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Jewish by Choice

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Forming a gold block into a stylized Menorah, using just a hammer?
What is the intent of such a law?

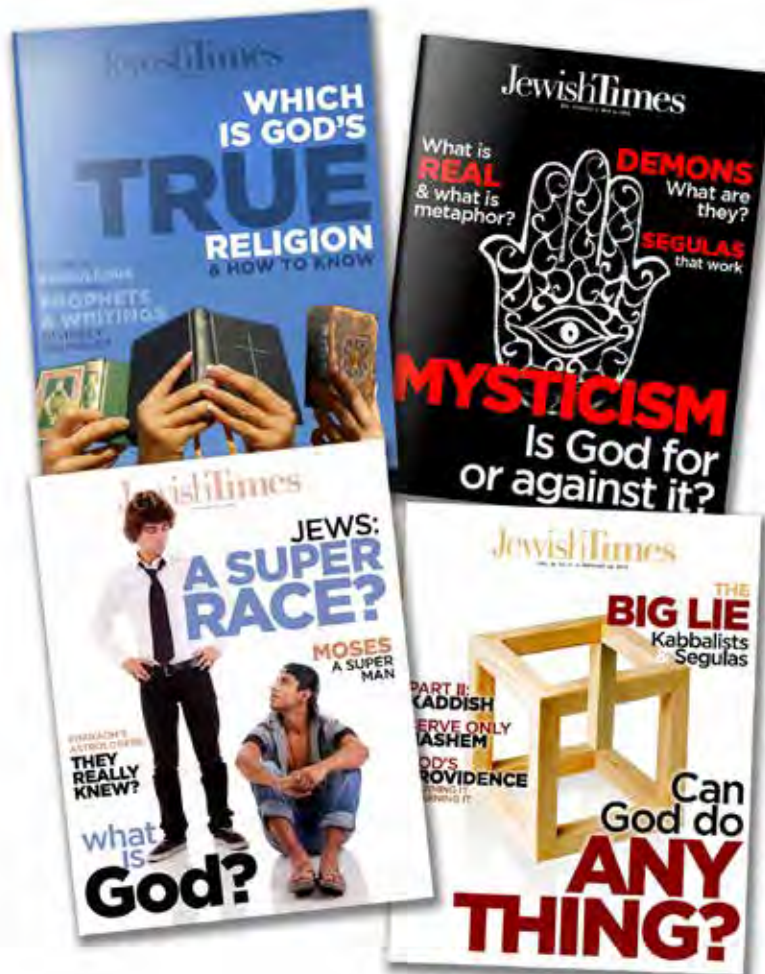


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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Creating gods

Reader: What do think of this sentence: "If people use their own minds, even to a small degree, they would wonder why they are bowing down to stone idols, and deifying men like Jesus"?

Rabbi: I agree fully. But I would add a quote from Jeremiah 19:20, "Shall a man make unto himself gods? But they are not gods." Meaning, it is antithetical to man's intent in creating a god, that he "causes his own cause." That is, a god is defined as the cause of one's existence. If man attempts to create a god, he is in fact contradicting himself. How can man cause his own cause? ■



This Will Amaze You

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Unlike all other Temple vessels, the Menorah and the Ark's cover, the "Kaporet" (designed with the two angels) had unique laws: neither could be made from prefabricated parts and subsequently assembled. Both objects must be created through a process of hammering — "miksha" — formed from a single block of gold. The centrality of this process is evidenced in the Torah's repetition of the term miksha in both Torah portions discussing the Menorah.

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Additionally, and unlike any other vessel, the Torah commands they both be formed of pure gold. What consideration demands this unique treatment? Ibn Ezra provides clues:

There is a medrash, "The Menorah was made by itself," but the explanation is that anybody who saw the Menorah would be astonished at how a man can make it (Exod. 25:32).

A wise craftsman could not create the Menorah, had God not revealed it to Moses in a prophetic vision (Num. 8:4).

