# JewishTimes

**RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT** 

# GOD'S IDENTITY AND MAN'S PURPOSE

Student's Notes on Recent Discussions



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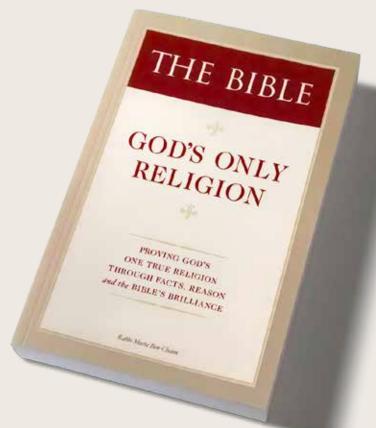
RABBI MOSHE

BEN-CHAIM

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#### LETTERS

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM** 



### The Angel Metatron

Jessie: Would love for you to figure this out! My aunt asked me what a "pulsa denura" is. The ritual is kabbalistic and sounds like voodoo. So leave that aside. But it's based on a gemara (Chagiga 15a):

Acher entered the Pardes and "cut down the plantlings" (i.e. he became corrupt). He saw the angel "Metatron" who received permission to sit and write the merits of Israel. Acher said, "We have a tradition that there is no sitting, competition, no backside, and not tiredness (among the heavenly beings) — perhaps there are two gods!" (Since Metatron was in fact sitting) They took out Metatron and lashed him with 60 pulses of fire ("pulsa denura") and said to him, "You should have stood up when you saw him (an earthly being)!" They gave him permission to erase the merits of Acher (because of his blasphemy). (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

#### LETTERS

My auestions:

Of course, if Acher sees that it is a vision and [thus] metaphorical, why would he ask that question?

What is the metaphor and what does it mean? Who is Metatron; what idea does he stand for?

What about Acher seeing Metatron "sit and write the merits of Israel" caused Acher's question?

What was Metatron's error; why should he have "stood?"

Does "60 pulses of fire" mean anything other than that Metatron did something wrong, or is there a deeper metaphor?

Rabbi: Metatron is an angel. As you know, an angel is a natural force, which God created to carry out His will in the universe. Thus, each angel controls a specific law, like Michael who controls snow and Gabriel who controls fire (Meharsha ibid). A prime example is found in Exodus just prior to the Jews' entrance into the Reed Sea: "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.

Over which sphere of natural law does Metatron control? What are the clues?

Sitting as opposed to standing[1] refers to one who is relaxed vs. one who must comply, showing respect by standing. So something about Metatron did not "comply" as do all other angels. Maharsha quotes the Navi, "God sat, the angels stood." But Metatron is the exception...he "sat" too, like God. What does non-compliance mean?

The Rabbis also teach that Metatron is named after God, meaning there is a "close tie" between this angel and God. Another explanation is not that he sat, but that he too wrote the merits of Israel.

What is meant by "Metatron should have stood before Acher?"

You are correct; what was Metatron's error expressed as it received 60 pulses of fire?" Why "fire"? (60 fire pulses seems to mean as you suggested, Metatron required correction.)

My understanding is that Acher "entering the garden" refers to his attempt to ponder metaphysics, i.e., how God runs human affairs. Remember, he is the same Acher who saw a son climb a ladder to send away the mother bird at his father's request; both acts (honoring a parent and sending the mother bird) are to result in longevity as the Torah states. Yet, the lad fell off the ladder and died. This distressed Acher, as in this case, he found a conflict between the Torah and reality.

