upon you."

The Talmud is explaining how Adam, through his very design, was equipped to derive all other truths, from one simple command.

**Why did God give Adam only one command, and Noah only seven? Why not give them the entire Torah?**

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## Maimonides' Message

This explains why in his Mishne Torah Maimonides says that love of God is attained through studying the natural world, and not through the Torah. For with his Mishne Torah, specifically in this opening section of the Fundamentals of Torah, Maimonides is presenting the most primary truths. These truths are prior to Torah, from which Torah was formulated. That is why they are called "fundamentals of Torah"...the prior building blocks from which God created the Torah system.

Maimonides' Mishne Torah differs greatly from his Sefer Hamitzvos. The latter addresses the Torah system and mitzvos alone. But with his Mishne Torah, Maimonides describes "reality" – topics more inclusive than Torah commands. He addresses God's existence, angels, prophecy, the heavens, and our relationship to God based on these truths. Our understanding of these topics are prerequisites for following Torah commands. We must know God's role as Creator and sustainer of all else. We must know that although quite lofty, the heavens and angels too are creations, not existences worthy of deification as previous sinful generations blindly believed. We must know that God relates to man, this is "prophecy." We must know that our role is obedience, so we must sanctify God and respect His name and fame. Once we know all this, then we are ready to move to the next step, and that is understanding our personalities and gaining control over our tendencies and passions. Thus, the laws of Personality Traits follow.

We see, Maimonides' Mishne Torah encompasses much more than a list of commands. He is preparing us for life. In doing so, he cleverly teaches us that man possesses a design through which we can attain the best life, love of God's knowledge and awe of His creations. That's why he teaches that love of God can be learned from King David's admiration of the natural world, as opposed to citing a command. By citing King David's words — "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers" —

Maimonides presents an example of man loving God through the study of the natural world.

Maimonides avoids stating the "command" of knowing God until he first states this reality based on reason alone. Again, the command element is second, to the arrival of this truth through reason, a natural process. Interesting too, is that his treatment of Mitzvos is discussed only at the end of his Guide.

A wise Rabbi explained the metaphor of the angel in the womb. The human mind is naturally endowed with a set of innate faculties. For example, we do not need to learn to "compare," as the mind does this naturally. When a child sees a stranger, it cries as his mind compares this face to his recalled image of his mother's face. There are a number of others, like "equality:" we know when two objects are dissimilar; without ever being taught the concept of

"equal." Neither do we need to be taught about cause and effect. We can also deduce, without being taught how to deduce. All this shows that a human being innately possesses these intelligent faculties, just as he innately possesses emotions. The Rabbis taught this by saying, "an angel teaches the embryo Torah, and we forget it all at birth." Forgetting is in contrast to never having learned. For the person who learned, but then forgot, still retains pathways back to that knowledge. This is the Rabbi's message: we innately possess pathways, or rather faculties, that can uncover truths concerning God, the universe, and our roles

here. Torah was not absolutely required.

Rabbi Acha said: "More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah (commands) of their children." Again this highlights the Patriarchs' perfections. Without Torah, we are taught the degree that even their servants' mundane words expressed. Thus, man can naturally achieve perfection, without Torah. Even the first naturally-formed Tablets expressed the idea that nature offers man a revelation of the Creator's hand at work. What an amazing sight that would have been to see...sapphire Tablets with God's words naturally formed inside its grain.

When we study creation, we are examining existence. In contrast, when we study Torah, although still witnessing God's brilliance...we are not relating to "existence." Moses very question to God, "show me Your honor" was his attempt to understand God's very existence. Evidently,

"existence" in Moses' eyes was something most central. Additionally, when we are studying creation by using our minds alone, we engage the process of thought greater than when relying on Torah's shortcuts (commands). The many great thinkers from Abraham to Aristotle and Einstein, reveal the raw human potential.