Let us be clear: the astonishment is not regarding the finished form of the Menorah. For many buildings and sculptures embody far greater detail and magnitude; Petra is one example. The astonishment was, as Ibn Ezra states, regarding the process: how could any person plan out exactly where to start hammering from, so that the precise amount of gold is separated to allow for the final form to emerge? Meaning, Betzalel (who formed both) did not commence by forming the Menorah's ornate designs, its goblets, flowers and spheres onto the massive chunk of gold. His first step must have been to determine how much gold was needed to form the Menorah's lower branches, which were longer, and how much for the upper smaller branches. How much gold would the base need, and how much for the center stem which was longer than the longest branches? What amount of gold would each of the basins require, which held the oil? And how much more gold was required for the goblets, flowers and spheres that would be shaped onto each branch? From where would he start hammering in order to commence the form: the top, the side? And how far down the block of gold would he start hammering? All this had to be determined before he made his first hammer blow. And once he started hammering the chunk, separating it into seven separate branches and the base, there was no turning back if he miscalculated, for he could not melt off some gold from here and reattach it there. Hammering was the only process allowed in creating this Menorah.

As Ibn Ezra expresses, we are in disbelief that the greatest human ingenuity could accomplish this feat, had God not directed its construction. The obvious question then presents itself: what was Betzalel's role in this? As the Menorah was created following a prophetic instruction, why was a "wise" carpenter required? However, despite God's

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direction, humans vary greatly in their degree of intelligence, creativity and labor. Even with the identical blueprint, we will find two carpenters producing non-identical houses. The translation between the plan on paper, then what each carpenter grasps in his mind, to their application to raw materials, precision in measurements, and each one's satisfaction in a component of the job completed...all determine the final structure. Betzalel was necessary, and the Torah makes this clear:

And Moses said unto the children of Israel, "See, the Lord hath called by name Betzalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And He hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship. And to devise skillful works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones for setting, and in carving of wood, to work in all manner of skillful workmanship. And He hath put in his heart that he may teach, both he, and Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. Them hath He filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of workmanship, of the craftsman, and of the skillful workman, and of the weaver in colors, in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen, and of the weaver, even of them that do any workmanship, and of those that devise skillful works (Exod. 35:30-35)."

Had God created the Menorah (and other vessels) miraculously, Betzalel would not have earned the admiration of the Jews. Thereby, we refine our question: what consideration in God's plan demanded the

Jews recognize "human ingenuity," and why to such a degree in connection with the Menorah and the Kapores, and no other items?

Had human genius not been realized, what would be missing from the Temple? The answer: "identification." It is through our comparison between the ingenious artisan and ourselves, where we can't fathom producing such craftsmanship, that we arrive at a sense of marvel over another person's amazing capabilities. God's universe contains phenomena to which we have grown accustom; we appreciate, but don't marvel at the sunrise, a tree, or other natural phenomenon, as the repeated appearance numbs us to anything novel. Of course, the wisdom uncovered through the study of nature greatly impresses man regarding God's wisdom. But what motivates man towards study?

Appreciating God's magnificence cannot always be approached head-on. As mentioned, what is familiar in nature loses impact. We need a first step. That being our observation of something novel: the human ingenuity of transforming a block of gold — through hammering alone — where man produces a perfectly planned and ornately-designed Menorah...this astonishes us! Our mindset is one where we are awed by that craftsman's ingenuity, because by comparison to ourselves — "identification" — we see ourselves as nowhere near the caliber of this artisan. Like watching a master painter, through our identification with him, we sense amazement in his abilities. But the purpose of this intended amazement is to step us towards grasping the Creator's amazing world. How does this work?

The Menorah is a map to the universe. In a previous essay I explained the seven branches refer to the first seven days: six days of Creation and the seventh, the Sabbath. The six Menorah branches emerge from the seventh center branch; the six days of Creation emerged from the Creator who rested on the Sabbath. More subtle is the lesson that the six branches are "suspended" through their attachment to the center seventh spine of the Menorah, the Yereicha; the six days of creation and all creations depend (are "suspended") on God's will, who rested on the seventh day. Meaning, creation does not simply endure, just because it was created. No. All creations require God's enduring will that they remain in existence, for nothing exists of its own, even though already created. This explains why the six branches' wicks "face" the center spine, to pay homage towards that which they depend upon; creation depends on God who rested on the seventh day. This is why God did not design the Menorah with all seven branches equally emerging vertically and parallel from a horizontal floor base. The six must emanate suspended by the center spine.

