



JewishTimes

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AN OPEN LETTER TO JEWS AND GENTILES

One God One Man One Religion

**DECIPHERING
THE CLUES**

God's "Voice"
in the Garden
of Eden

**THE SHAVUOS
HOLIDAY**

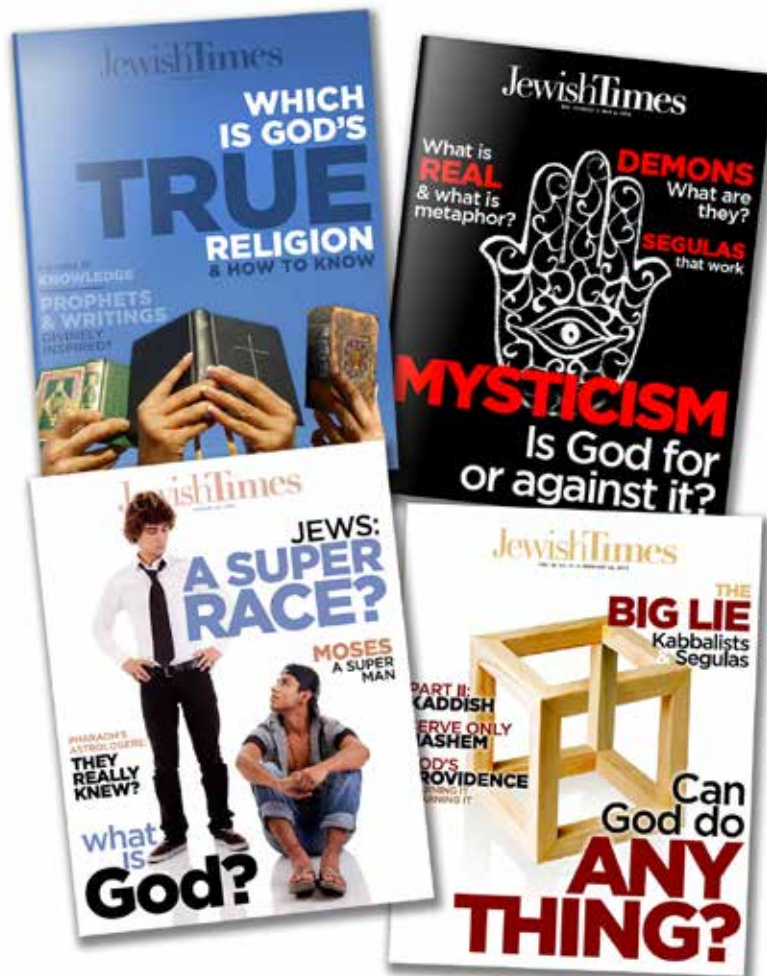
Were We
Coerced
at Sinai?

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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Truth & Kindness

Reader: Yes, orthodox life is the highest form of practice. But being truthful and kind to others as well is important and is not exclusive to Orthodox life. In many ways, Orthodox life excludes that, sadly.

Rabbi: We must be both: orthodox, and truthful and kind. And know, that these are ALL part of orthodoxy. But kindness without God's definition of what is truly kind, leads one away from truth. Thus, doctors attempting to be kind, treated Arafat when he was ill. Torah says not to assist those who murder children. But without Torah's direction, peoples' misguided attempts at kindness will lead to healing murderers and other atrocities. But those among the orthodox who you feel exclude truth and kindness, are not acting in accord with Torah. ■



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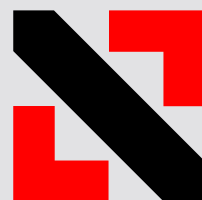
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SHAVUOS

Were We Coerced?

REVELATION AT SINAI

Rabbi Reuven Mann

An Aggadic teaching of the Talmud asserts that the Jews only accepted the Torah because they were coerced. This idea derives from the verse in Exodus describing the Revelation: "They stood at the base of the mountain." Rav Avdimi said it teaches that G-d turned the mountain over them like a vat and told them, "If you accept the Torah, fine, but if not, this will be your burial place."

This explanation lends itself to many questions. First and foremost, why would G-d do this, and what is the benefit of an agreement secured through the fear of destruction? Another Midrash says that G-d offered the Torah to various nations, but each rejected it because of its prohibitions. Well, why didn't He use the pressure of dire consequences to secure their agreement?

