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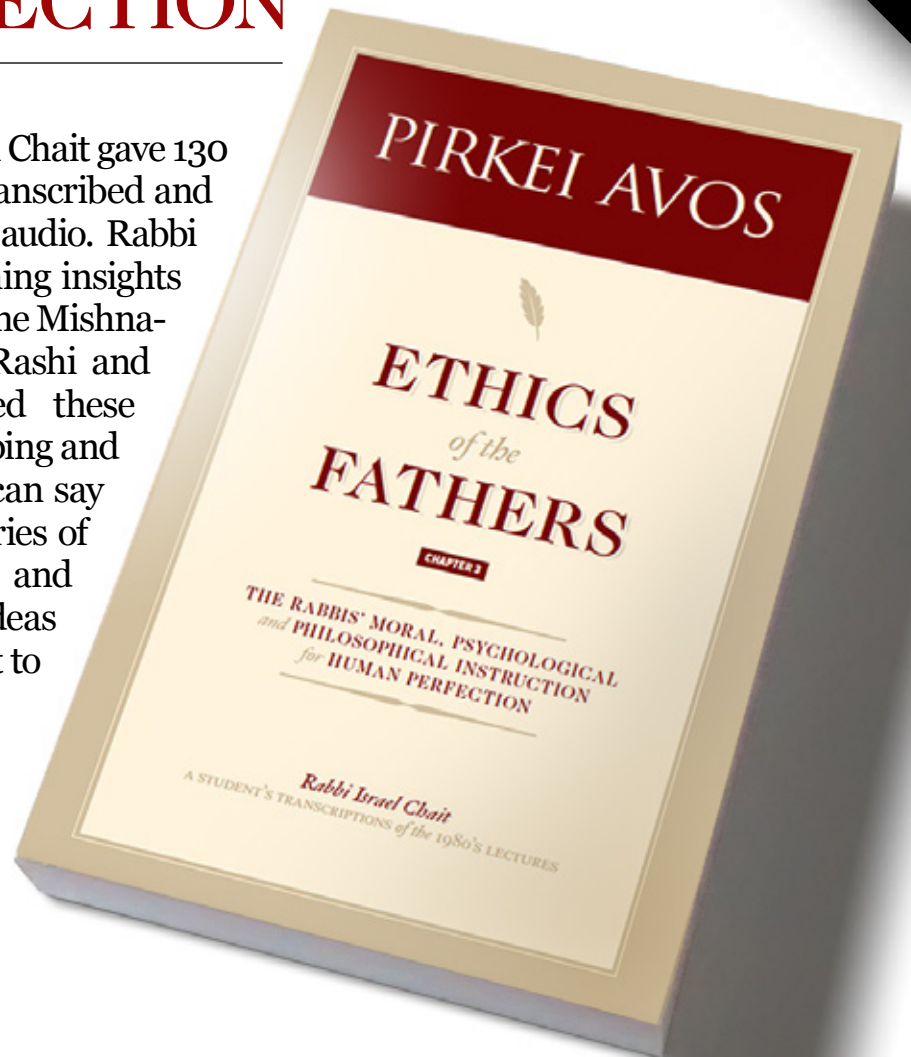
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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



Mohammed, Jesus or Moses: Who's right and how to know?

The following is a recent email dialogue over the course of 1-2 weeks.

Reader: I left Christianity due to its falsehoods. Islam appears to address everyone, inviting all to come under its fold, while Judaism doesn't address anyone but the Jew. Therefore, I am leaning towards Islam.

Rabbi: I understand why one would leave Christianity: its dogma are contradictory and incomprehensible. And its principles violate God's Bible of not deifying man, and that God does not change and certainly does not become a man. But to lean towards Islam too is baseless, as it does not offer proof of divine origin; a mass-attended event demonstrating super-natural phenomena. All religions except Judaism make claims, but offer no evidence. Evidence means an event witnessed by masses. We have evidence of WWI, WWII, Alexander the Great, Egypt, etc. The evidence is "mass witnesses"... which is absent in Islam and Christianity. Thus, all religions except Judaism are based on blind faith or belief, and not proof.