We come to the three unique Menorah designs; goblets, flowers and spheres. These appear on all seven branches, but goblets are most numerous. I explained that creation offers man objects through which man realizes God's wisdom. The study of creation leads us to the love of God[1]. And there are three areas of study: 1) properties of substances like iron and carbon, 2) study of natural design like a spider's web, and 3) study of the harmony between all forces and objects, like gravity, the food chain and the human body. All three offer us great appreciation for the Creator, but the last offers us the most. While the properties of

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the elements and natural designs are impressive, when we witness all corners of the universe complimenting each other, we behold a “plan” — a greater Mind. The “function” of the universe is most impressive. The Menorah’s spheres (unformed mass) correlate to simple material substance; flowers (beauty) correlate to the design of creation; but goblets are “functional” things, correlating to the function or systems of the universe. Thus, to stress that the universe’s functions reveal most of God’s wisdom, the Menorah has more goblets than flowers or spheres.

This explains why the Menorah required a process of formation through hammering: the marvel we experience regarding human artisan genius, is intended to be transferred to God’s wisdom, evidenced in Creation. The Temple’s other vessels do not recount wisdom, but share other ideas. So the law to create those items from hammering a single block of gold do not apply. It is only regarding vessels that focus on wisdom, that God commands its formation to embody an ingenious (wise) process.

Why then must the Kapores too must be created by hammering...why was it too made of pure gold? This is because the Kapores teaches of the “method” wherein man gains wisdom. The Menorah reflects wisdom in creation. But how does man “attain” knowledge? What is this process? At one moment, man is ignorant of an idea or an answer to a question he ponders. Then, he suddenly arrives at an answer. A wise Rabbi once

taught, quoting Maimonides, that the Ark’s angels forming the Kapores cover, refer to the vehicle through which man taps God’s knowledge. God is the source of all wisdom, but how does man acquire His knowledge? Maimonides teaches that angels are the conduit between man and God. Unlike other religions believing them to be winged human forms, angels are in fact not physical. They are a species of metaphysical intelligences God employs to govern the world and share His wisdom with mankind.

Thus, the Kapores and the Menorah, in order to indicate that their designs relate to wisdom, must be formed through a process requiring great wisdom. And as the pursuit of wisdom is the most prized of all mitzvos, God indicates this by commanding the Menorah and Kapores are to be constructed of pure gold, a most prized and valued element.

In summary, God commands man to employ great wisdom in forming vessels that focus on His wisdom. Through our amazement of an artisan’s abilities as compared to ourselves, we are awakened to realize that even greater amazement is awaiting us as we study God’s universe and His Torah. We marvel at man’s formation of a single Menorah. We will be even more astonished at God’s wisdom revealed in His universe. ■

[1] Maimonides, Yesodei Hatorah, 2:2



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JEWISH BY CHOICE

The proper view
of the convert



RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Beha'alotcha, describes the sanctification of the Levites for their service in the Mishkan. Originally this privilege was to be distributed in a more "democratic" fashion. It was not to be confined to one tribe but available to any "bechor" ie. the first born male in a family.

The bechor had a special status in the Jewish nation. To this day the father must "redeem" this child in a ceremony known as Pidyon Haben. The mitzvah has its origin in the last plague which Hashem visited upon Egypt, the slaying of the first born.

In executing this judgement Hashem distinguished between the Jewish males, who He protected and the Egyptian offspring who were destroyed. When we are the beneficiaries of Divine favor we incur a debt. The bechor must recognize

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that he was saved in order to serve Hashem. It was intended that he would assist the Kohanim in their Temple service.

However this great benefit was rescinded as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf. The first born did not refrain from this transgression. Only the tribe of Levi absolutely avoided the temptation of idolatry. Not only that but they dealt justice to the sinners without concern for any consequences. Their loyalty to the pure and undiluted worship of the Creator, which is the fundamental foundation of Judaism, facilitated their displacement of the first born in the Temple Service.

Once the construction of the Mishkan, and the consecration of its priests was completed, the People commenced the journey which would bring them, in a very short time, to the gates of the Promised land. The Torah records a conversation in which Moshe implores his father in law, Yitro, to join them in their conquest and settlement of the land.

For some reason, which is not entirely clear, Yitro demurred saying, "I will not go but, rather, to my land and birthplace will I

go." Moshe persisted, reminding him of how helpful his advice and insight had been and that if he stayed with them he would partake of the great good which Hashem had guaranteed His People.

The question arises, what is so important about this conversation that warranted its inclusion in the Torah? What spiritual lesson are we supposed to derive from it?

Yitro was a great man who had the courage to renounce idolatry and withstand the persecution that he and his family were subjected to because of his belief in the true G-D. After the Exodus he left his home and made the arduous wilderness journey to be reunited with Moshe.