In this case, Acher was confronted with one of God's angels, Metatron. He was sitting, unlike all other angels who must stand before God. What does "standing before God" mean? It refers to unequivocal compliance with God's will. Angels control natural forces by their very design. They immediately execute God's will, as if they are standing at attention and in full compliance in all their missions. But these are "individual" forces of nature, like fire and snow. These elements, as all elements, have strict designs and laws to which they are eternally bound, as if standing before their Creator. However, aside from individual discreet laws...there is the whole of all natural laws we call "nature." In its myriad of laws and systems, man will at times become victim to unfortunate circumstance. Hurricane Sandy pummeled the eastern US 5 years back. Rain, high tides and wind, independently, do not typically cause problems. But the combination was devastating during that super-storm. Man will then accuse nature — the aggregate of these laws — like Acher accused Metatron. Man will cry of injustice.

I believe Metatron is "nature." Acher viewed nature as sitting, as if it were a second deity, a second force functioning outside of God's system of Reward & Punishment, It didn't "stand" before God means Acher didn't see nature as perfectly inline with the merits of the Jews. Just like the son died and should have been secure from harm, Acher viewed the current state of the Jews as unjustly afflicted by natural law...as if another power determined the Jews' fate. In this sense, Metatron too "writes" the merits of Israel. "Writing merits" can refer to that which "causes" one's merits/demerits. Thus, a faulty conclusion derived from natural order earns one his demerits in accepting a fallacy.

This is stressed by Metatron "not standing" for Acher. Meaning, Acher too sensed a chasm between his sense of personal justice, and what nature meted out to him. Nature should have stood for him, i.e., Acher should have experienced God's attentiveness, as if nature "stood" for him. Acher concluded: there must be another deity, as God cannot be unjust. Acher's error was his limited understanding. He viewed isolated verses and events, assuming he knew all considerations, and based on his knowledge, the world should comply with his views.

What is the idea that Metatron was punished? Why with fire? Well, fire is the one element that destroys nature. Now, the idea of nature (Metatron) requiring a punishment means nature was not inline with man's view of God's providence. Nature, at times, makes man question God's justice. That is, there are times that although one is just, he will suffer through natural order. An intelligent man will accept that a sudden downpour can ruin his expensive suit, but he won't

suggest this is God's punishment. Rather, it is natural law, from which he did not take proper precaution to avoid. It was self-inflicted.

Maimonides says the misfortune of righteous people is also due to their interruption of contemplation on God (full text in note 2 below). To the onlooker, like Acher, this is unjust. Nature giving this "poor reflection" of God's justice is called "Metatron receiving 60 pulses of fire."

The medrash concludes that Metatron punished Acher by removing his merits. This means that Acher was subjected to natural laws that afflicted him. thereby reinforcing his false view of a second deity and eliminating his merits in the process. One's false views of God, such as Acher's ditheism (two deities) forfeit one's merits and the afterlife.

Jessie: If they gave him permission to erase Acher" merits because Acher had a distorted view, so now Acher is punished by being subject to the laws of nature. But wasn't Metatron wrong in giving Acher a false view of reality?

Rabbi: Yes, Metatron/nature gives an impression, but man is incorrect to jump to conclusions based on natural order alone. This is the very message of "tzaddik v'ra lo; the righteous who suffer." Meaning, don't cry injustice, for there is more than meets the eye.

Jessie: If nature gave a false idea that it runs itself, contrary to justice, how do the pulses of fire correct

Rabbi: I don't know. I must think further.

Related article: http://www.mesora.org/angelspunished.html

[1] Haftorah of Yisro; Isaiah 6

[2] "If man frees his thoughts from worldly matters, obtains a knowledge of God in the right way, and rejoices in that knowledge, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him while he is with God, and God with him. When he does not meditate on God, when he is separated from God, then God is also separated from him; then he is exposed to any evil that might befall him; for it is only that intellectual link with God that secures the presence of Providence and protection from evil accidents. Hence it may occur that the perfect man is at times not happy, whilst no evil befalls those who are imperfect; in these cases what happens to them is due to chance (Guide, book iii, chap. li)."



