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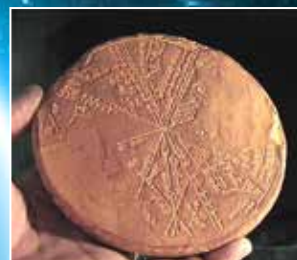
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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Angels

Rabbi: Last week I heard two questions concerning angels. The first is based on two related Talmudic sources:

Rabbi bar bar Channa said, "When I went after Rabbi Eliezer to pray for the sick, at times he prayed in Hebrew, and at times in Aramaic. But how did he do so? For we learned that Rabbi Yochanan sated, "Anyone who asks for his needs (prays) in Aramaic, the ministering angels will not respond to him, since the angels do not recognize Aramaic. The answer is that sick people are different, since God's presence is with them (Sabbath 12b)."

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Tosfos is astonished at this and states, “All man’s thoughts angels know, but they don’t know Aramaic?! ” How do we reply to Tosfos? My friend Jessie asked, “Why are we praying to angels, when we are to pray to God alone?” And even if this is true, what is the meaning? We must also understand what is meant by God being with the sick.

The second source (Sota 33a) says one may pray in any language. The Talmud cites the quote above as a question, but resolves the conflict by saying,

“Any language can used in prayer (i.e., angels understand even Aramaic) is applied to a congregation’s prayers. But when one prays as an individual, he must not pray in Aramaic, as the angels don’t recognize it.”

The question is obvious: Do angels recognize Aramaic, or not?! What’s the difference if one is praying alone or with others: how does this affect the language skills of angels? And why is Aramaic singled out, as opposed to other languages?

Focusing on the clues, we will arrive at our answer. We are told that Aramaic prayers of individuals – not congregations – are not recognized. Aramaic prayers for the sick – even made by individuals – are recognized, since “God’s presence is with the sick.”

What is significant about one who prays alone? When one does not pray with the congregation, and is isolated from others, one cannot escape the feeling that his prayers are only from himself. He experiences a larger measure of entitlement. When praying to be saved from his evil twin Esav, Jacob said, “I have grown small from all of Your kindness (Gen. 32:11).” Jacob recognized this idea, that the feeling of entitlement, in fact, can reduce one’s true entitlement to God’s kindness, “I have grown small.” Jacob was aware that all God’s kindnesses might have had an adverse effect on his perfection, namely, on his humility.

To feel “worthy” of God’s kindness, is to engage arrogance. Arrogance aroused when man prays alone, causes him to view his mitzvos and good acts as a tool for ulterior benefit. This view is incorrect: Torah fulfillment and upright morality are worthwhile...without side benefits. If we follow God’s Torah merely as a means to gain success in any area, we do not possess a true opinion of the Torah, as it is meant to benefit our souls, not our daily physical needs. Ironically, this incorrect view of Torah decreases our true entitlement. And when Jacob felt

what he already received from God might have corrupted him, this was due again to his fear that he might have overestimated himself, thereby reducing his worthiness of God’s continued kindnesses. Pirkei Avos 4:7 too teaches this idea to not use the Tora as a means for personal gain. Additionally, arrogance has a way of deluding us about the degree of our goodness. Thus, we may cross the line of poorly assessing how deserving we truly are.

The Rabbis speak metaphorically and non-literally, in order to teach vital lessons. (The next example on fallen angels below illustrates this point again) Tosfos is correct: angels know man’s thoughts, and thus, no language is a barrier to angels. Suggesting an individual’s prayers in Aramaic are not recognized, is a lesson: our prayers are compromised when we pray alone. Our arrogance and sense of entitlement are “as if” unintelligible by those beings who relate our prayers to God. The Talmud does not say we pray to angels. But as we learn throughout Torah and the Rabbis, angels play a role in our lives. Regarding both, God’s communications to prophets or His kindnesses towards all individuals, or our prayers to Him, angels play a role. I will expound more on this in a minute. But let us grasp this concept of “angels not recognizing Aramaic.” This is a Rabbinic metaphor that relates the idea of our reduced worth due to entitlement feelings. Aramaic was the language used to translate Torah readings for the masses who did not know Hebrew. Thus, Aramaic carries a sense of entitlement. I believe this to be the unique character of Aramaic, and why it embellishes this lesson that entitlement compromises our prayers. The fact that angels suddenly recognize Aramaic when a congregation prays, must cause the reader to scratch his head. This Rabbinic statement intends to alert us to a conflict, and strive to uncover the hidden meaning. Why are prayers for the sick heard in any language? This is because our concern is so great for others, that there is no possibility of arrogance, even when praying alone. This unselfish focus is referred to as “God being with the sick.” And when we pray with a congregation, again, our focus is not that God answers “my” prayers, since I am praying with a large group. My worth is as part of the nation of Israel, not my own merits.