Yitro's goal was to study the meaning of the events, in depth, with the greatest teacher, Moshe Rabenu. The lessons he learned had a transformative impact on Yitro. He blessed Hashem for all that He had done for the Jews and offered sacrifices to Him. According to the Rabbis he then converted to Judaism.

In light of this it is difficult to understand Yitro's reluctance

to go with the Jews to the land of Israel. An interpretation of Rashi is illuminating. Commenting on Moshe's statement, "You will be unto us as eyes..." Rashi says, "as beloved as the ball of our eyes, as it says, and you shall love the stranger, (convert)."

Apparently, Yitro did not know what standing he would have in the Jewish nation. Moshe, therefore, revealed a vital principle of the Torah. The convert is not a second class citizen or inferior in any way. It is natural in any organized group for the establishment to feel superior to the "outsider" or newcomer.

Jews may not feel they are better than those who were not "frum (observant) from birth," nor may they look down, in any way, upon the convert. Hashem has bestowed great honor upon the "ger" (convert). There are two commandments enjoining us to love the stranger. Firstly, he is included in the general mitzvah of "And you shall love your friend as your self." Secondly, he is the subject of a special mitzvah designed exclusively for him, "And you shall love the ger."

The Rambam teaches that Hashem loves the stranger as it says, "And He loves the Ger." The reason for this is because the convert has abandoned his family and nation in order to come under the protection of the Shechina (Divine Presence).

Moshe reassured Yitro that he would have a prominent place among the Jews and that his talents would be fully utilized and appreciated. There is a lot that we can learn from Moshe's dialogue with his father in law. Most of us did not choose to embrace Judaism and often take it for granted. Would we be Jewish if we didn't have to, if we had had the choice to be exempt from the "Yoke of the commandments?" If fate had dealt us a different hand, would we have the courage and commitment to leave our family and cast our lot with the Jews, simply because of our love for Hashem and His Torah?

We will never know but should be inspired to recognize that such people exist and are to be respected and loved.

Shabbat shalom ■

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MUSIC IN JUDAISM

Rabbi Bernie Fox

Also in the day of your rejoicing, and in your appointed seasons, and in your new moons, you shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt-offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace-offerings; and they shall be to you for a memorial before your G-d: I am Hashem your G-d. (Sefer BeMidbar 10:10)

1. The commandment to create trumpets and their functions

In Parshat BeHa'alotecha, Hashem commands Moshe to fashion two trumpets of beaten silver. The parasha explains that these trumpets had a number of functions. They were to be used to signal the nation to assemble. They signaled the camp to commence its journey to its next destination. These trumpets were to be sounded at times of war or affliction. The above passage explains that they were also sounded on festivals, new months and times of rejoicing when the sacrifices for that occasion were offered. In all of these instances the trumpets were sounded to alert the people or to awaken their awareness. Their sounding was a call for action. This action may have been the movement of the camp or its assembly. At a time of war or danger, the trumpets directed the people to call out to Hashem. On the festivals and

joyous occasions they summon the people to direct their thoughts to Hashem at the time that their sacrifices were offered.[1]

Trumpets were also used in the Mishcan and in the Bait HaMikdash on a daily basis. They were among the instruments that accompanied the leveyim when they sang songs of praise. When the communal sacrifices were offered, the leveyim – the levites – would sing songs of praise to Hashem and their singing was accompanied by instruments. These included trumpets. What does the use of music – vocal and instrumental – in the service of the Mishcan and Bait HaMikdash indicate about the Torah's attitude toward music and as a source of religious inspiration?

After that you shall come to the hill of G-d, where is the garrison of the Philistines; and it shall come to pass, when you come there to the city, that you shall meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a timbrel, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they will be seeking prophesy. (Sefer Shemuel I 10:5)

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2. Music and prophecy

Before addressing this issue, it is appropriate to note another context in which music plays an important role. Maimonides explains that prophecy is received only by those who are transcendent in their wisdom, character, and behavior. However, even one who is exceptional in all of these ways is not yet prepared for prophecy. A proper state of mind is also essential to the prophetic experience.