The Jews, by contrast, are praised for willingly consenting to receive Hashem's Torah. More problematically, the Aggadic teaching cited above contradicts the scriptural account of the "negotiations" that preceded the Revelation at Sinai, with Moshe acting as mediator.

At Hashem's instruction, Moshe conveyed G-d's message, the essence of which was "and now, if you earnestly hearken to my voice and observe my covenant, you will be my most treasured nation, for the entire Earth is Mine." Upon hearing this "offer," the "entire people responded as one, and said, 'Everything Hashem spoke, we will do.'" Moshe

reported this response to G-d, who proceeded to reveal the Aseret HaDibrot (10 Commandments) on Mount Sinai.

There is no hint of threat or coercion in G-d's communication with the Jews.

Hashem stressed the great benefit that would ensue from commitment to the covenant. The Jews would, by accepting the Torah, become a holy nation and G-d's special treasure.

This seems to be an offer one couldn't refuse. And it doesn't seem that there was any dissent among the people. They were all united in their enthusiastic positive response. That is why the Jews are favorably contrasted with the other nations that could only find fault with the Torah's restrictions and rejected it.

The Rabbi who formulated the Aggada about the mountain turned over them certainly knew the scriptural account. How could he maintain that the people complied only out of fear of death?

There is no doubt in my mind that the Aggada is not meant to be taken literally, but to convey a subtle message. Humans are complex beings with many levels of thought and intention. We are also capable of ambivalence. Sometimes we are caught in a dilemma when our mind tells us one thing, but our emotions are completely out of sync with what we "know" to be true.



The Jews' positive attitude is described in the Torah and must be taken at the literal level. Hashem's invitation to become His nation resonated with the people. It was very appealing, and they freely accepted it. On the conscious level, they agreed to receive the Torah willingly, happily.

However, the Aggada is pointing out that their emotions were not entirely in line with their reason. There was psychological resistance to being "locked in" to the system of mitzvot. These contrary feelings were so strong that, to stifle them, an element of compulsion was required. The Jews had witnessed the awesome power of G-d. The fear and reverence in which they held Hashem was a necessary factor in making the decision to become His people.

As we celebrate the anniversary of the Revelation, let us strive to gain greater understanding of Hashem's Torah. May we reach the level where our emotions are in line with Divine Wisdom, so we can serve Him with love.

Shabbat shalom and chag Shavuot sameach. ■



SHAVUOS

AN OPEN LETTER TO JEWS AND GENTILES

One God One Man One Religion

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Shavuos recounts the only time in history that God gave mankind a religion. 3327 years ago on Mount Sinai, God gave His Torah to Moses and 2.5 million of Abraham's descendants from Isaac and Jacob. The veracity of this event is not doubted by Christianity or Islam, and this truth actually forms part of their beliefs. This is because God's Revelation at Sinai was witnessed by masses, which removes any possibility of fabrication. Masses of witnesses is the criteria that verifies any and all historical claims. Conversely, the lack of masses within any historical account – secular or religious – casts doubt on such a claim. For this reason, all religions aside from Judaism fail to prove their claim to Divine origin. No