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RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT GOD'S IDENTITY AND MAN'S PURPOSE Student's Notes on Recent Talks 6 WWW.MESORA.ORG/JEWISHTIM

ollowing are notes and my own elaborations on two recent discussions by Rabbi Israel Chait. I hope I have grasped his true intent

I must first thank Rabbi Chait. I regularly ask him questions, and once again, the very next day, he called me to share his answer.

Rabbi Mann questioned Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons. The Torah says, "Jacob blessed Joseph and said, 'God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac lived, God who led me from times past until today, the angel who saved me from all evil should bless the children...' (Gen. 48:15,16)."

Rabbi Mann meant that Judaism is most firm on the reality of all realities: God alone created and runs the world. Jacob could not have been blessing Joseph's sons, suggesting they relate to an angel (natural force) as opposed to relating to God directly. How then do we understand the mention of the angel?

Rabbi Chait explained, a word must be inserted as follows:

"God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac lived, God who led me from times past until today *through* the angel who saved me from all evil should bless the children..."

Meaning, God acts through angels. God uses angels — physical forces of nature — to achieve His will. Angels are not autonomous. Rabbi Chait said to attribute free will to an angel is idolatrous, as it supposes something other than God can willfully control the universe. While man has freewill, our powers are quite limited; no man would pray to another man to change his fate. But if we suggest an angel has freewill, and it can override natural law, we then suggest a being exists other than God which can alter my fate. That is idolatry.

Rabbi Chait agreed with my equation of animals to angels, in that both are restricted to a design and a limited behavior. Rabbi Chait said even when the angels bless God, this is not a freewill event, but their precise design dictates they must praise Him. Our error is equating human praise to angelic praise: ours is due to freewill, but angels "must" praise God. A school of fish swim uniformly, and in perfect unison it darts in a new direction when approached by a hunter. Each fish in a given species shares an identical design and behavior. Angels are the same; they have no freewill and must behave in accordance with God's design of their natures.



Regarding the Akeida (Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac) which also changes from God to angel, Rabbi Chait said that Ibn Ezra states there is no difference between God and angel: God controls the angel, so it's all God's will.

In the end, God's identity is the sole cause and governor of the universe, and man's fate.

#### **MAN'S PURPOSE**

39 Torah laws including carrying are forbidden on Sabbath. However, when the eighth day after birth coincides with Sabbath, circumcision must be performed. Cutting the flesh and carrying, which is normally prohibited, is permitted if one forgot the special knife which is used. Rashi states (Talmud Sabbath 130a) that according to Rabbi Eliezer, one may carry the knife openly, "to make known that due to his love for the mitzvah of circumcision, he profanes Sabbath" by carrying. Rabbi Chait said there's a problem: there is no profanation of Sabbath, for the Talmud teaches (Sanhedrin 59b), "On the eighth day circumcise the flesh of his foreskin (Lev. 12:3)." Sanhedrin teaches the derivation from this verse is that even if the eighth day is the Sabbath, God has commanded we forgo Sabbath prohibition in order to circumcise the newborn on the eighth day. Thus, Torah has already taught that there is no "profanation" of Sabbath when it comes to circumcision. Rabbi Chait's powerful question is how Rashi could say, due to his love for this commands he "profanes" Sabbath. There is no profanation!

Rabbi Chait offered a marvelous insight. He said that the profanation referred to here is not the typical "halachik" (lawful) profaning of Sabbath. For as he

said, there is no halachik profanation, as Torah commands us in circumcision on the eighth day. Profanation here refers to a novel concept in an area other than halacha. There is also "philosophical" profanation...