This principle is illustrated by the life of Yaakov. During all of the years that Yaakov believed that his beloved son Yosef was dead, he did not experience prophecy. Maimonides explains that this is because Yaakov was unable to escape his deep sorrow over the loss of Yosef. Only when he learned that Yosef was alive was his sorrow shed and replaced by happiness and contentment. Maimonides explains Yaakov's experience reflects an important principle regarding prophecy. Prophecy requires a specific state of mind. It can be experienced only by a person who is content and happy. One who is burdened with sorrow and torment cannot achieve prophecy.[2]

Maimonides explains that those transcendent individuals who aspired to achieve prophecy, would utilize the influence of music in order to secure their objective. What was the function of the music? It helped them achieve the requisite state of mind. Music helped them achieve the state of contentment and joy that is requisite to achieving prophecy.

Maimonides cites the above passage as an illustration of this principle. Shemuel tells Shaul that during his upcoming journey he will encounter a group of students who are seeking a prophetic experience. The pasuk describes the various musical instruments that they will have in their company. Why does the passage mention that these aspirants for prophecy will travel with musical instruments? Maimonides responds that those seeking prophecy used musical instruments as an aid in achieving prophecy.[3]

The message that emerges from this discussion is that the Torah recognizes the capacity of music to impact one's mood and state of mind. It can help us achieve joy and a sense of well-being. Presumably, melodies can evoke other states as well. In

the context of the prophetic experience, music is not used as a source of religious inspiration. It is used to create a mood or state of mind.

3. The function of music in Temple service

As noted above, music was a part of the daily service in the Bait HaMikdash. The leveyim sang songs of praise as the communal sacrifices were offered. They were accompanied by musical instruments. It is notable that the instruments were used during the service only in the accompaniment of the leveyim. The leveyim sang their songs of praise and they were accompanied by the instruments.[4] This indicates that the instruments were included to supplement and enhance the singing of the leveyim.[5] It added an instrumental element to their vocal presentation of their songs of praise. In other words, the essential element of the music in the service was the content of the song of praise. Instruments and melody

were used to more effectively communicate the message of the songs.

The use of music in the service in the Bait HaMikdash contrasts with its use by the aspiring prophet. The prophet did not use music for religious inspiration. He used it to evoke the mood consistent with the prophetic experience. The music in the Temple service was intended to accomplish much more than create a mood. It was intended to reinforce and better transmit the message vocally communicated by the songs of the leveyim. The central element of the music was the ideas expressed in the songs; the music served to communicate these ideas.[6]

It emerges from this discussion of the service in the Bait HaMikdash, that music alone was not used as a source of religious inspiration. Inspiration was to be derived from the message of the songs of the leveyim. Music was used to facilitate the message of the songs.

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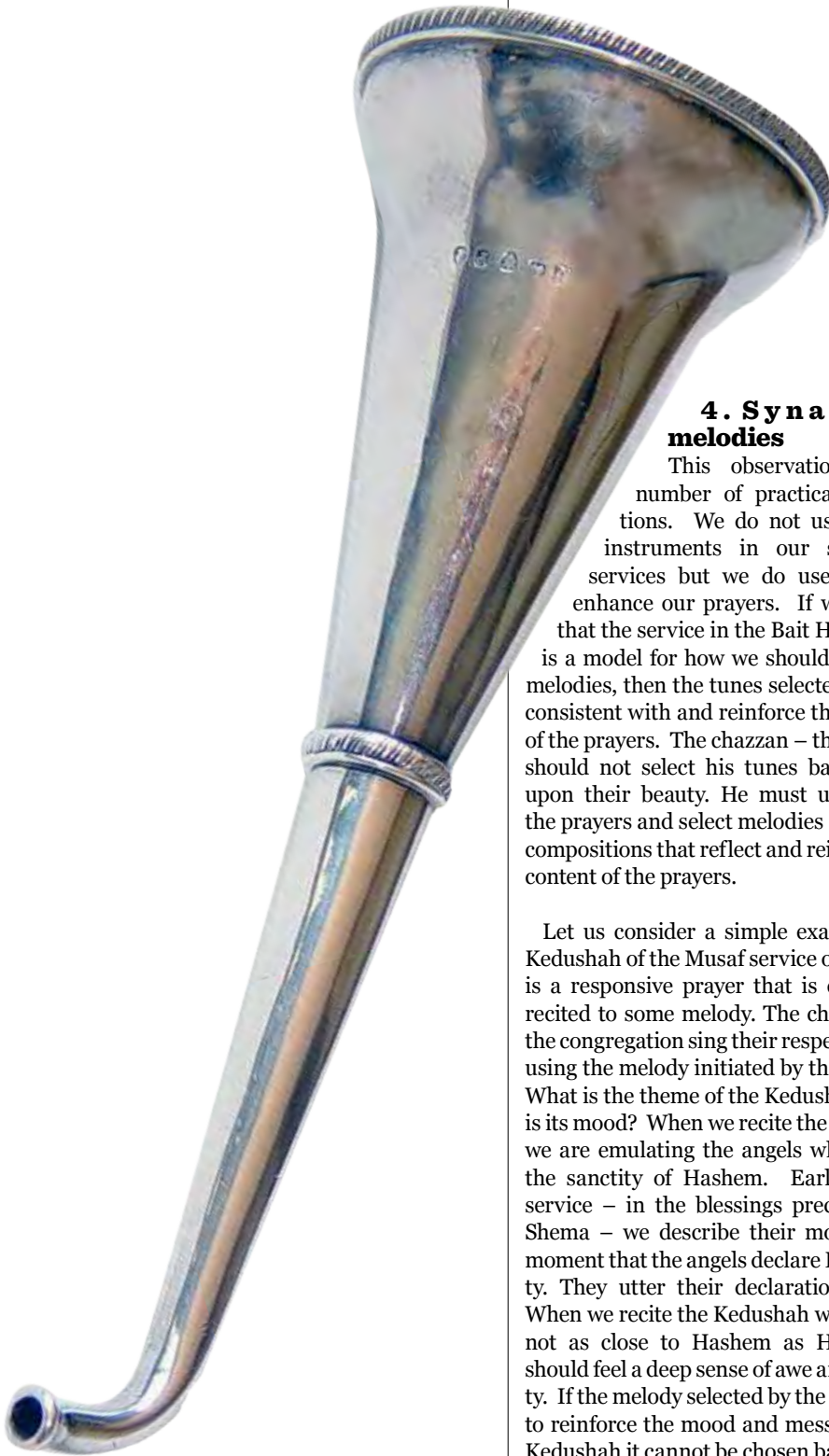
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4. Synagogue melodies