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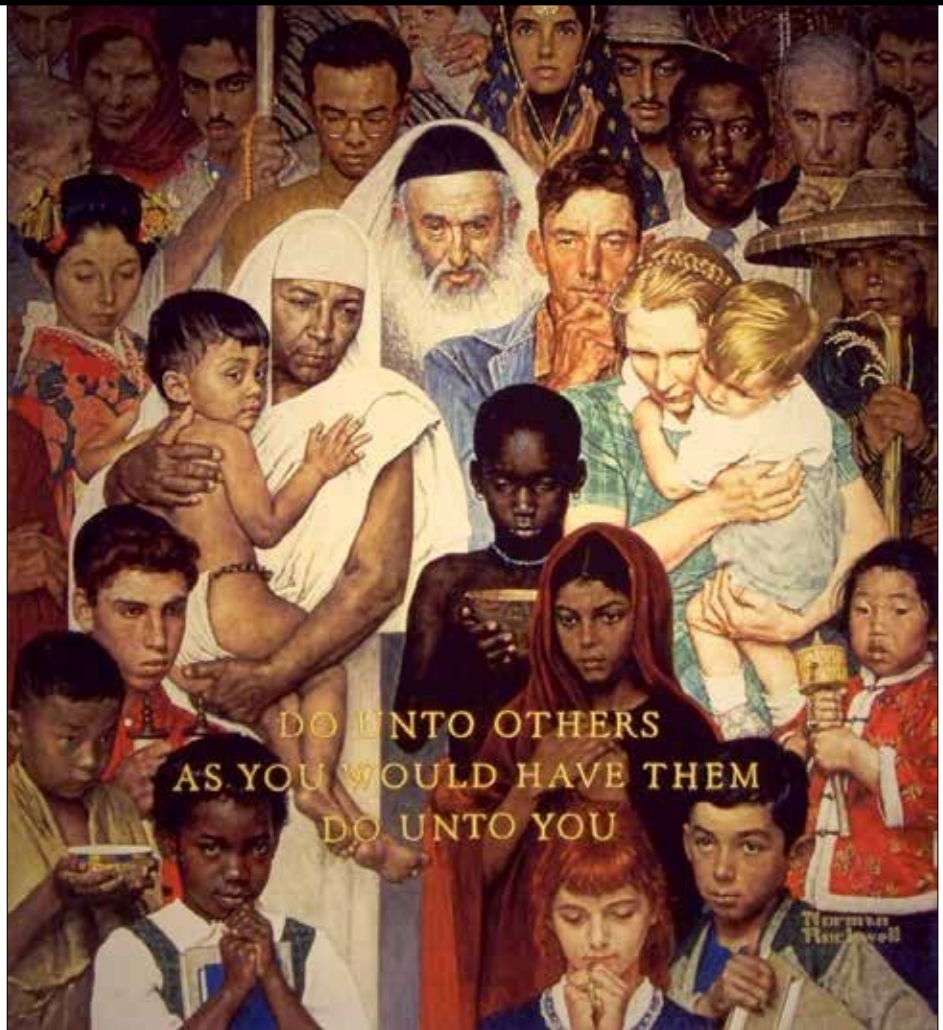
other religion claims to have received communication from God in front of mass witnesses. This explains their demand for blind faith. I understand this is difficult to accept, but the truth must be spoken, as intelligent people wish to live by truth, and not by falsehoods. The fact that all religions argue on each other, indicates that only one religion is the true religion given by God. This is not an attack on other religionists. Just the opposite: it is a genuine concern that other religionists realize their widely accepted and long-standing error. God did not give His one religion to the Jews, for it not to be shared. God desires that all people, who are equally created “in His image” enjoy the benefits of His Torah. Therefore, it is the Jews’ obligation to make the Torah and its core truths available to all peoples. The Jew is not superior, and the gentile is not inferior. Abraham and his descendants were merely those at that era who were not idolatrous, and accepted monotheism. Therefore, they were suitable as God’s emissaries to mankind.

No one takes a job without verifying the employer and the business, and not without a contract. No one subjects himself to surgery without proof that the doctor is who he says he is. Religion is no different; one is foolish to sacrifice his life, and his soul, without research and validation. Yet, sadly, many peoples do just that, merely because there are millions of others with the same unproven beliefs. However, masses of “believers”, does not equate to masses of “witnesses.” You must distinguish this in your mind. Billions of Muslims and millions of Christians who “believe” doctrines and stories, do not satisfy as proof to their historic claims. However, 2.5 million witnesses at Sinai is 100% proof.

Many religionists accept claims and beliefs without the same proof they demand for accepting secular claims. They even accept religious doctrine that conflicts with reason. But, as God gave each of us intelligence, He demands we engage it, certainly in the most vital part of life, that being our religious life. Blind faith has no place in any aspect of life: religion included.

There is one God.
There is one mankind.
There can be only one religion.

Doctors do not treat identical diseases differently, regardless of the patients being Asian or Christian. Hindus and Jews both desire happiness. And Eskimos and Indians



both cry when loved ones die. Across all peoples and cultures, we witness only one design of the human species. Variations in height, hair and skin color, accent, language and other traits do not affect the identical psychological and intelligent makeup our Creator gave each one of us.

Killing those who oppose your beliefs does not strengthen a religious position, but weakens it. For if your religion is God’s true religion, proving it through intelligent arguments is the only validation. It is those throughout time who fail to possess such a proof, who succumb to killing other religionists to destroy opposition. But this fails to validate their own views. No religion aside from Judaism possesses proof of Divine origin. Therefore, many resort to murdering opposers, and anti-Semitism.