The Talmud does not suggest that we are to pray to anyone, but God alone. What then is the role of angels in prayer? Maimonides states about the perfect person, “such a person will undoubtedly perceive nothing but things very extraordinary and divine, and see nothing but God and His angels (“Guide,” book ii, chap. xxxvi).”

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In his Mishna Torah (Yesodei Hatorah 2:7) Maimonides teaches of the various levels of angels, including those called "ishim" who "speak and appear to prophets in visions."

Angelic cherubs are a central part of Judaism. Their golden forms are commanded to be created above the Ark housing the Ten Commandments. There are additional angelic forms in Temple. Maimonides states:

"...the belief in the existence of angels is connected with the belief in the existence of God; and the belief in God and angels leads to the belief in Prophecy and in the truth of the Law. In order to firmly establish this creed, God commanded [the Israelites] to make over the ark the form of two angels. The belief in the existence of angels is thus inculcated into the minds of the people, and this belief is in importance next to the belief in God's Existence; it leads us to believe in Prophecy and in the Law, and opposes idolatry (ibid, book iii, chap. xlv)."

The point I intend to stress is that God created an abstract but real system of interaction between Himself and mankind, and angels play an indispensable role. We do not pray to angels, but angels also play a role in how our prayers are related to God. As Maimonides said, it is a vast study (Yesodei Hatorah 211). This is the meaning behind our Torah and Talmudic sources.

"Fallen" Angels

"The Nefillim lived in the land in those days and afterwards, when the sons of the judges came to the daughters of men and bore them; they were the mighty ones, renown of ancient times (Gen. 6:4)."

Yonasan ben Uzziel offers this commentary:

"They were Shame-chazzai and Uzzi-el, who fell from heaven and were in the land in those days..."

Are we to assume this is literal, that non-physical things (angels) can "fall to Earth" and procreate with women? Or, perhaps Yonasan ben Uzziel echoes the other Rabbis...

This Torah section recounts those corrupt societies that precipitated the Flood. God communicates the flaw of those people: they grew arrogant due to their amazing stature. Their height and might caused other peoples' hearts to "fall": i.e., they feared them and felt powerless. The Rabbis teach, this is the meaning of "Nefillim," those who cause the hearts of others to "fall." The verse also tells us they "lived in the land in those days and afterwards". Longevity also contributes to one's invincibility.

"...they were the mighty ones, renown of ancient times" means they were uniquely strong and this was famous among mankind. Thus, they must have had an astonishing degree of form and power unique from the rest of mankind. Now think about that: form and power...doesn't that correlate well to the names Yonasan ben Uzziel cites? "Shame-chazzai" means "fame from what is seen (form)." And "Uzzi-el" means "God, my might (power)." Meaning, society named these men of great stature based on their appearance, and due to their might, as if they beheld God's might.

Finally, the verse itself bears out that these were humans, not angels: "when the sons of the judges came to the daughters of men and bore them." Who is "them?" The only subject in this verse are the Nefillim. The judges bore the Nefillim; they were human. ■



Abraham witnesses the aftermath of Sodom's destruction



PARSHA

Abraham & the Angels

VAYERA

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

One 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 and attentively 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 other 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 denied 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 delayed, and interrupted by God's following consideration:

"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

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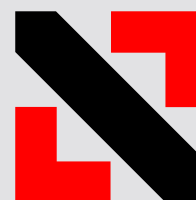
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God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken. And God said [to Abraham], 'The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, 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. 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 revealing greater 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

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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 nature; here, the specific task of repositioning 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. Yet, the angel somehow knew Sarah’s name. This I believe further proves that this story was a vision. For if it were a literal event and these three were men and not angels, they could not know Sarah’s name.

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 contin-

ue Abraham’s teachings, and the destruction of Sodom and Lot’s salvation comprise important lessons on God’s justice, the very substance of Abraham’s teachings. Thus, all three angels’ missions related to Abraham, and therefore were all part of this vision.

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 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,” meaning to forgive. 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. (Similarly, 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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PARSHA

Wisdom of the Verses

VAYERA

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

The phrase “Shall I keep hidden” teaches that God revealed a new area of knowledge so Abraham should learn, and teach others. The glaring question is this: If God decides ‘not’ to hide this secret, where in this account do we see God informing Abraham of it?