There is a world of difference between a widely accepted "belief," versus an accepted "event." Belief requires no proof, and therefore it is most likely false. Whereas Revelation at Sinai would not have been accepted by the world, had it never occurred. Had some man named Moses approached an unknowing group of people or town attempting to convince them

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that they witnessed miracles including a voice emanating from fire, when in fact they were just doing their daily chores at that specified time of Moses' reported claims, they would reject Moses as insane. Certainly, Moses' claim of such a miracle witnessed by people who never there would never become a religion followed by millions and agreed to by the other two world religions. Just as any historical event—not belief—which is accepted by the world is validated by such unanimous acceptance, Judaism too is validated in this identical manner.

Revelation at Sinai stands alone as the only mass-witnessed event of divine revelation. The Bible even identifies by tribe and name attendees (Numbers). Other religions accept this history of revelation at Sinai when God gave Moses and the Jews His Bible, as there is no controverting historical events attended by masses.

Reader: Do you believe in the divine origin of revelations given to Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Micah among many others? After all, these revelations are not witnessed by the masses. On what basis then did the Jewish nation include these revelations as part of the Hebrew Bible? Thank you.

Rabbi: The Torah was given at Sinai in the eyes of the masses. That is its divine validation. The prophets performed miracles, which was their individual divine validation. Joshua split the Jordan and stopped the sun and moon in front of the nation. Elijah prayed to God on Mt. Carmel and fire descended from the sky and consumed the sacrifices and large quantities of water and stones...also in front of masses. And for those whom did not perform miracles, like King David and Solomon, as they followed Moses' laws from God, wherein God commands that we follow the prophet, they are endorsed by God through Torah, and Islam and Christianity which reject the Torah are thereby dismissed as false religions. They directly violate God's words on many counts. All other religions lack any public miracle. They lack proof of divine origin.

Reader: Thank you for your response and patience during the course of this conversation.

Yes, it is true that the Torah was given to the masses at Sinai. However, "masses" is confined to the mixed multitude that left Egypt.

Rabbi: Yes, and they include the children of Jacob, the tribes and their household names. Numbers commences with names and a count of the Jewish men alone above age 20, all of whom were in attendance at Sinai.

Reader: Moses commanded that these revelations be taught to the descendants of Israel. There are no textual indication which mentions that the Jews are commanded to preach the Torah [to others].

Rabbi: God's command of Torah adherence—613 commands—is upon the Jew alone; 7 commands apply to the gentile. The other nations as a whole rejected monotheism; they were all idolaters, except Abraham. God communicated with Abraham, protected him, taught him through prophecy and gave his seed the Torah. The Jew is now to observe Torah, not only for himself, but as God says,

Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who, upon hearing all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people" (Deut. 4:6).

Thus, Torah disagrees with your assessment. Torah says our actions will impress the other nations. We are to act in a way that gives the proper impression of Torah to others. Why? Because God wishes all people to find Torah impressive, for the purpose of following it. But we don't preach it, and certainly do not coerce like other religions. Rather, we embody the lifestyle and welcome all who wish to benefit. Be mindful that every human being is equal, sharing the same potential of benefitting from God's one religion. It is nonsensical the God creates so many nations and only wants the best life for just one of those nations. God's actions are not futile, and such an opinion would suggest that the creation of all nations but the Jews is futile.

The prophets too, many times discuss how in the future, all nations will recognize Judaism as the truth and their beliefs as false. See for example Jeremiah 16:19:

O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, My refuge in a day of trouble, to You nations shall come from the ends of the Earth and say, "Our fathers inherited utter delusions, things that are futile and worthless."