This observation has a number of practical applications. We do not use musical instruments in our synagogue services but we do use tunes to enhance our prayers. If we assume that the service in the Bait HaMikdash is a model for how we should use these melodies, then the tunes selected must be consistent with and reinforce the message of the prayers. The chazzan – the cantor – should not select his tunes based solely upon their beauty. He must understand the prayers and select melodies and create compositions that reflect and reinforce the content of the prayers.

Let us consider a simple example. The Kedushah of the Musaf service on Shabbat is a responsive prayer that is commonly recited to some melody. The chazzan and the congregation sing their respective lines using the melody initiated by the chazzan. What is the theme of the Kedushah? What is its mood? When we recite the Kedushah we are emulating the angels who declare the sanctity of Hashem. Earlier in the service – in the blessings preceding the Shema – we describe their mood at the moment that the angels declare His sanctity. They utter their declaration in awe. When we recite the Kedushah we, who are not as close to Hashem as His angels, should feel a deep sense of awe and humility. If the melody selected by the chazzan is to reinforce the mood and message of the Kedushah it cannot be chosen based solely upon its beauty. It should inspire the reverence and humility that is the very essence of the prayer.

Another issue that emerges from this analysis is that our melodies should be scrupulously faithful to the proper pronunciation of the words and the punctuation of the phrases. The melody must be selected and applied with care. Each word must be pronounced with its proper accent. Accent cannot be sacrificed in order to preserve the rhythm of the melody. Each sentence and phrase must be properly punctuated. The punctuation should not be altered to accommodate the melody.

In summary, it is appropriate to enhance our prayers with melodies. Our melodies should reinforce and communicate the message of our prayers. Because this is their purpose, each melody should be consistent with the theme and mood of the prayer it accompanies and it should preserve the proper pronunciation and punctuation of the material. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, 10:8-10.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Avot, Introduction, chapter 7.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 7:4.

[4] For a description of the musical element of the service see Rabbaynu Menachem Me'eri, Bait HaBechirah, Mesechet Succah, chapter 5, comments on first mishne.