Lately, I have been concentrating on articles that focus on how to learn the Torah’s verses. I have been compelled to do so, as more and more often I hear others repeating what they’ve learned, and it is disappointing. Disappointing because they have not been exposed to God’s brilliant method of revealing ideas through the very text. I hear notions that do not fit the text, and notions that are not true. Teachers themselves are not aware of how God hides and reveals Torah insights. This forfeits the transmission and the delight possibly imparted. The only way to correct this problem is through many examples. Once a Torah student is exposed to the precise and insightful methods God uses in constructing the verses, that student will become imbued with an appreciation for Torah over all else he or she encounters. This is what we call “Love of God”. We cannot know “Him” so as to love Him, but we can know some of His wisdom, on a human level. We love God through seeing His wisdom. And although it is minute wisdom, to us, it can be remarkable. For this reason, we must not be satisfied with mediocre explanations and mere possibilities; we must insist on understanding why each word is found in each verse. I intend to show such an example here.

In this week’s parsha God says the following:

“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)

We understand from the following verse (ibid 18:25) that Abraham had a clear understanding of God – God would never kill the righteous on account of the sins of others:

“Far be it to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and the righteous and the wicked would be equal, far be it...the judge of the Earth would not do justice?!”

Abraham was correct in this exclamation. This was Abraham’s knowledge of God all along: the wicked deserve punishment, and the righteous do not. This is justice. However, God said earlier, “Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do?”

This is the first lesson: there are areas of knowledge which man cannot penetrate.

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And this is rightfully so, for man cannot possess all knowledge; only God does. Therefore, God expresses a sentiment to the Torah reader that if He does not disclose His wisdom on this topic of 'justice', Abraham – and mankind – will remain in the dark; it will be "hidden" from Abraham.

God also expressed His reasoning for inviting Abraham to investigate this matter:

"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..."

That is, God wishes the world to increase in their knowledge of Him. And since Abraham teaches his household of God's ways (and greatly benefits other nations by rebuking their idolatry, as Sforno states), God imparted to Abraham greater knowledge of morality. Examining the world or theorizing moralistic philosophy cannot uncover the secret we are about to discuss. That is the meaning behind the phrase "Shall I keep hidden". God therefore revealed a new area of knowledge so Abraham should learn, and teach others.

The glaring question is this: If God decides 'not' to hide this secret, where in this account do we see God informing Abraham of it?

Somehow, Abraham knew to ask God whether He would spare the wicked, based on numbers of righteous people. This mercy was not what Abraham knew before...this was the new piece of information God disclosed and did not "hide". He assured Abraham that if at least 10 righteous people were in Sodom, He would spare all of them, even the wicked.

So we now know the secret: previously, Abraham assumed the wicked must die – no exceptions. But now Abraham understood that God's mercy can allow wicked people to remain, provided there exists the influence of at least 10 righteous people can turn them back towards repentance and God. We understand this. But again: from where did Abraham derive this new concept of mercifully sparing the wicked



Sodom's destruction

people on account of the righteous? God does not say this in the entire account! However, the hints must be in what He told Abraham. Read it again:

"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.'"

This is from where Abraham derived the new concept that God will spare the wicked.

Do you see the hint?

Do you see any questions?

I have one: If their sin is "greatly heavy", why should they not receive punishment? This is compounded by God's very words, "if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them". God is saying that in accordance with their corruption, they deserve annihilation. Yet, God says there exists the possibility of Him 'not' annihilating them! Now, if their current state of sin requires God's punishment, for what reason would God abstain? There is only one possibility where the merit to save them exists: the righteous inhabitants.

Abraham listened to God's words, "in accordance with their state, they deserve annihilation." But God also said a possibility exists that they will be spared. In God's very words was the clue. Abraham now realized a new concept: God does not work with strict justice, but He also performs charity, "tzedaka". Abraham knew about tzedaka, but he did not know all of its applications. It was necessary that God

teach him this specific case. We might even add that God's concluding words "I know" are meant to indicate to Abraham that this knowledge is what "God" knows, and not man. It is concealed until God imparts it through this prophecy. God intended to teach that this idea is of a concealed nature. He taught this to us through the future-given Torah narrative "Shall I keep hidden", and He taught this to Abraham through the words "I know".

Thus, God taught Abraham a new idea in justice that man could not arrive at alone: the wicked could be spared. And He also taught him that there are ideas, which are concealed if God does not offer man clues.

We learn that God presented just enough clues in His words to allow Abraham to think into the matter. Once he realized this new concept, the next question was how many righteous people are required to save the wicked. But why did God inform Abraham in such a subtle manner?

God does so as this increases a person's intelligence, his reasoning power. Just as a Talmudic scholar is not born with his skills, but gains them over decades of practice...Abraham too grew in his capacity to reason for himself through this experience. With thought, Abraham questioned his current beliefs and principles. Abraham moved beyond his previous boundaries, and excelled to greater wisdom.