God's prophets reveal the objective is for mankind, not just the Jews. Consider that God sent Jonah to Nineveh warning that they repent, and He sent Moses to Pharaoh exposing Egypt's idols as helpless against His 10 Plagues. God wished these nations to follow him. These examples are to educate all people, then and today.

When the queen of Sheba visited King Solomon and presented him with numerous questions, her response to his wisdom was this:

When the queen of Sheba observed all of Solomon's wisdom, and the palace he had built, the fare of his table, the seating of his courtiers, the service and attire of his attendants, and his wine service, and the burnt offerings that he offered at the House of the Lord, she was left breathless. She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own land about you and your wisdom was true. But I did not believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even the half had been told me; your wisdom and wealth surpass the reports that I heard. How fortunate are your men and how fortunate are these your courtiers, who are always in attendance to you and can hear your wisdom! Praised be the Lord your God, who delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel. It is because of the Lord's everlasting love for Israel that He made you king to administer justice and righteousness."

The queen attested to the truth of Torah's ways. Ruth too recognized the truth of Torah and abandoned her Moabite religion. She is the example from which we derive conversion laws. Her offspring are Kings David and Solomon, and eventually, the Messiah. Thus, God has no favorites, except for the one who follows Him. Lineage is irrelevant; Messiah will descend from a Moabite woman.

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Reader: Let's take the 1st commandment; the prohibition against idolatry as an example. Most Jewish opinion say that Christianity is prohibited for the Jew, but is permissible for the Gentile. Christianity is a shituf (polytheism) which is of a lesser degree than idolatry.

Rabbi: It is false to suggest that idolatry is permissible for anyone: what is wrong is determined by the idea, not the follower. Furthermore, what is wrong for one person is wrong for every person, as we are all equals. Idolatry is one of the seven Noahide laws and therefore prohibited for all people.

Reader: Only a handful of Rabbis including yourself categorize Christianity as idolatry and that it is prohibited for both Jew and Gentile.

Rabbi: Truth is not defined by numbers, but by principle. Abraham was the only monotheist of his era, yet he was correct, while all others were wrong to pray to stone gods. The other Rabbis you cite are wrong. I believe intelligently, you can discern that worshipping anything but God is wrong. God alone created everything. How then can anything else earn our prayers? Those who believe God became Jesus, follow an idolatrous, baseless and incomprehensible notion. The concept of the trinity too is heretical.

Reader: Why should I, a non-Jew, obey a command that was not specifically directed to me?

Rabbi: Although you are not commanded, the Deuteronomy quote above should now clearly show you that you share the same potential as a Jew. Many gentiles throughout time recognized the truth of Judaism being God's only religion, that it is all based on proof and reason, and therefore they converted and became some of our greatest leaders.

Abraham is a primary example of this behavior. Although raised following idolatry, when he used his intelligence to discover God, and started teaching the masses, he embodied what God loves: a person who uses intelligence to arrive at truth. Abraham did not say that since he was raised as an idolater, that justified such a lifestyle. But he recognized his capacity for intelligence, and he engaged it. God therefore

created a nation from him because he was the specimen of the perfect man. God desired that his offspring would be examples for the rest of the world. This explains the numerous verses in Torah that the convert and born Jew follow the identical Torah system.

Again, God's selection of Abraham and positioning him as the forerunner of the Jewish nation is precisely to teach every human of the proper lifestyle: a person who uses his mind to arrive at truth. Abraham is now an example for every gentile who should follow his example of abandoning a false religion and cleaving to the correct religion. Not all elements of God's will for mankind are discreet "laws"; the many lessons of Genesis are human examples of perfected character and intelligence. These histories are recorded in God's Bible precisely to instruct every person in the proper lifestyle.

Reader: Why did G-d create two separate standards (7 laws and Torah) for the gentile and the Jew? Why are the 7 laws general and the Torah laws specific if G-d intended man to use his intellect in the first place? Isn't this unjust to the Jew and the non-Jew?