Sabbath is "profane" when compared to circumcision; a matter far more weighty than Sabbath. What does this mean? It means that although the system of Sabbath and Torah is of primary importance, if a person does not perfect himself displaying real value of a Torah idea through action — those systems cannot compensate. Without perfection, embodied by circumcision — the act of restricting one's instinctual drives - man can study Torah and observe Sabbath, but he has not become perfect. Regarding circumcision, God said to Abraham, "...walk before Me and be perfect (Gen. 17:1)." One can praise the act of charity, but if he

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

never donates, he in fact does not "value" the institution of charity. "Actions speak louder than words." So, one can keep Sabbath and study Torah, but he must embody in action all he learns. Otherwise, his studies are theoretical; he lacks any real value of God's laws. He is not perfect. This explains why Sabbath prohibitions are suspended when circumcision coincides. Maimonides teaches[1] that circumcision reduces sexual gratification for both genders. God commands man to rise above his instinctual drives and master them, so as to engage his energies in the higher sphere of the intellect and the pursuit of greater knowledge of God. But man cannot disengage from his lusts if they are too strong. Therefore this command helps us on the path God declares is our purpose in having been created: the life of pondering nature and Torah, and unraveling ever-increasing knowledge and brilliance. Human perfection is so primary, God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision with 13 treaties, while Torah was given with just 3 treaties. Our very point. Furthermore, 99% of Genesis focusses not on Torah laws, but on the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, for they arrived at human perfection. This concept is echoed as follows. All mitzvos have a blessing prior to perfomance; including circumcision. But circumcision has an additional blessing, "...to enter him into the covenant of Abraham our father." If I recall properly, Rabbi Chait stated many years back that there is a fine lesson with this additional blessing. Although Torah was given 400 years after Abraham, and it is not Abraham's lifestyle, but this post-Abrahamic Torah system that guides us, nonetheless we retain the pre-Torah covenant of Abraham's circumcision. The reason this one element of the pre-Torah era is retained, is because it embodies the perfection of man. Before Torah existed, Abraham demonstrated the natural perfection man can attain on his own. The intellect is an amazing tool, and Abraham embodied the pinnacle of human perfection. Retaining Abraham's perfection in our blessings underscores human perfection at it's finest. Rashi on Genesis 24:42 says, "Rabbi Acha said, 'More pleasant is the speech of the servants of the Patriarchs before God, than the Torah (commands) of their children'..." This is precisely our point.

Finally, it is interesting to note that God did not command Abraham in Sabbath, but He did command him in circumcision.

[1] Guide for the Perplexed, book III chap. xlix

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**WEEKLY PARSHA** 

# MOSES'

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM** AND DANI ROTH

y best friend Dani Roth asked me this excellent question, which I never heard asked even by adults:

"Why did Moses need to wave a staff when announcing the plagues? Couldn't he just announce the plagues, since it was God who really made the plagues?"

Once I heard Dani ask this, I said "That's a great question!" I immediately started thinking and researching the Torah for clues. Dani is correct: God has no needs, so whether Moses waved a staff, or simply announced to Pharaoh the next plague, or even if Moses did nothing, God can cause the plague to start independent of Moses' actions. Furthermore, what difference is it to Pharaoh and Egypt if they see Moses waving a staff or not? The plague alone is the impressive event!

To answer Dani's question and learn the significance of Moses' staff, we must study the first instance of the staff found in Exodus 4:2 during Moses' first prophecy at the burning bush on Mount Sinai. During this prophecy (which commenced in chap. 3), God outlines His plans to send Moses to address Pharaoh to answer the cries of Abraham's descendants and deliver them to freedom, also giving them the land of Israel.

Moses was the most humble man on Earth[1], and therefore when God summoned him to lead the Exodus, he replied to God, "Who am I that I should address Pharaoh and take out the Jews?" God then assures Moses He will be with him. Moses then asks what name of God he should use, and God says, "I am, that I am." God then instructs Moses to gather the Jewish elders and inform them of His plan, and God assures Moses "they will listen to your voice (Exod. 3:18)." God concludes that He knows Egypt's king will not initially release the Jews, and that He will bring the plagues. Ultimately the Egyptian

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#### **WEEKLY PARSHA**

king will release the Jewish nation, and the Jewish women will ask the Egyptian women for gold, silver and clothes and they will despoil Egypt. This apparently ends God's address to Moses.