It is the recognition of one’s false religion and the proven truth of Judaism that arouses anti-Semitism. One must realize, the Jew committed no crime that deserves the

attacks, torture, and mass murders of Jews throughout time. We did nothing different than any other people. So why are we so targeted? It is the realization that the Jews received God’s favor, and not the pagan religions. Other than this, we are no different than any other people. To deny being the “unfavored child”, other religions attack the Jew. And if you suggest “occupation” in Israel as a justification for anti-Semitism, history – not the biased media – teaches there is no such thing as a “Palestinian people.” They are Arabs from Arab lands. Mark Twain – Samuel Clemens – took a tour of Palestine in 1867. This is how he described that land: “A desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given over wholly to weeds. A silent, mournful expanse. We never saw a human being on the whole route. There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.” Those calling themselves Palestinians did not originate in Israel. Additionally, anti-Semitism predates the Palestinian claim.



**Mt. Sinai ablaze as the Jews
received the Torah from God**

Anti-Semitism is clearly a response by other religionists to deny God's selection of Abraham's descendants as the beacon to the world. Had this event at Sinai not been clearly proven, other religionists would not care what claims we Jews make. Other peoples make many claims, and yet, the world is not up in arms against them. But the "truth hurts," that is, if the world feels the Jew claims superiority through receiving God's Torah. However this is not the case. If the Jew is haughty, and feels he is superior, that is a grave sin, for God created all men and women perfectly equal. Our only difference is that the Jew must fulfill God's command to share His only religion: the Torah. And this is not through coercion or proselytization. Whom-ever wishes to learn, we must teach. He who does not wish to learn, is free to live his or her life as they so choose. Gentiles who wish to follow Torah become beloved by God. And a Jew who rebels, is hated by God. Jews are not superior, unlike many Jewish extremists preach. Gentiles are not inferior...God says otherwise in His Torah. We all descend from one first couple. We are all identical. We all possess the same potential. And God gave us a means to reach that potential with one religion, for the one humankind He created. All claims by other religions to Divine origin are without proof. But Revelation at Sinai is proven.

There is just one human design. Multiple religions are as much an error as multiple treatments for the identical disease.

If the Jew fails to make these truths available, he does his fellow human beings the worst injustice.

Shavuos celebrates the most monumental truth: God gave a religion to mankind only once. He did so in a manner that would stand the test of time, and that was by creating that miraculous event in front of 2.5 million people. Such a story would not today exist as the sole history of the Jew at that time, had this event been fabricated. Has this event never happened, we would at the least, possess today, an alternate history of the Jew. Yet, not only the Jew, but the Muslim and Christian accept Revelation at Sinai as historically true as Alexander, Caesar, Egypt, and other mass witnessed events and cultures. And as God commands in His Torah, let us not add or subtract to His one religion, by fabricating other religions.

I end by asking my fellow Jews to cease from preaching a false superior attitude. But rather, make God's Torah available to all others as is His will, and do not cower from defending the Torah's intelligence and proofs.

And to gentiles, I urge you to carefully and honestly examine your beliefs: are you accepting them due to any proof or reason, or because masses also share your beliefs? Do you feel if masses do something, it validates those beliefs? Or, must a belief be proven on its own merit? If you feel masses are a validation, you must join a religion with more followers than yours. But as it would be foolish to join another religion merely based on the number of their followers, you should also not follow your current religion based on numbers. And do not be impressed by the history or libraries of books dedicated to any religion. For many falsehoods have been put into ink over the millennia.

Rather, act as you do in all other areas of your life, and engage your intelligence that God gave you, and using your mind, determine what events truly happened in history, which religion God truly gave, and uncover what stories are without mass witnesses. Do not follow the numbers of believers, but the numbers of witnesses at the historical event. And if there were no recorded masses at historically claimed events, or the records have conflicting versions, you have no basis to accept them as true. Buy you do have proof that God gave the Torah to the Jewish nation, for the purpose of sharing it with the world. It is difficult to leave a religion that your entire family and numerous friends cherish. But you live once. The moment is now to focus on the reality that you were created for a reason. Each one of you are alive by God's will. Each one of you possess the amazing and unparalleled tool called intelligence. God wants you to use this tool. So begin your journey now. Explore the claims of the various religions, and determine using reason, which religion provides you proof of Divine origin, and which do not.