Rabbi: Incorrect, as prior to Revelation at Sinai, all people were identical, they were all gentiles. God gave Adam one command prohibiting idolatry. The plan was for man to use his mind and unravel more of God's will. God desires that man's mind be engaged, and He gave man deductive and inductive reasoning for this goal. This would enable Adam and all others to explore and uncover greater truths, as exemplified by Abraham.

As time progressed and man declined morally, as seen through need for the Flood and in man's rebellion against God by building the Tower of Babel, God increased the laws to seven. Man sinned during Noah's era through robbery and rape and we see these two prohibitions in the seven Noahide laws, also including setting up courts to respond to the rampant disrespect of property. Throughout this time, we see a single system for the single mankind. God is not playing favorites.

Idolatry then took a strong foothold, even though it started with Adam's grandson Enosh. Abraham stood alone as a monotheist. God's will is that man obtain the truth. He therefore

chose Abraham to be a leader of a nation who would study, protect, share monotheism. But God did not remove the minimal laws from the rest of mankind. Therefore, Noahide law vs. 613 Biblical laws for the Jew is not favoritism. Noahide law is the minimal system for people to retain their right to exist, but the descendants of Abraham would receive God's directives in the form of Torah to enable any human being to reach full human potential—perfection.

Reader: How will G-d judge a Gentile who is aware of both the 7 laws and Torah but chooses not to reach the ultimate perfection through conversion?

Rabbi: As the intelligent fulfillment (not blind religiosity) of the greater amount—613 Torah laws—requires greater study and impresses one's mind, thereby perfecting his soul, it is sensible that it is irrelevant if one's parents were gentiles or Jews. What is relevant is the path that the child follows. As both children are identical in design, it is sensible that if they both choose the proper lifestyle, their rewards are identical. Alternatively, both the Jew and the gentile can choose not to perfect themselves and therefore their ultimate fate in the afterlife would be identical.

Reader: If G-d has a change of direction in method of guiding mankind (7 laws to Torah), how is it not possible that He may change direction again?

Rabbi: I believe you can answer this question, that there was no change in direction, but that God responded to mankind as needed. The rabbis say that, "God looked at the Torah and created the world." This is a homiletic lesson that the world was designed with the goal of Torah. Therefore one can say the Torah was the ultimate plan, but God in His wisdom gave it at the proper time. The prophet also says, "I am God I do not change" (Malachi 3:6). The philosophers too have arrived at the conclusion that a perfect being does not change. Change would imply ignorance of the future, or that something is lacking in that being until the change is made. "Need" is a property of that which does not have essential existence, and therefore had to be brought into existence by another being.

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Therefore, need is a characteristic of every existence except for God. And as God has no needs, there is no change in His nature.

Furthermore, we see from God's creations that He knows the future. For example, His creation of vegetation as food was a response to his future forecast of His creation of beings that require food. The same applies to water and weather. He created an atmosphere that provides limits to the extremes of temperature, thereby preserving the life He would create. We see in the Bible that God forecasted the Jews enslavement.

As an omniscient being, God is aware of all generations and therefore there can be no surprises forcing Him to change his course.

Reader: Is the gentile who is aware of the 7 laws required to study and follow them 100% in the context of the Torah law?

Rabbi: Yes.

Reader: Or are we still required to engage our mind to understand them on our own, or a combination of both?

Rabbi: Both.

Reader: With the revelation of the Torah, does this mean that the Jew does not need to engage his mind as much, since it is quite specific?

Rabbi: Without engaging the mind, Rashi says that performance is worthless. The goal of every command is not the act, but its underlying idea. A relevant source says as follows:

Rabbi Yannai declared that the situation may be expressed by the following sentiment: Pity him who has no courtyard but senselessly makes a gate for his courtyard. Fear of Heaven is like the courtyard, and the study of Torah is the gate that provides entrance to the courtyard. The study of Torah is purposeful only if it leads to fear of Heaven (Yoma 72b).