Many times we prevent ourselves from alternative choices, simply because we are incapable of reasoning out all possibilities, or due to false assumptions. For example, a student may accept all ideas in books,

(CONT. ON PAGE 15)

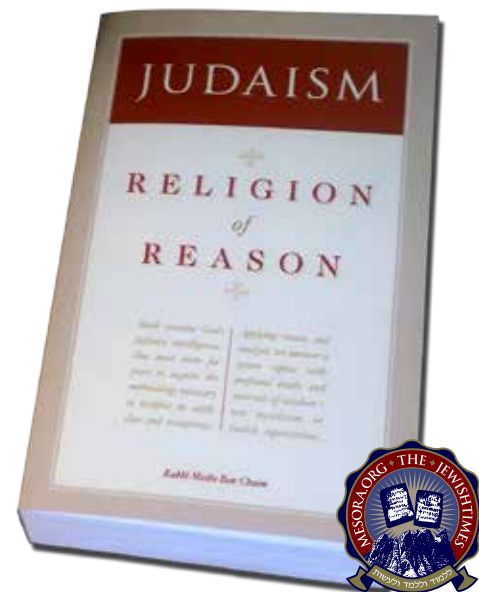
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REVIEWS



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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simply due to his mind being crippled by the false notion that “all books must be true”. People are quite impressed by authors and feel each author knows about what he or she writes. But once the student sees an error in one book, this broadens his horizons and he will never again blindly accept any notion, just because it’s printed.

A wise Rabbi once cited Rav Moshe Feinstein’s critique of the Ramban. Ramban condemned Abraham for leaving Canaan and descending to Egypt due to the famine. Rav Moshe zt”l said that Ramban’s comment should be torn out of the Chumash. The lesson: even Ramban can be wrong. But we incorrectly tend to shy away from such statements. We fear reputations. But you must know that the greatest of our teachers – Maimonides – openly invited anyone at all to correct his errors. Maimonides did not feel infallible; he admitted that those below him in wisdom could correct him. No one is always correct.

People sometimes say, “Who am I to argue with Ramban?” This means they credit Ramban, or any Rabbi, as possessing tools to attain accurate understanding. But God did not give Ramban alone the Tzelem Elokim – intelligence. God gave it to every human. He did so in order that we engage it, and not make such statements. If we continually refrain from challenging our teachers, we reject God’s will that we employ this great gift of intelligence. Of course we are respectful of all Torah

scholars and teachers. But as one Talmudic Rabbi said, he cherished questions on his words more than words of support.

Furthermore, any person who assesses the Rabbis as brilliant thereby admits he can accurately determine truth, i.e., that they are brilliant. And if he can determine truth, he then contradicts himself when saying he cannot argue with them. For if one can determine truth, and does so in a specific case, he must disagree with anyone who opposes that truth. Regardless of who it is. It is a false humility, or a corrupt mind that will at first passionately support his view, and then back down when he learns a Torah scholar holds the opposite. If he was firm on his understanding at first, he must be honest and say he disagrees, regardless of whom he opposes. Again, the Torah commentaries disagree with each other, and do not blindly accept even the words of those far greater than them. A Talmudic Rabbi once said, “Had Joshua bin-Nun said it, I would not hear it (Tal. Chullin, 124a).”

Although I carried an awe of the Rabbis from youth, once I heard Rav Moshe’s critique of Ramban’s words, I realized that no one is infallible. This was one of the greatest lessons that had the most dramatic affects on my studies. Furthermore, there is no Torah obligation to accept any idea outside of halacha. In matters of philosophy, there is no “psak” – ruling. Many times people say, “Maimonides is only a minority view, I need not follow him”. Their error is

in applying halachik principle of “majority rule” to hashkafa – philosophy. The Torah teaches, “According to ‘law’ that they will teach you and the judgment that they will tell you, you should behave. You should not deviate from that which they tell you to the right or left (Deut. 17:11).” This means the Rabbis have authority on ‘laws’ and nothing more. Not philosophy.

Additionally, a wise Rabbi once taught that no one – not even great Rabbis – can tell you what you think. Meaning, it is impossible that anyone be compelled to believe something, which they do not. Yes, in halacha I can be compelled to ‘act’. But philosophy is concerns beliefs alone. Thus, there cannot be a ruling on philosophy. This is something we can only come to on our own. Either we accept a belief, or we don’t. And if I do not believe something, no one can possibly force that belief.

The refusal to accept popular opinions was Abraham’s greatest trait. It was through questioning what he was taught, that he discovered the error of his father and that entire idolatrous generation. This trait led him to discover God after 40 years of independent reflection and analysis. There were yet areas that Abraham could not penetrate, but God assisted him. God also assists us in the form of His Torah. And if we continue to question the Torah, as is God’s will, we will then unlock numerous other ‘hidden’ treasures.