May the day arrive soon as the prophet says, that all people will recognize God's one religion, and the one God. ■

I invite any reader interested in pursuing this topic to write me at: rabbi@mesora.org

—Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

METHOD

The Sound of God Traveling in the Garden

HOW GOD TEACHES US

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

"...and she took of its fruit and ate, and also fed her husband with her and he ate. And the two of them, their eyes opened and they understood they were naked and they seamed fig leaves and made for themselves garments. And they heard the voice of God traveling in the garden at the wind of the day, and they hid, man and his wife, because of God was in the midst of the trees of the garden. And God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And man said, "I heard Your voice in the garden and I was afraid, for I am naked and so I hid." And [God] said, "Who told you you are naked; have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat?" And the man said, "The woman you have given with me, she gave me from the tree and I ate." And God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The snake caused me to err and I ate (Gen. 3:6-13)."

God then punished the snake, then the woman, and then man. However, my focus is on the verses above: what occurred prior to the punishments. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve "heard God's voice moving in the Garden" ...and they heard this "at the wind of the day (Gen. 3:8)." There are many questions...

1) Did they truly hear a voice? If so, what was God saying? The verse does not teach of any words or communication.

2) What is the significance of hearing God at "the wind of the day"?

3) Why repeat God was in the garden, but add "in the midst of the trees"?

4) Why is God's voice only mentioned 'after' the sin?

5) God questions Eve after Adam blames her, and God then punishes the snake when Eve blames it. Why does God seem to accept Adam's blame on Eve, then accept Eve's blame on the snake?

6) Why do they both shift the blame?



7) God does tell Cain about his inner world, that he can rule over it. Why does God not warn Adam and Eve prior to their sin?

We first learn that subsequent to the sin, the man and the woman received new knowledge, taught by the words "their eyes were opened." From the every commencement of this Torah section, metaphor is employed, as "opened eyes" truly refers to knowledge, not to the moving of one's eyelids. Thus, other metaphors may be included.

The "wind of the day" is literal, referring to the dimming of daylight, at dusk, when the winds pick up (Ibn Ezra, Gen. 3:8). But here is the lesson... During the transition of daylight to darkness, a contrast presents itself to man. This caused man to distinguish, and reflect on both parts of the day. He then reviewed his actions; man reflected on his disobedience. (Ibn Ezra says this means they repented; *ibid*) God was going to keep His word of punishment. Man recognized God would be "coming for him" in the garden. Man felt remorse, and this remorse shortly followed man's sense of nakedness. Remorse is part of the newly-born faculty of morality granted to man once he sinned. This morality is intended to offer man a secondary system of

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abstention from sin. If reason alone would not stop man from sinning, hopefully a sense of right and wrong will. Subsequent to the sin, the man and the woman received a new awareness, a conscience, which they did not possess previously. This explains why they were ashamed of their nakedness.

As the day subsided, man reflected, and with his new conscience, he then sensed his error conveyed as “hearing a voice.” Voice does not refer only to words, but also to “understanding.” Similarly at Sinai, Maimonides teaches the Jews heard no words, only a voice or a sound, based on the verse “a voice of matters you heard (Deut. 4:12)”. So, in the garden, God was not speaking, as we see no message recorded. Nor can God be located anywhere; neither in heaven, on Earth, nor “in” the garden. Hearing a voice in the garden means that man understood he violated God, Who knows all man’s actions, as if He is “in the garden,” and Who will now exact punishment.

“And they hid, man and his wife, because of God was in the midst of the trees of the garden.”

Notice in the second half of that verse, God is viewed as amidst the “trees” of the garden, not simply “in the garden” as in the first half of the verse. “Amidst the trees of the garden” conveys that God is aware of his trees, including the forbidden tree which now is missing some of its fruits.

This teaches a fundamental lesson: until they sinned, man and woman were not contemplating that they stood before God at all times. God was not “in the garden” while they sinned. Sin requires a denial of God, or that He is watching. One cannot sin if he feels he is before God. This explains why man only contemplated God ‘after’ the sin. King Solomon teaches “at all times let your garments be white (Kohes 9:8).” The king means that one should abstain from sin (stained garments) at all times. And this, Pirkei Avos teaches is achieved if we recognize that God records all. But man and woman were able to deny God’s presence, just as anyone must do today when he or she sins.