However, we notice that in God's initial presentation to Moses about how these events will take place, God does not command Moses to use his staff. This is significant.

In the next verse Moses says, "...they [the Jews] will not believe me and they won't listen to my voice for they will say 'God did not appear to you' (Exod. 4:1)." Moses says this, despite God's earlier assurance that the Jews would in fact believe Moses (Exod. 3:18). Some Rabbis[2] critique Moses for this disbelief, while Maimonides teaches[3] Moses was merely asking "how" God intended His plan will cause the Jews to accept Moses' words, as God stated in verse 3:18. (I will soon propose a third possibility.) Nonetheless, God responds, "What is in your hand?" Moses replied, "A staff." God told Moses to cast it downward. Moses did so, and it became a snake. Moses then fled from the snake. God then told Moses to grab its tail and it returned to a staff. God explained this miracle was "in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you (ibid 4:5)." In 4:17 God commands Moses to use this staff to perform the miracles and the plagues[4]. But we must ask, as God already told Moses "they will listen to your voice (Exod. 3:18)" even without the staff, how can God now say that due to the staff miracle, "the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you"? The Jews' belief is independent of the staff's miracle!

God then performed another miracle of Moses' hand becoming leprous. God continued:

"And if they do not believe you, and they don't listen to the voice of the first sign, they will listen to the voice of the second sign. And if they don't believe also to these two signs, and they don't listen to your voice, then you shall take of the Nile's water and pour it on dry ground and that water you take from the Nile will become blood on dry land (Exod. 4:8,9)." What is this "voice" referred to here? Furthermore, Moses too says "will not believe me, and they won't listen to my voice." Why is "voice" in addition to Moses himself?

Now, while it is true, as Dani's father said, God could have ultimately planned Moses to use the staff, regardless of Moses' apparent initiation of the need, it is equally tenable that God's instruction to Moses to use the staff was only a concession to Moses and not part of God's original plan. A few other considerations lead me to this assumption. First of all, after Moses pleads with God to find another emissary and God concedes to allow Aaron to speak instead of Moses, God includes in that concession the statement "And this staff take in your hand with which you will perform the miracles (Exod. 4:17)." Why is the command to take the staff joined to Aaron's appointment? Secondly, in verse 4:20 the staff is mentioned again, but now Moses calls it the "Staff of God."

#### THE PURPOSE OF THE STAFF

Moses was most humble, viewing himself as no one special. He did not wish leadership. Perhaps Moses' very humility made him perfect for this role in God's plan. As God wished to display His greatness to the Egyptians, a humble man would ensure that the focus remains on God, and not allow leadership to corrupt

I wish to suggest the purpose of the staff is connected to Moses' humility. Perhaps God gave Moses this staff to equip Moses with complete confidence. Holding the staff throughout the signs and plagues - the staff that turned into a snake and back again - Moses was thereby emboldened to carry out God's mission confidently. He would be able to speak with a "voice" of confidence. Perhaps also, God grouped together His concession of sending Aaron with His command to take the staff (ibid 4:17) to say in other words, that both were concessions - "for Moses" - not Pharaoh or others. And Moses' reference to the staff in 4:20 as "God's staff" is another way of saying that Moses viewed the staff as a surety from God: Moses' sentiment of satisfaction that he will succeed.

This explanation of the staff also explains why the staff was a "response," and not in God's original plan: the staff was for Moses, not the Jews, as God already said the Jews will believe Moses "prior" to the staff's miracle. When God says the staff will be used "in order that the Jews will believe that the God of the patriarchs appeared to you (ibid 4:5)," God does not mean the staff is what convinces the Jews, for God said "they will listen to your voice (Exod. 3:18)" without the staff. Thus, the staff was to provide Moses with the necessary assurance, in order that "he" feels confident that the Jews will listen. The staff was to embolden Moses, and was unnecessary for the Jews or Pharaoh.