The verses are truly astonishing. ■

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PARSHA

A Lesson in Promoting Values to Our Children

VAYERA

Rabbi Bernie Fox

And Avraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said: Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it unto the lad; and he hastened to prepare it. (Sefer Beresheit 18:6-7)

Avraham enlists Sarah in providing hospitality

Parshat VaYera opens with the description of a visit by three travelers to Avraham. Avraham observes these travelers and runs to greet them. Him invites them into his home and offers them food and rest. The strangers accept Avraham's invitation. Avraham learns that these travelers are messengers sent by Hashem. They impart to Avraham a message from Hashem. Sarah will soon conceive and give birth to a son – Yitzchak.

One of the interesting elements of the Torah's treatment of this encounter is its description of Avraham's hospitality. The Torah describes this hospitality in detail.

The above passages describe Avraham's personal involvement in the care of his guests. He directs Sarah to prepare fresh bread for the visitors. He selects an animal from his herd for slaughter and preparation for the guests. The passages describe Avraham's running and rushing from activity to activity and urging Sarah and his lad to also quickly perform their tasks. This event took place while Avraham was recovering from his circumcision. Under those circumstances, his energetic attention to his visitors was especially remarkable.

The Torah previously described Avraham's great wealth. In this description, the Torah explained that he had many servants. Nonetheless, Avraham did not direct a servant to prepare bread for his guests. He turned to Sarah to perform this task. Furthermore, the Torah mentions this detail in its description of the events. The attention given to this detail by the Torah indicates that it has significance.

The lad enlisted by Avraham

As noted above, the passages describe Avraham enlisting the assistance of a "lad" to prepare the selected animal for the guests. The term that is translated as "lad" is na'ar. The term na'ar describes a person who is not fully mature or self-directed. It can describe a person who is young and is emotionally immature. Sometimes, the term does not refer to a young person but to a servant. A servant also is not self-directed. Instead, he receives his direction from his master. When the term is used to describe a servant, it is applied regardless of the age of the servant.[1] In short, the term is sometimes used to describe a young person. Other times, it is used to describe a servant who may be any age.

The midrash provides different suggestions regarding the identity of the na'ar enlisted by Avraham. One opinion is that this na'ar was Eliezer – Avraham's servant. [2] Rashi quotes another midrash. According to this opinion, the na'ar was Avraham's son Yishmael. The midrash quoted by Rashi also discusses Avraham's reason for enlisting Yishmael.

Apparently, the author of this opinion believes that Yishmael's involvement requires explanation. As noted above, Avraham was wealthy. He could have called upon his many servants to prepare the meal for his guests. Instead, he enlisted his son. The midrash explains that Avraham wished to initiate Yishmael in the performance of the mitzvah of caring for guests.[3]

The midrash's discussion of Yishmael's involvement in serving the guests raises a question. Yishmael was enlisted in order to initiate him in the performance of the mitzvah of providing hospitality. However, Sarah was a wise, righteous woman. Avraham did not need to initiate her in the performance of this commandment. Why did he enlist her in his preparations for his guests rather than calling upon a servant? Before addressing this issue, it will be helpful to consider another issue from the parasha.

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Hashem, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that Hashem may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him.' (Sefer Beresheit 18:19)

Hashem recognizes Avraham's devotion to the teaching of his children

After these messengers deliver to Avraham the news of the approaching birth of Yitzchak, they set off for Sedom. They travel to Sedom as agents of its destruction. Before the messengers arrive at Sedom to execute their assignment, Hashem reveals to Avraham that Sedom will be destroyed. Avraham intercedes and asks that Hashem consider the righteous living in Sedom and spare the city. Avraham and Hashem enter into a dialogue concerning the number of righteous individuals required in order for Hashem to spare Sedom.

However, before Hashem reveals to Avraham that He plans to destroy Sedom, the Torah inserts three interesting passages. In these passages Hashem is described as dialoguing with Himself. He explains why He should reveal to Avraham that Sedom will be destroyed. In this brief discussion, Hashem notes that Avraham will instruct his children and the members of his household to go in the ways of Hashem and to pursue righteousness and justice. In other words, part of the reason that Hashem will enter into a dialogue with Avraham regarding the destruction of Sedom and the circumstances under which it might be spared, is that Avraham is devoted to imparting his understanding of the ways of Hashem, righteousness, and justice to his children and to the members of his household. It is not remarkable that Avraham will instruct his children and the members of his household in these values and behaviors. Every father and leader wishes to transmit his knowledge to his children or followers. However, the passage suggests that Avraham's devotion to this process was special and surpassed the efforts common to fathers and leaders. What was special about Avraham's devotion or methods?