Torah starts with the genesis of the

universe for this very reason. Naturally, man was well-equipped to study the universe, as we read of Adam accurately naming (defining) the animals. Torah is not a history book, and as Rabbi Isaac said, it could have started with the first command. But we require fundamentals before we can accept

**Functioning by design and not coercion (i.e., commands) is the most pleasing and perfected existence for us, and God wants man to live in the most pleasing state. When our minds grasp a truth through studying the natural world (as opposed to Torah study) this truth registers as something rooted in our experience...in reality. It impacts and impresses us most deeply. This realization in-turn propels one to non-conflicted action.**

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and follow Torah. Maimonides codified these fundamentals. We now understand the distinction between his Sefer Hamitzvos and his Mishne Torah.

Over the years, man corrupted himself. Many Torah laws were invented to combat these corruptions, like not following superstitions or the ways of the Canaanites and Egyptians. Laws and holidays were invented to recall God's kindness, like Passover and Succos. Tefillin recall the first born deaths during

God's salvation. So the Torah as we have it today, the 613, could not have been given to Adam. Later generations backslid, and God in His kindness formulated a Torah system to help mankind remain on track. Adam was quite capable of using his mind to arrive at those laws independent of man's deviation. He, his sons, Noah and Abraham sacrificed to God, as they fully understood man's relationship to his Maker. Prayer was expressed by our

Patriarchs, without any command. They used their minds to grasp God, His ways, and His will for man. Prophecy was God's means of communicating with man, and prayer was man's means of communicating with God.

Torah and Mitzvos do not target a new plan, but remain true to the original plan, like first fruit offerings that compel us to recognize the Creator of our bounty, as do tithes. Again, we see Abraham gave tithes without a Torah, displaying how the human mind can arrive at truths and morality independent of the Torah. This was God's initial plan. The greatest mitzvah is education, and we learned that Abraham taught tens of thousands. Kindness and justice was also exemplified by Abraham's wars against the kings, and God said of Abraham that He will reveal greater justice by teaching Abraham of Sodom's justice so Abraham could teach God's ways as he always did. This means Abraham understood God's ways, without a Torah. As we study the Patriarchs, as is God's will, we will arrive at even more examples supporting the Rabbis who metaphorically taught that "Abraham observed the entire Torah[3]." This means that Abraham was able to arrive at the same truths God later

taught in a formal communication to mankind.

The Rabbis teach that ultimately, in the days of the messiah, man will return to the state of Adam where we naturally are attached to God and wisdom. But this is only the general rule. Anyone today can engage his or her mind and become an Abraham. We each have this capacity, as we are now. It only takes the conviction that God will provide, and the trust He will do so, and then we can release our attachment to the "calculations sought by the masses"[4] (prioritizing wealth) and minimize our work so as to maximize our Torah study[5]. Doing so, we will arrive at the greatest fulfillment through realizing God's wisdom. ■

[1] Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah 2:2

[2] Guide for the Perplexed, book I, chap. LXVI

[3] Talmud Kiddushin 82a, mishna

[4] Hilchos Shmitta v'Yovale 13:13

[5] Ethics 4:12



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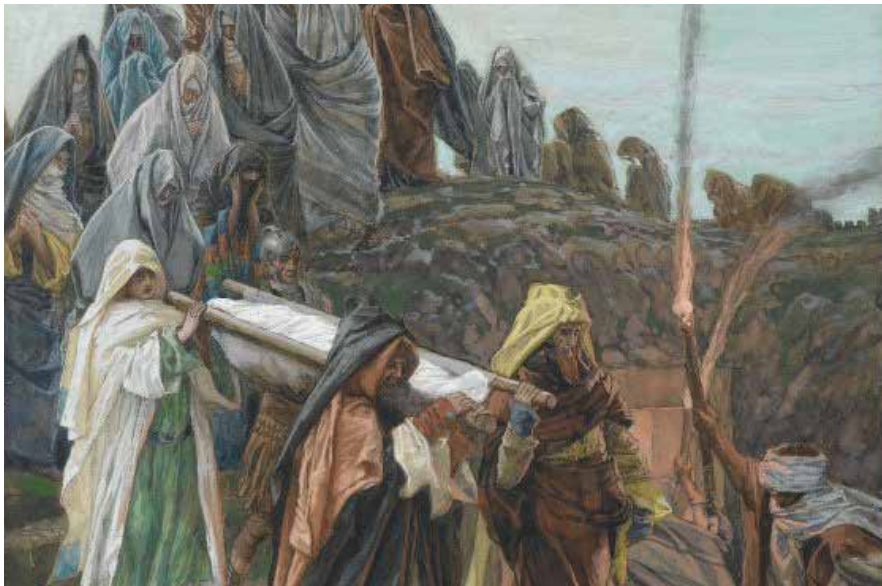
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# Don't Take it Personally