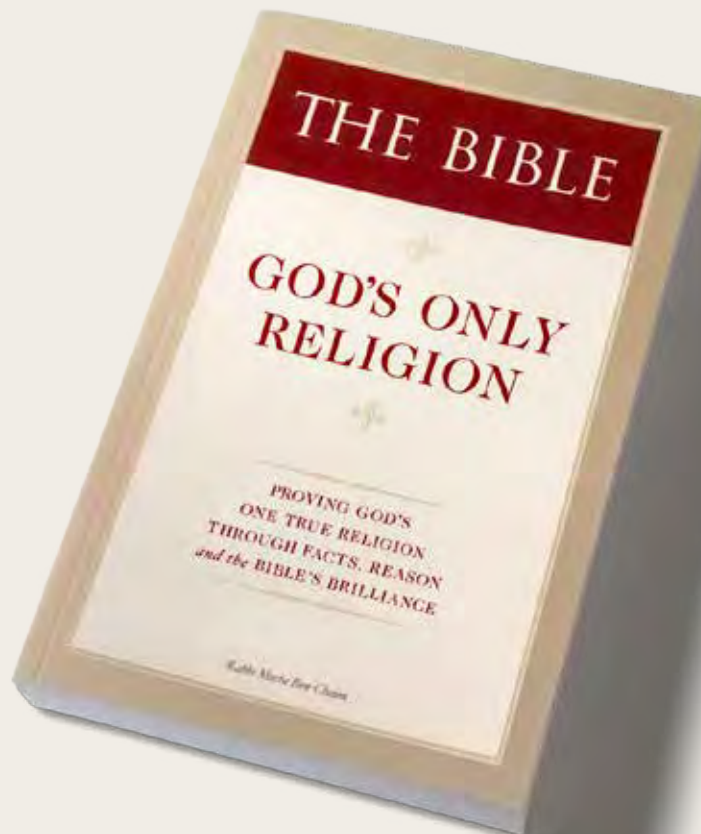
[5] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on the Talmud, Mesechet Succah 50b.

[6] As a young teenager, I had the opportunity to participate in the choir of Cantor Phillip Brummer. His only expectation of me was that I not sing and just stand quietly among those who did the singing. Often, I understood the words only vaguely. But his melodies communicated to me, with remarkable accuracy, the theme and mood of each of the prayers. The experience also provided me with the unique opportunity to observe Cantor Brummer as he sang and chanted the liturgy surrounded by his choir. His expression changed from joy to awe, and to that of a humble petitioner as he progressed through the liturgy. As a young person, it was a very special intimate encounter with a soulful prayer experience. It inspired within me a love for music and an appreciation of the power of prayer.

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The Mysterious Sin

BEHAALOSECHA

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

The tone shifts dramatically from peak to valley in this week's Torah portion of Be'haalotcha. The Jewish people had begun a slow descent into sin, starting from the second half of this Torah portion through the end of the Torah portion of Balak. It is painful to read about the missteps and deviations exhibited by the Jewish people. Each sin, though, is an opportunity to learn and gain insight, so we can avoid the incorrect path. Even the first sin recorded this week, as obscure as it is, affords us a remarkable opportunity.

What exactly was this first sin committed by the Jewish people? The Torah is as cryptic as can be (Bamidbar 11:1-3):

"The people were looking to complain (ke-mitonanim), and it was evil in the ears of the Lord. The Lord heard and His anger flared, and a fire from the Lord burned among them, consuming the extremes of the camp. The people cried out to Moses; Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. He named that place Tab'erah, for the fire of the Lord had burned among them there."

This incident follows immediately by another sequence of sin (ibid 4):

"But the multitude among them began to have strong cravings. Then even the children of Israel once again began to cry, and they said, 'Who will feed us meat?'"

What was the specific sin alluded to in the initial verses? Were people killed as a result? Why is the Torah being so ambiguous about it?

The commentators are acutely aware of the obscurity contained within these verses. To begin, Rashi explains that the complaint of the Jews was in fact a pretext. The Jewish people (or at least those who were involved with this specific sin) were

attempting to find a way to sever their relationship with God. They came up with a ruse:

"They said, Woe is to us! How weary we have become on this journey! For three days we have not rested from the fatigue of walking."

In other words, according to Rashi, they fabricated a complaint. Interestingly enough, in this interpretation, God responds to the "complaint", punishing those involved accordingly:

"I meant it (travelling through the desert) for your own good—that you should be able to enter the Land immediately."

How do we understand God's response to the complaint, knowing that their grievance was in fact a pretext?