Avraham's strategy for imparting values to his children

Now, let us return to Avraham's enlist-

ment of Sarah and Yishmael in providing hospitality to his guests. As noted above, Avraham enlisted Yishmael in order to initiate him in the performance of this mitzvah. However, Avraham also enlisted Sarah. It seems that Avraham believed that his initiation of Yishmael required more than providing him with instructions to prepare the selected animal for their guests. Avraham believed that he needed to communicate to Yishmael that he was including him in an activity of the family. In order to accomplish this, it was not adequate to give Yishmael direction in the performance of his assigned task. Avraham, needed to demonstrate to Yishmael that he and Sarah were inviting him to be their partner in a family activity.

The message Avraham communicated to Yishmael was not merely that he should begin to undertake acts of kindness and charity. He communicated that kindness and charity are a fundamental value of their family. He communicated to Yishmael that these activities are activities of the family, and that Yishmael's participation integrates him into an important activity of the family.

It is immediately after this lesson to Yishmael that Hashem acknowledges Avraham's commitment to the instruction of his family in the ways of Hashem, righteousness, and justice. The juxtaposition of these two events suggests that Avraham's thoughtful treatment of Yishmael is an example and demonstration of the commitment to teach the ways of Hashem, righteousness, and justice. Hashem was acknowledging the care and the considerable thought that Avraham had devoted to developing a strategy for imparting values to the members of his household and family. Avraham had concluded that these values cannot be effectively imparted through instruction alone. Avraham carefully considered how to instill these values in his son. Out of this thoughtful planning emerged his strategy of teaching kindness through inviting and integrating Yishmael into the family activity of hospitality.

This interpretation of Avraham's behaviors also addresses another interesting issue. The midrash quoted by Rashi explains that Avraham enlisted Yishmael in order to initiate him in the performance of the mitzvah of hospitality. However, another version of the midrash offers an alternative explanation. Avraham enlisted Yishma-

el in order to encourage his zealous or energetic performance of the mitzvah.[4] According to this explanation, Avraham was not interested in merely initiating his son. He wished to inspire in his son an attitude of commitment and excitement.

According to the above interpretation, these two versions of the midrash are not in conflict with one another. They express different aspects of Avraham's program. He did wish to initiate Yishmael into the mitzvah of hospitality. However, he also gave careful, thoughtful consideration to how to inspire. The strategy he devised was designed to initiate and also encourage and nurture enthusiasm.

Lessons from Avraham

Avraham's strategy reminds us of the partnership between school and home. School must educate, teach and encourage values. However, the student's embrace of these values and his or her attitude toward those values is also deeply influenced by home. Avraham's strategy suggests the importance of value-rich activities that integrate all members of the family. For example, one suspects that in a home designed by Avraham, it would not be the mother's responsibility to prepare for Shabbat. It would be an activity in which all members would participate. Avraham might suggest that the family spend some time at the Shabbat table learning together. The family, following his design might consider engaging – as a family – in chesed.

Avraham would tell us that family values are not those values shared by the family's members but values that are pursued as a family. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 2:6.

[2] Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher, Torah Shelymah vol 1, p 752.

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 18:7.

[4] Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher, Torah Shelymah vol 1, p 752 (footnote).



SODOM SEEN

A clay tablet that has baffled scientists for 150 years has been identified as a witness's account of the asteroid suspected of being behind the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Researchers who cracked the cuneiform symbols on the Planisphere tablet believe that it recorded an asteroid thought to have been more than half a mile across.

The tablet, found by Henry Layard in the remains of the library in the royal place at Nineveh in the mid-19th century, is thought to be a 700 B.C. copy of notes made by a Sumerian astronomer watching the night sky. He referred to the asteroid as a "white stone bowl approaching" and recorded it as it "vigorously swept along." Using computers to recreate the night sky thousands of years ago, scientists have pinpointed his sighting to shortly before dawn on June 29 in the year 3123 B.C.

About half the symbols on the tablet have survived and half of those refer to the asteroid. The other symbols record the positions of clouds and constellations. In the past 150 years scientists have made five unsuccessful attempts to translate the tablet.

Mark Hempsell, one of the researchers from Bristol

University who cracked the tablet's code, said: "It's a wonderful piece of observation, an absolutely perfect piece of science." He said the size and route of the asteroid meant that it was likely to have crashed into the Austrian Alps at Köfels. As it traveled close to the ground it would have left a trail of destruction from supersonic shock waves and then slammed into the Earth with a cataclysmic impact. Debris consisting of up to two-thirds of the asteroid would have been hurled back along its route and a flash reaching temperatures of 400 Centigrade (752 Fahrenheit) would have been created, killing anyone in its path.