## THE JEWISH NATION

Rabbi Reuven Mann



**T**his week's parsha, Beshalach, describes the extrication of the Jews from the land of Egypt. This must have been a time of great exhilaration and excitement, as well as nervous anticipation about what awaited them in the vast wilderness they were about to enter.

In the midst of these momentous events, the Torah mentions that Moshe took Yosef's bones with him, for Yosef had foresworn the Jews that, "when Hashem takes you up from Egypt, you shall take my bones with you." Rashi points out that the other brothers imposed a similar oath, and that when the Jews left, they fulfilled that promise as well.

The true greatness of Moshe's leadership can be seen from this seemingly trivial action. Most leaders would be too busy with vital national matters to focus on a detail concerning the reinterring of bones. Yet, for Moshe, the moral dimension of his role was the most significant. He tended to this matter himself to teach the nation the lessons of hakarat hatov (appreciation of the good; gratitude) and faithfulness to one's word.

At first glance, the question arises: how could Moshe and his contemporaries be bound by a vow they had not personally taken, and that had been administered

many years before they were born?

I believe the answer lies in the fact that there are two kinds of oaths, personal and national. Judaism is not just a personal religion. It is the foundation of a unique nation established by the Creator to bear His message to mankind. Thus, an integral requirement of Judaism is to be an active and committed citizen of the Jewish people.

This is a highly significant concept. One cannot separate himself from the community. The Rambam says that one who breaks his connection to the Jewish people, in the sense that he has nothing to do with them and is unconcerned with their fate, but regards himself as an American or Frenchman (for example), has no share in the World to Come. This is true, even if he believes in the Torah and scrupulously observes the mitzvot. Even if he does not commit any sins, his alienation from the Jewish family is fatal.

One cannot treat Judaism as a religion designed for one's personal spiritual fulfillment. To do so is to deny a fundamental element of the Divine Will, that there should be a special "chosen" nation that is the repository of the unique way of life that mankind was created to experience.

This explains the significance of praying with a minyan and why all our prayers are

formulated in the plural. Every group of 10 Jewish men constitutes a representation of the Jewish nation. There are, of course, times when we do not have access to a minyan and must pray by ourselves. However, the superiority of joining with a minyan is that G-d "always hears" the congregation's prayers because His "eyes" are constantly on the affairs of His people.

In formulating our prayers, we do not use the word "me." Rather, we say "heal us" or "redeem us," or "hear our voice." The key word in all our petitions is "us" or "our." We are not asking for special attention from the Creator because of petty personal concerns. Rather, we beseech G-d to assist us insofar as we are part of the collective whose mission we share. It is the merit of the nation He has fashioned that we rely on in making our personal requests.

We can now understand why Moshe was bound to honor the oath that Yosef had administered to his forebears. National responsibilities are transferred from one generation to the next and are binding on future members, no less than on contemporaries. An honorable country will adhere to the terms of treaties that were made hundreds of years ago.

So, too, with regard to sacred oaths. Yosef did not foreswear his brothers as individuals, but as representatives of the Jewish people. The vow became binding on the Jewish nation and was transmitted all the way to the generation of the Exodus, when it became due. Moshe realized how vital it was to honor this commitment and, in doing so, to demonstrate that Judaism is not a personal religion, but a national identity. Our obligation to keep the Torah is based on the fact that we are all foresworn from Mount Sinai. The entire nation entered into a covenant with the Creator that is binding on all future generations of Jews.