More startling, is the Torah’s method of conveying man’s mindset subsequent to sin. It is described as “God going in the garden” – a phenomenon external to man. Similarly, both man and woman blame another party when God inquired of their sin. And even

God initially follows suit, seeming to initially accept their blame by seeking a response from the accused party: man blamed woman, and God turns to her and inquires of her. The woman blames the snake, and God turns and addresses the snake. Man and woman are punished after this, but at first, God entertains their blame. These acts of blame are significant enough that God records them in His Torah. And again, God also records man subsequent to sin, as hearing “God going in the garden,” a literal phenomenon, instead of describing man’s remorse. This is compounded by God being “amidst the trees of the garden.” What is this lesson?

But even with his remorse, man does not yet repent until God calls out to him, “Where are you?” God allows man to believe he has successfully hid himself, just as God asked Cain where Abel is, and asked Bilam “Who are these men?” (The Rabbis teach God does this so as not to suddenly accuse man, which would be too stressful) And even when Adam replies, he does not confess his sin, but says he was hiding due to his nakedness. It is only after God inquires if he did eat the forbidden fruit, that man confessed to the act, and even so, he still blames the woman.

More startling, is the Torah’s method of conveying man’s mindset subsequent to sin. It is described as “God going in the garden” – a phenomenon external to man. Similarly, both man and woman blame another party when God inquired of their sin.

In contrast to man and woman where God does not warn them prior to sinning, we find God does in fact warn Cain before he murders his brother (Gen. 4:6,7). Furthermore, God informs Cain that he can rule over his desire to sin. Here, there is an identification of the part of man that sins, as separate from man himself. Was Cain – and not his parents – warned due to his young age, or due to his greater self-awareness of his internal world (instincts), or was he perhaps different in human design than his parents? I can only speculate, but my speculation is in line with an idea I heard years back...

The answer to all these questions might found in the difference in design between the first man and woman, and all subsequent people...

The idea I heard years back was that until they sinned, the instinctual drive was not an internal part of their makeup. Before the sin, it was only when man saw his wife, that he was sexually aroused. Otherwise, he was too engaged in wisdom, that his imagination would not naturally flow towards his instincts without external stimuli, as our instincts work today. Today, our imagination is strong, and is attached to our instincts from youth, as God says, “For the inclination of man’s heart is evil from youth (Gen. 8:21).” This means there was a change from Adam and Eve, to all their descendants. Adam and Eve did not possess an internalized instinctual drive. This is difficult for us to imagine, since all we know is our own makeup; our feelings have always been part of us. It is hard to grasp what we would be like if we didn’t have internal urges and a strong imagination. Yet, this appears to be the state of man prior to sin.

This would explain why after the sin man viewed the “external world” as different, as “God moving in the garden”, and not viewing himself as different...that there were now some internal workings to blame. Adam did not yet recognize this new, internal part of his nature. This explains why he blamed the woman, why she blamed the snake, and why God accepted their blame. For they had not yet grasped the change in their psychological makeup. Therefore, they only recognized the external world, and felt justified to blame something else for their sin. This is significant, so God records their blame. God also momentarily accepted their blame as they were as of yet, not ready to appreciate their new makeup. However, Cain was born with the instincts, and could understand God’s warning to control his internal urges. This is why God warns Cain, but not his parents.

Whichever explanation one accepts, we must appreciate God’s inclusion of the details of this story, the many questions, and the significance of God recording the fact that man felt “God was in the garden.” The fact the Torah does not share any words of “God’s voice”, adds support that there was in fact no voice, but that this conveys a different idea, as we stated. ■

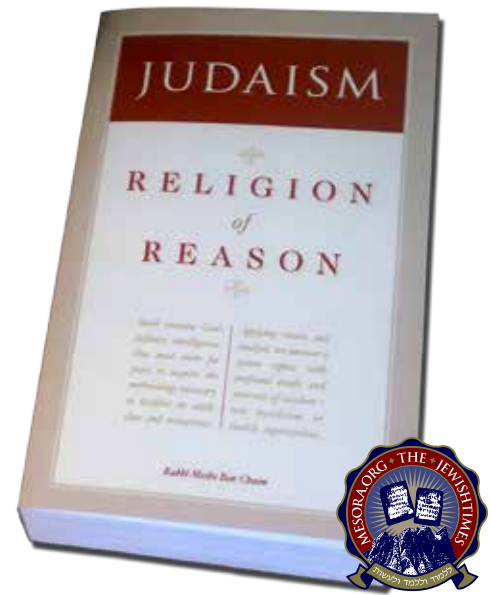
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REVIEWS



RABBI REUVEN MANN — Rabbi, Y. Israel of Phoenix

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



RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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