So Dani, thank you once again for asking me a great Torah question that has lead me to learn new Torah ideas. Together, we are sharing Torah with many other people who will read and learn from this article.

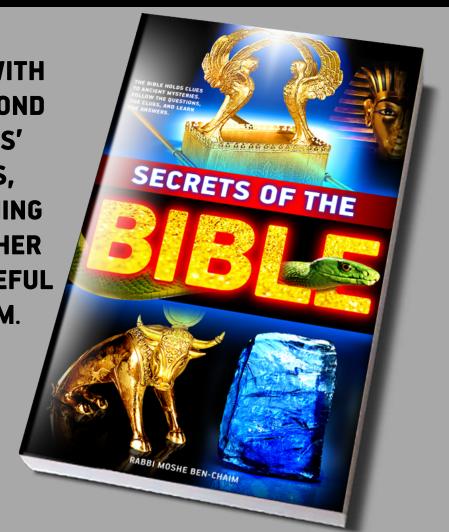
- [1] Numbers 12:3
- [2] Rashi, Ramban
- [3] Guide for the Perplexed, book I, chap. lxiii
- [4] Ibn Ezra, Exod. 4:17



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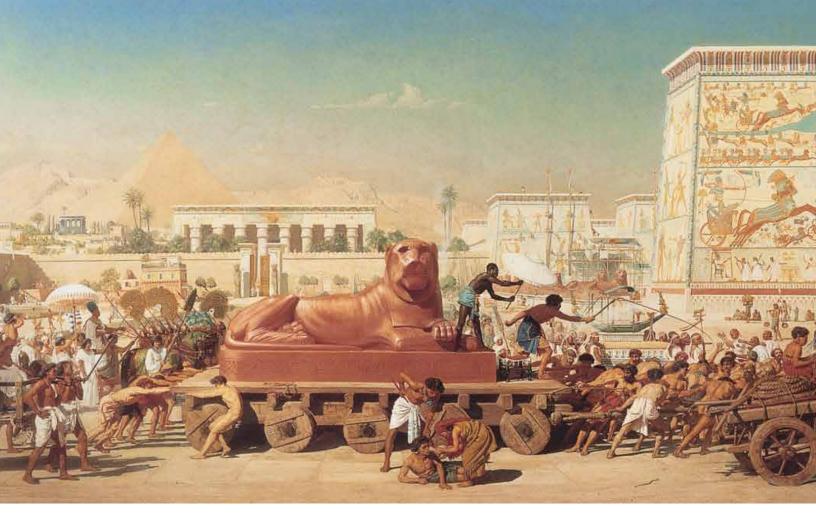
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# DOES **WEEKLY PARSHA** HASHEM ABANDON US?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

his week's parsha initiates the second Book of the Torah, Shemot. Its main theme is the formation of the Jewish people and their receiving the Torah at Sinai. An entire nation was present to witness Divine Revelation and hear Hashem address them from Heaven.

Why hasn't any other people made such an audacious claim?

The parsha begins with the experience of the Jews in Egypt. Their situation was very secure and comfortable as long as Yosef and his family were alive.

However, historical conditions are in a constant state of flux, and we must always be alert to the winds of change. The generation that had emigrated to Egypt passed on. Their descendants, the future Jewish nation, went through a period of tremendous growth. They became numerous,

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#### **WEEKLY PARSHA**

powerful, and expanded to the point where "the land became filled with them." From a purely physical standpoint, the original family of 70 souls had become a "national entity."

And then, suddenly, the party was over, and the Jews were not prepared. Pharaoh had guaranteed his protection because of his great gratitude to Yosef, and he had been true to his word.

But everything changed when "a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef." How could

he not know such a fundamental aspect of

his country's history? Probably he knew about him solely on a factual plane, but he had not lived through the famine and experienced the

salvation Yosef wrought. Great heroes are quickly forgotten. Does today's generation remember the exploits of men such as George Patton or Douglas McArthur and many others who saved the country and the world from tyranny to preserve the beneficent lifestyle of wonderful our country?