About one million sq kilometers (386,000 sq miles) would have been devastated and the impact would have been equivalent to more than 1,000 tons of TNT exploding. The researchers say that the asteroid's impact would explain why at Köfels there is evidence of an ancient landslide 3 miles wide and a quarter of a mile thick.

Dr Hempsall said that at least 20 ancient myths record devastation of the type and on the scale of the asteroid's impact, including the Old Testament account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. ■

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PARSHA

For the Love of Rebuke

VAYERA

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg



Abraham admonishing Avimelech

“Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.”

These profound words were spoken by Winston Churchill, and they would appear to ring true at first glance. However, in practicality, we tend to rush to admonish others and be wary of rebuke to ourselves. A perceived failure in others elicits a storm of admonition, an almost bloodthirsty desire to point out how terrible the person truly is. And when it comes time for us to address a rebuke from a loved one or spiritual leader, are we willing to even listen to it, let alone accept it? Indeed, the notion of rebuke is not agreeable. In this week’s Torah portion, an episode between Avraham and Avimelech helps shed light on the correct attitude we should have regarding rebuke.

The story begins with Avimelech’s initial address to Avraham (21:22):

“Now it came to pass at that time, that

Avimelech and Phicol his general said to Avraham, saying, “God is with you in all that you do.”

Many commentaries explain that Avimelech’s impetus to meet with Avraham was due to the famous news of the birth of Yitzchak to Sarah. Avimelech saw the hand of God in this event, and was therefore drawn to Avraham.

He then requests what would appear to be as the formation of an alliance (ibid 23-24):

“And now, swear to me here by God, that you will not lie to me or to my son or to my grandson; according to the kindness that I have done with you, you shall do with me, and with the land wherein you have sojourned. And Avraham said, “I will swear.””

With Avraham’s acceding to Avimelech’s request, one would think matters would be settled. Yet Avraham responds with a rebuke (ibid 25):

“And Avraham admonished [vehochiach] Avimelech about the well of water that the servants of Avimelech had forcibly seized”

Avimelech responds to this accusation with a clear denial of the charges (ibid 26):

“And Avimelech said, “I do not know who did this thing, neither did you tell me, nor did I hear [of it] until today.”

The episode continues with a covenant between the two, and Avraham re-claiming the aforementioned well as his own (Be’er Sheva).

What stands out among these verses is the stinging rebuke given by Avraham to Avimelech. The Torah does not elaborate much about the specifics. The Sforno, though, offers a captivating angle as to what concerned Avraham (ibid 25):

“He rebuked him, as king, for the violent robbery committed without shame in his land, and also for keeping wicked men in his household, which is not the way of the righteous...”

Thus, the Sforno is presenting this rebuke as an attack on the moral compass of Avimelech. Why would Avraham do this? What are we to learn from this?

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

The Sages extract a general concept regarding rebuke from Avraham. We find in the Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 54:3) a debate concerning the importance of rebuke. According to R' Yossi Bar Chaninah, one cannot have love (ahava) without rebuke, while according to Reish Lakish, peace (shalom) cannot exist without some instance of admonition. Both point to the episode of Avimelech and Avraham as the source for this idea. One must raise a seemingly obvious question – is it indeed true that love or peace cannot be achieved without rebuke? When dating, should a couple engage in rebuke to ensure there is love? Should parties looking to make peace admonish each other prior to signing the treaty? How does one understand this formula?

Clearly, there is something deeper than an alliance taking place between Avraham and Avimelech. At the outset, we see Avimelech's attraction to Avraham based on his belief that Avraham shared a unique relationship with God. The Rambam, in Hilchot Avoda Zara (1:1-2), describes in detail the process Avraham went through concerning his "discovery" of God. Avraham developed incredibly important ideas concerning God, and began teaching others about Him. The basis for this all came through his understanding of God as Creator. Avimelech was quite aware of the teachings of Avraham, and understood that the God Avraham spoke of had a "bond" with him. When Avimelech approaches Avraham, Avraham sensed an important opportunity to expand on the idea of God to Avimelech. We see from the Seforno that Avraham was not driven to admonish Avimelech due to a land squabble. Rather, Avraham was interested in revealing to Avimelech a defect in his personality, to bring to light to him that belief in God is not just a belief in a Creator; man must live his life in line with His moral system. Avraham admonishes Avimelech on two planes. In the first, he points out how there is a vacuum present in his moral leadership, where thievery is permitted. And on a personal level, he questions how Avimelech could tolerate co-existing with people whose value system was so corrupt. To believe in the true God is a challenge Avimelech was able to overcome; however, belief not followed with a proper life reflects a serious chasm in the relationship between man and God.