As the leader, Moshe took personal responsibility for this matter to teach the people a lesson in hakarat hatov. He wanted to perform this great kindness to Yosef himself. As the ruler of Egypt, he was the instrument through which the family of Yaakov moved there and developed into a nation. Through his burial request, Yosef wanted to show that, although he was exiled to a foreign land, he never abandoned his connection to the Jewish people and his association with their fate. He wanted to be interred in the land of the nation he had played such a fundamental role in establishing.

Moshe thus demonstrated that recognition of and gratitude for those who are vital pillars of the Jewish people is a sacred religious obligation. Let us strive to emulate his example. Shabbat shalom. ■

# Abraham & the Angels

## DECIPHERING GOD'S MESSAGE

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

**O**ne must repeatedly revisit Torah portions to uncover God's numerous lessons. What catches our attention during our first few reads of a given area, often obscures other questions and insights. However, if we follow the halacha of reading each weekly portion twice yearly, and we are fortunate, new questions arise leading to new discoveries. I will address this account of Abraham and the angels following God's words that all prophets excluding Moses received prophecy only while unconscious.[1]



Three angels visit Abraham. We read five times how fast Abraham “ran” and “hurried” to prepare a meal for these guests, described as men. What is God's intent in, 1) giving a vision to Abraham that highlights Abraham's kindness to people, and 2) repeating how fast Abraham served them? Since God ultimately discusses directly with Abraham the justice of Sodom, of what purpose is this vision of the three men?

Only one angel appears required for this vision, since only its news of Isaac's forthcoming birth was announced. The other two angels were silent the entire visit and could have initially “arrived”[2] at Sodom. The Rabbis teach that the other two angels had the respective missions of destroying Sodom and saving Lote. This being the case, there was no need for them to accompany the angel assigned with the mission of the birth announcement. What then was the purpose of the two remaining angels visiting Abraham?

One angel asked Abraham, “Where is Sarah your wife?” We would assume this was intended to call her to share the news. But this did not occur. As Abraham responded, “She is in the tent”, the angel then announced only to Abraham the news of Isaac. Why then did the angel inquire of Sarah's whereabouts? It appears inconsequential. The Torah then tells us that Sarah “in fact” heard, as she was behind the angels. She rejected her ability to become pregnant at ninety years old. God then ridicules Sarah addressing Abraham, “Is anything impossible for God?” As Abraham was alone in communion with God, what purpose was served by God including Sarah's words in this created vision? (Although this was Abraham's vision, God accurately depicts Sarah's true feelings, which no doubt, Abraham discussed with Sarah in his waking state subsequent to this prophecy. For she too would be instrumental in transmitting God's justice. Alternatively, Sarah might have very well participated in this prophecy; similar to when God gave a joint prophecy to Miriam, Aaron and Moses [Num. 12:4].)

This is followed by the angels “gazing at Sodom”, but not yet leaving. Their departure is suddenly interrupted with God's consideration:

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



*"Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do? And Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God, performing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken. And God said [to Abraham], 'The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, I know' (Gen. 18:17-21)."*

Following God's words, we read in the very next verse (ibid 18:22) that the angels then left to Sodom. Again, the angels gazing towards Sodom should be immediately followed by their leaving. What is the meaning behind God's words above interrupting the angels' departure? And what is God's message here?

### ABRAHAM'S CONCERN FOR MAN

Why the emphasis of Abraham "running" and "hurrying" the meal preparations? Abraham was having a vision, and to him, he was relating to men, not angels, as the verses state. Abraham had a keen sense of kindness, and wished to give honor to his fellow man. One can serve others, but if he runs to serve them, this expresses the height of honoring others, as we see regarding Rivka "running" to draw water for Eliezer's camels (Gen. 24:20). One feels more appreciated when another person runs to assist them, and does not merely walk. Abraham wanted to make the three men feel as appreciated as possible. Abraham prized human dignity, and thought little of himself. Typically, a leader seeks honor. But the perfected leader views all others as equals, and even forgoes personal rights and feelings to accommodate others. But why was this part of the vision God created? How is this related to Abraham learning God's justice?