Although advent of a king who did not venerate Yosef is not surprising, the hostility he displayed toward the Jews is incomprehensible. He accused them of being a fifth column who would not be loyal to Egypt. In fact, he believed, that if an enemy were to attack they would turn against Egyptians and dispossess them.

None of this was true. Jews have always been the most loyal citizens of the lands they have inhabited. However, deep-seated envy and hatred has induced a certain paranoia against Jews in the minds of their enemies. This psychosis is the source of our enemies' conspiratorial theories about us.

On the basis of a false and malicious narrative, the wicked Egyptian ruler devastatingly persecuted the Jews, culminating in onerous enslavement.

How could such a dramatic change of fortune occur? Can it happen again in this era of "enlightenment"? What lessons can we glean from this dark episode in our history?

The written text does not describe all aspects of the deterioration of the Jews' situation in Egypt. However, a vital piece of the puzzle can be found in the Rambam's famous Code of Jewish Law.

In the section on idolatry, he describes Avraham's renunciation of paganism and discovery of the true G-d. Our patriarch's mission was to educate mankind in the knowledge and proper worship of

Hashem informed Avraham that his descendants would form a unique nation that would accomplish this goal by accepting and preserving the Torah that He would reveal to them.

It was the task of every generation after Avraham to maintain his special understanding of the Creator and his specific way of serving Him. Unfortunately, at a certain point in their Egyptian sojourn, the Jews began to abandon their Abrahamic heritage. The process of assimilation was so pervasive that it almost reached the point of no return.

The Rambam describes this development: "It would not have been long before the doctrine that Avraham had instilled in his offspring would have been uprooted. The descendants of Yaakov were on the brink of lapsing into the errors of the world and their corrupt ways. He brought forth Moshe, our teacher, the master of all Prophets and sent him to redeem the Children of Israel."

Oppression and enslavement occurred at the very time when the Jews were discarding the ways of their fathers and lapsing into the primitive idolatry of Egypt.

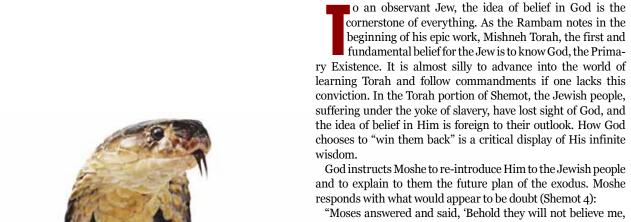
The lesson is that, as long as we are close to Hashem, we enjoy His protection. When we abandon the fundamental principles that define us as His People, we become vulnerable to all the enemies who lie in wait.

Our history teaches that whenever we enjoy great freedom and acceptance in foreign lands, we become spiritually imperiled.

Statistics show that the levels of assimilation and intermarriage among American Jews have achieved epic proportions. There is something seriously amiss if we only turn to Torah when persecuted, but abandon it when things go well with us.

This is the challenge that confronts us. We must seek to resolve it with all our heart and soul. Let us pray that Hashem grants us the wisdom to recognize the true beauty and eternal relevance of Torah so we can embrace it out of pure love.

Shabbat shalom



and they will not heed my voice, but they will say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you'."

God's responds with the three miraculous demonstrations to the Jewish people. This begins with the first miracle:

"And the Lord said to him, "What is this in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." And He said, "Cast it to the ground," and he cast it to the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch forth your hand and take hold of its tail." So Moses stretched forth his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand."

Why have this miracle performed?

""In order that they believe that the Lord, the God of their forefathers, has appeared to you, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

One would think this should have been sufficient. Yet God continues:

> "And the Lord said further to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom," and he put

> > his hand into his bosom, and he took it out, and behold, his hand was leprous like snow. And He said, "Put your hand back into your bosom," and he put his hand back into his bosom, and [when] he

took it out of his bosom, it had become again like [the rest of] his flesh."