We see from the above how Avraham's objective in rebuke was motivated by a desire to perfect Avimelech. The Midrash is then able to extrapolate a universal concept concerning rebuke. As noted above, there is a

debate as to whether love or peace requires admonition. Rather than view these two opinions as being mutually exclusive, it would appear instead each one is focusing on a perspective regarding rebuke. The love the Midrash speaks of is the ideal relationship between two people, where each is ultimately concerned with the other's perfection. In such a relationship, the motivation for rebuke of the other is purely in line with this objective. The Midrash is not suggesting that there must be rebuke in order for there to be love; rather, the idea is that when the love of truth is the guide in any relationship, the desire to rebuke has the same character as that of Avraham's rebuke of Avimelech. The other opinion, though, sees the issue of admonition from the perspective of the receiver. Quite often, when a person's weakness (whether it be in the area of Jewish Law or as a general personality trait) is pointed out, a defensive shield is put up. A person naturally does not want to hear that he or she is a defective person. Many insecurities emerge, leading to a shock to one's sense of self. The peace referred to in this Midrash concerns the security (shalom is commonly used in this context) and lack of conflict one has in who he truly is. When a person actually sees himself for what he is, a human being with defects and foibles, he will accept the rebuke with pleasure. Any opportunity to raise one's level of perfection is something only a person who is secure with who he is would welcome. When receiving admonition whose interest is in perfection, the response should be one of warm embrace rather than defensive skepticism.

We see from this that the Torah's recording of the covenant between Avraham and Avimelech contained an important revelation into the greatness of Avraham. Avraham was solely motivated by the desire to teach others about the existence and greatness of God. When dealing with others, he always searched for an opportunity to sanctify the name of God, removing any personal ambition from his approach. As such, the Midrash is able to expand on this idea, demonstrating how as long as we are guided by a selfless desire for perfection and driven by love of God, rebuke can play a critical role in strengthening our relationship with God. We must always be careful when we choose to admonish our fellow man, where our motivations are like those of Avraham. As well, we must be willing to accept that all of us are human, and our defects are a part of us. The objective of living in line with God's will must be at the forefront, allowing the door for rebuke to be wide open. ■



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PARSHA

Imitating the Creator

VAYERA

Rabbi Reuven Mann



This week's Parsha, Vayera, begins with Hashem's "appearance" to Avraham. According to the Rabbis this was not an ordinary revelation but a special visit which was intended as "Bikkur Cholim" (visiting the sick).

The Torah is telling us that the Creator of the universe saw fit to "be" with Avraham in order to assist in his recuperation. This contains an important teaching. Judaism derives its values from the concept of "Imitating Hashem". The Rabbis say, "Just as He is called Merciful so too, must you practice compassion". This pertains to all form of behavior that is attributed to G-D.

We are supposed to train ourselves in the "ways" of Hashem. Because He saw fit to visit the sick so, too, must we. This is a very important and unique mitzvah. We should seek to understand its deeper significance. We should note that while the mitzvah is Rabbinic it has its roots in the Torah. A major Biblical commandment is, "Love your friend as yourself". This is a very challenging exhortation.

Human nature is complex. It is, seemingly, impossible to love each and every Jew as much as you love yourself. How is such a thing possible? How many people do you really love, "like yourself"? One may feel that way about a few special individuals like one's child but a blanket requirement to extend this kind of love to everyone seems impossible.

It is essential to understand how this mitzvah is interpreted by the Oral Law. The command to love does not refer to emotions

but to action. We should be as solicitous of the rights, feelings and concerns of our fellow humans as we are for our own. This means that we do not put ourselves on a higher plane than others.

This can only be attained by a proper belief in Hashem. The mitzvah to love others flows from the recognition that Hashem created all of us in His "Image" and endowed us with certain "inalienable rights".

Let us remember the basic rule that we must strive to emulate the ways of our Creator. Hashem created mankind for a purpose. He does not show favorites and desires that all His creatures should attain their ultimate fulfillment. That is why the Rabbis say that each person may say, "because of me was the world created".

Hashem visited Avraham in order to demonstrate how important it is to care for needs of others. Judaism teaches that one must be selfish and act as though the world was created for him. It also asserts that one must not be for "himself alone". Is there a contradiction between these two imperatives?

If one's behavior is rooted in the love of Hashem and desire to follow His ways he will automatically achieve the best life for himself and be a positive force in enhancing the lives of others. There is no contradiction between being selfish and altruistic. As Torah teaches, "The man of compassion benefits himself."

Shabbat shalom ■