Men such as Abraham, who are genuinely concerned for his fellow, and who teach others God's ways of "charity and justice" (Gen. 18:19) will be the recipient of greater knowledge in this area. God therefore teaches Abraham not only His ways, but also, that man (Abraham) earns this knowledge due to his acts of kindness to his fellow. Thus, Abraham sees himself showing kindness to the three men, and this is followed by God's dialogue on Sodom's justice. God says in other words, "Abraham, due to your kindness, justice and concern for mankind, I am sharing more knowledge with you on how My true kindness and justice operate."



### ANGELS

Angels are not omniscient; they are God's metaphysical agents to perform events on Earth. As King David said, "He makes His angels winds; His ministers [He makes as] blazing flames (Psalms 104:4)." Each angel controls a particular sphere within natural law, and nothing outside that law. As Rashi taught, "...one angel does not perform two missions (Gen. 18:2)." We also read, "And the angel of God that went before the Jewish camp traveled, and it went behind them; and the pillar of cloud that went before them traveled and stood behind them (Exod. 14:19)." There is no redundancy. This verse teaches a fundamental: there are two entities: 1) the metaphysical angel, and 2) the physical entity (here, a cloud) over which God places the angel as a supervisor. God controls nature through an angel, charging the angel over a specific sphere of governance; here, commanding the specific task of physical relocation to the cloud to protect the Jews from the approaching Egyptian army. Thus, angels themselves are not physical, but they control physical phenomena. This explains why this verse describes the angel traveling,

and then again, the cloud traveling. We are taught that the angel controls the cloud. And angels only control the sphere of laws determined by God. Thus, the angel did not know where Sarah was and needed to ask, since this knowledge was outside its specific sphere of control.

The angel did not intend to share the birth announcement with Sarah. It is my opinion that it was ascertaining that Sarah was not in earshot of this announcement. The angel's inquiry "Where is Sarah your wife?" is understood as ensuring she did not hear the birth announcement. Why? I believe this teaches another lesson about God's justice. For it was Abraham who taught monotheism and God's justice to his children and mankind (Gen. 18:18). Therefore, the news of Isaac's birth — the son who would continue Abraham's legacy — related primarily to Abraham, and not Sarah.

### THE VISION

This entire vision dealt with God's justice. Justice is not merely the destruction of evildoers. A primary aspect of God's justice is educating man about His ways. Therefore, the two other angels, although silent the entire time, came along with the announcing angel to convey a relationship between all three angels. Isaac's birth was vital to continue Abraham's teachings, and the destruction of Sodom and Lote's salvation comprise important lessons on God's justice, the very substance of Abraham's teachings. Thus, all three angels carried messages of sorts for Abraham.

### THE INTERRUPTION: GOD'S DIALOGUE WITH ABRAHAM

God's will is to teach man. The angels were about to leave to Sodom, but not quite yet. First, God shares with Abraham a clue to greater knowledge of God's justice. This knowledge would have been "hidden" from mankind — "Hamichaseh ani may'Avraham (Gen. 18:17)" — had God not suggested to Abraham that although exceedingly great in sin, Sodom might be salvaged if certain conditions were met. (God knew



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there were not 10 righteous people, and therefore the angels proceeded to destroy Sodom, prior to Abraham's dialogue with God.) But the message of the angels not departing to Sodom until God commenced a dialogue with Abraham, indicates that the angel's mission of destruction played a great role in Abraham's knowledge of God's justice. So we can read the verses as follows: God is about to destroy Sodom (the angels gaze at Sodom) but God first shares knowledge of His justice before doing so. Once this dialogue ensues, the destruction can take place, and Abraham will attain greater knowledge. Again, God's dialogue is inserted between the angels' gaze towards Sodom and their departure for Sodom, conveying a relationship between Sodom's destruction and Abraham learning God's justice.