Somehow this second miracle does not seem to be sufficient. God expresses concern that the

Jewish people will not believe the first two demonstrations:

"And it will come to pass, that if they do not believe you, and they do not heed the voice of the first sign, they will believe the voice of the last sign. And it will come to pass, if they do not believe either of these two signs, and they do not heed your voice, you shall take of the water of the Nile and spill it upon the dry land, and the water that you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry land."

Why the need for three miracles? Most of the commentators focus on the specific choices of the first two miracles. Why did God need to show these to Moshe? Why not just command him to perform these miracles in front of the people? Many point to the snake and the tzaraat as punishments of sorts for Moshe's casting aspersions on the Jewish people. God has Moshe perform these miracles for himself as a lesson concerning his

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RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

overall critical approach up to this point. One can therefore extract a specific idea about each miracle and its effect on Moshe.

What is not discussed is the necessity of the three miracles for the Jewish people. Why would it be necessary to have three miracles for the nation? God justifies each additional miracle due to a lack of faith in Him. If the first miracle doesn't "work", the second one might, and if not that one, the third one will. Why would they still have doubts after the first miracle? A clear breach in the laws of nature should have been enough to convince the doubters. And if it wouldn't, why would the second one do the trick? Maybe three? Why stop there?

There is a more fundamental question one could ask regarding these miracles. There are of course a myriad of options God could choose when demonstrating His power. Is there an idea we can derive from each specific choice of miracle, and how each one would serve to win over the skeptics?

The first miracle involves Moshe's staff being turned into a snake, and then returning to its original form as a staff. Obviously, taking an inanimate object and giving it life is a clear breach in the laws of nature. At the same time, as we know later on with a comparable performance in front of Pharaoh and his magicians, sleight of hand can lead to this result. In the personal example given to Moshe, the return to its original composition as a staff is the important step, something that can only be done via a breach. The concept, then, is demonstrating God's complete control over nature. After seeing this miracle, one would conclude that God is the master of the natural world. The question of "why continue" becomes even stronger, as seeing this miracle should have been convincing. What does the second miracle add to convince some of the skeptics otherwise?

The second miracle involved Moshe's hand becoming afflicted with tzaraat. There is a subtle change here, one that helps clarify how this miracle had a greater effect on those who might still be doubtful. The first miracle involved

something external to man in the physical world, the staff. God demonstrated a command of the natural world. Man, though, sees himself from a position of control as well. On a daily basis, we have a mistaken sense that we are in complete control, and we are able to harness the physical world to do our bidding. Sure, God projects control over the world around us. but so does man (at least he thinks he does). This miracle shattered that image. For man to be effected in a manner like Moshe was indicated a level of control even man himself did not possess. The second miracle helped break down another psychological layer of skepticism.

The third miracle follows this trajectory, and was suited for the people not quite ready to accept the complete authority of God. This miracle would target the Nile River, and involve a similar demonstration of complete control. The Nile was a source of power in Egypt, both in an economic and theological framework. To demonstrate power over the Nile would mean supremacy over competing ideologies. God sought to express the idea of His exclusive control. and this meant demonstrating authority over incorrect beliefs. For those still questioning God's power, this final demonstration sought to extinguish all doubts. Through the third miracle, God manifested His exclusivity in the ideological realm.

Plan A, as described by the Torah, was for the Jewish people to be convinced of God's truth through philosophical reasoning. While that could be successful for a segment of the population at the time, it would appear much of the nation would be blind to this type of approach. God adds an additional approach of using miracles, demonstrating to them His complete control over the universe. Even this approach required a progression, as many Jews were too entrenched in their pre-conceived notions to make the necessary steps forward. Each miracle sought to break down another barrier, resulting in an undeniable recognition of God.

With that in place, the exodus could now begin. ■

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