The Ibn Ezra offers an even more enigmatic explanation of this mysterious sin, writing simply that the perpetrators spoke "words of sin". The Ramban takes him to task for this "incomplete" explanation. He questions why, according to the Ibn Ezra, does the Torah hide the sin of the Jewish people, rather than explain overtly the nature of the transgression (as in all other instances in the Torah). The Ramban offers his own explanation of the matter. When the Jewish people left Mount Sinai, not far from entering the Land of Israel, they came to the great wilderness. They began to question: What will we do? How will we survive in this desert? What will we eat or drink? When will we exit? This is why they are referred to as the "ke-mitonanim", meaning "similar to" the "mitonanim". They were like those who complain when they are already in pain. God became angry, as they should have followed Him with happiness, looking back at the precedents set through all the

good He did for them to that point. Rather, they were complaining about their current fate.

The Ramban is painting a much more damning picture than the above commentaries, and we get a much clearer sense of the specifics surrounding this sin. However, he does not explain the cause of this sin, or what was driving the Jewish people to complain at this point in time.

When it comes to studying the works of the great commentators, it is critical to understand that often, what they write is a window into their minds. In reality, a person must reflect and think into what concept is being introduced, as the true wisdom of these individuals can then be appreciated.

At first glance, Rashi and the Ibn Ezra seemed more aligned than the Ramban. The Ibn Ezra offers zero specificity regarding the sin. Rashi explains that whatever they were complaining about, it was merely a pretext. The true sin, though, is never really elucidated by Rashi. Furthermore, we see God responding to the pretext, rather than the actual problem. Both of these commentators view this sin as a transition to the next sin (and those that followed), a moment in time where the Jewish people had the opportunity to repent and avoid falling deeper into the traps laid out by their distorted outlook. This period of time, post-Mount Sinai but prior to the entering into the Land of Israel, brought with it a surge of powerful emotions and insecurities. The Jewish people were at a point of complete subservience to God, but were unable to break away from their own base framework. The Ibn Ezra simply describes it as speaking words of sin. They were allowing their emotions to dictate their thoughts, expressed through these words. Rashi goes further than this. In his mind, the dangerous emotions were fueling a need to sever themselves from God. The commitment of being servants to God was too great of a burden. A life dedicated to pursuing His knowledge, rather than one guided by the instincts and driven by insecurities, seemed to have begun to lose its appeal. They needed some type of method of expressing these feelings, and they choose to complain about the short sojourn through the desert. This was a microcosm into their mindset. Rather than see the overall good that would come about by travelling through this desert and get to their future home, they chose to

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dwell on the momentary pain. It is this very formula that lies at the heart of the challenge of Judaism. We must be willing to put aside dwelling on whatever “restriction” the system demands of us in order to focus on the perfection it brings about. God was indeed responding to the true problem here, as their pretext was a direct link to their true problem.

At this point, both Rashi and the Ibn Ezra see the punishment as a transitory concept. The Torah never records the amount of people killed; instead, we see the fire consuming the extremes of the camp. Were people killed? Whether or not the punishment resulted in deaths, its main objective was to stop the Jewish people in their tracks. This warning would hopefully allow them to re-organize their thoughts and return to the proper path. Instead, as we see, they are unable to break away from their emotional state. They succumb, and the next phase of sin is open rebellion.

The Ramban sees this sin as discrete. This does not mean we do not need to explain on a deeper level the nature of the sin. It is interesting to note that in the complaint proffered by the Jewish people, nowhere do they conclude that travelling through the wilderness presages their doom. Instead, the Ramban construes their complaint as one of questioning. Normally, the idea of questioning is a critical part of man's thinking. We see plenty of instances where great Jewish leaders are presented with a plan from God, only to challenge said plan. In many of these occurrences, no criticism is heaped on the individuals. One of the core tenets of Judaism is to use our minds to pursue clarity of truth; if something contradicts reason, we must question until we understand. Alas, this high level of inquiry was not taking place here. The Jewish people had been on the receiving end of Divine Providence, and had witnessed the perfection in God's plan.

Yes, there were times where it seemed all hope was lost (such as at the Red Sea), but they always turned to prayer, to inquire and seek from God the answer to the dilemma. In this case, though, they rejected that method, and opted for questioning how God could pull it off. Standing before this great wilderness, they could not fathom how they were to survive, never mind thrive. They spoke from a state of bitterness, resolved that there was no plan, and began directing their wrath to God. It was the first stage of the rebellion.

There are no “minor” sins as recorded in the Torah. Each instance is a moment in time where the fate of the Jewish people hung in the balance. Even in this vague and cryptic story, one can sense the precariousness of the situation. Through the eyes of the commentators, we are now able to see clearly the underlying forces at play, and we can learn from them to ensure we are on the path to perfection. ■

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