#### SARAH

What purpose did Sarah serve in this vision? The Torah makes it clear that Sarah viewed natural law as absolute, "After I have aged, will I truly give birth (Gen. 18:14)?" Thus, God's response, "Is anything too wondrous for God (Gen. 18:14)?" The lesson to Abraham by God's inclusion of this scenario within the vision is this: knowledge of God's justice must include the idea that God's justice is absolute. Nothing, not even nature overrides God's justice. This is expressed throughout Torah in the many miracles God performed to benefit righteous people. As God was teaching Abraham new insights into His justice, this lesson was of critical value.

#### SUMMARY

God gives Abraham a vision intended to further educate him on His ways, and for him to teach his son Isaac and the world. But God only does so, since Abraham was perfected in his concern for man. Abraham is taught through the vision that this concern is what earned him new insights from God. The other two angels visiting Abraham, and the interruption of the angels' departure by God's dialogue, teaches that man's knowledge of God's justice is a primary purpose in His meting out of justice. Thus, the angels did not leave to destroy Sodom until Abraham was engaged in learning a new insight into God's justice in this destruction. Abraham also learns that God's justice is absolute, expressed in God's rebuke of Sarah.

#### ADDENDUM

Although it is suggested that Abraham was pleading with God for the salvation of Sodom, the verses do not suggest this. I say this due to the absence of Abraham mentioning "selicha" or "mechila." It is my opinion that Abraham accepted God's decree, and was inquiring for his edification, what exactly are God's measures of justice. In contrast, Moses poses arguments to God that once He selected the Jewish nation, favored by His salvation, annihilation of the Jews would cast shame on God. This was not the case regarding Sodom. ■

[1] "...If there will be prophets of God; in a vision to him I will make Myself known; in a dream I will speak to him. Not so is it with My servant Moses; in all My house he is trusted. Face to face I speak with him and in vision and not with riddles; and the form of God he beholds... (Num. 12:6-8)."

[2] I say "arrived", but in no manner do I suggest that angels are an earthly phenomenon. Rather, as I elaborated within this essay, that the two other angels could have "addressed" God's will for Sodom without connection with the announcing angel. (Simialrly, the angels of God addressed God's will that the pillar of cloud relocate behind the Jews. But angels are not on Earth; only the cloud is. See Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, book II, end of chapter 6.)



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# On the Oneness of God

## WHAT THIS MEANS

Rabbi Israel Chait

**“Hear  
O Israel,  
the Lord  
is our God,  
the Lord  
is One.”**

**T**his statement is the most profound and concise metaphysical statement ever made. In one phrase, “the Lord is one,” the metaphysical idea of God is fully captured. When we say God is one, we mean it as Maimonides states: one in every way. This means that He is not physical since anything physical can be divided into parts. Even the most primary particle of nature is not one since it is a component of a greater whole. It is not one, since it needs something else. True oneness needs nothing and is complete in and of itself.

But what of non-physical entities such as angels? These too cannot be described as one since they are created. To the human mind anything created consists of the thing and its existence. We say e.g. the universe came into existence. There is the universe and its existence. God did not come into existence. His existence is intrinsic. [The question of where God came from is therefore nonsensical] We also mean He is the only one, for if there were another, He would be two.

Thus, the phrase “God is one” teaches us:

- A] That God is not physical
- B] That He has no parts
- C] That He is not a part
- D] That He is not created, i.e. He is eternal intrinsic existence

E] That there is none other beside Him. The full statement also teaches that He is our God; we recognize him by choice. He is the God of Israel; His providence relates to us in a special way. This is the unique credo of the Jew.

Post script to C: Lest one get caught up in the confusing notion that one electron or quark can exist in and of itself, let me add some clarification. Any physical existence has a function, or else it would not exist in the universe. An electron for instance has a charge, which gives it its function within the atom. There exists therefore the electron, and its charge. There again it is two. Moreover, every physical entity exists in time space. It is contingent on time space as the backdrop of its existence. Ergo: It is not one. ■

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