Reader: You replied (to my question on 7 laws and Torah) that a non-Jew should study/follow the 7 laws 100% within context of the Torah with



a combination of his/her intellect. Why should a non-Jew study the 7 laws within the Torah, when it (the Torah) was not commanded to us non-Jews in the first place? I believe this "knowledge" of the 7 laws are already embedded in man's conscience. Everyone knows it's wrong to steal, kill, commit adultery etc. The difference is whether they choose to follow their conscience or not. So isn't one's intellect and conscience enough to study and follow these laws?

Rabbi: The Talmud (Avoda Zara 2b) says that if one follows a law, but not due to an obedience to God's command, his reward (credit) is lost. One's objective in life is to recognize his/her Creator and act out of obedience, as this is true human perfection. But to follow the same concepts based on intellect alone, is not a recognition of God.

This is the core concept in God commanding Adam on idolatry. Adam's objective was to recognize and follow God. As someone with a perfect intellect like Adam could arrive at the truth that idolatry is wrong, his actions would not be considered "following God's will" without a command. Havakuk 3:6 says that at one point in history, "God arose, assessed mankind, He 'saw' and released the nations from their 7 Noahide commands." The Talmud (Ibid.) asks, "What did God see?" The Talmud answers, "He saw that the nations abandoned the Noahide laws, and therefore God released them from their obligation." We know historically that this release is not literal, so how do we understand this?

The Talmud concludes that as the nations abandoned Noahide laws, any future Noahide who followed the laws would be considered as one "not commanded." Meaning, once the chain of transmission of Noahide law was broken, all future Noahides would not be

"following God," since the transmission that God commanded these laws was lost from society. As such, a Noahide's adherence to any of these laws (principles) would not be out of "obedience to God," but based on societal practicality, "as if" God released them. Thus, such individuals could not be rewarded as "followers of God" for their generation was no longer in receipt of a transmission from God. It is only one who knows that he is adhering to "God's will" who truly lives "subservient" to God. And only when man serves God—not acting merely for practical reasons—does he or she earn God's reward. (Similarly, if one waves the Lulav, not knowing it is God's command, he cannot receive reward for "following a command.")

In fact, God did not "release" the Noahides, they are still obligated in those 7 laws. Loss of the transmission is described "as if" God released them, since He can no longer reward any Noahide who fulfills these 7 principles without knowing God desires them to do so. The Rabbis phrase the Noahide's loss of transmission of God's commands as the Noahides own doing — "as if" God had released their obligation. This must be clear.

Reader: I have read your replies in this e-mail thread, and your essays "Intellect vs Obedience" and "Torah Obligation" and I understand that adhering to the 7 laws must be based on recognition of G-d. I try to obey these laws every day, for example not idling away at work even though the boss is not around (not stealing), or not to gossip/spread false rumors out of obedience to G-d. I fail many times but still keep on trying.

The point is, why should I look to the Torah to learn more about the law, say of not stealing? I can think of many scenarios which can cause one to "steal" and try consciously not to do them out of obedience. Isn't the intellect enough to discern these laws and apply them in life? Thank you.

Rabbi: You should look to the Torah to learn the laws for a few reasons.

1. The human mind cannot know all the cases and permutations of stealing, or any law...only God can. Therefore we need to learn what He revealed through Torah.

2. As the greatest mitzvah is Torah study, which

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offers the most pleasure of any activity, through study, one's mind slowly uncovers deeper and deeper insights into God's laws, their formulations, and the brilliance of the very wording of every Torah verse, shared by the Talmudic Rabbis. This fills one with complete satisfaction, which any other pursuit fails to offer.

Good gifted man—and no other creation—with an intellect, because He desires we engage it to become enamored by His wisdom. Mitzvah—the action itself—is performed not as the highest activity, but as a barometer of our convictions. One cannot be considered charitable if he praises the value of charity, but never gives a dime. His action displays his values. But man's true purpose is to study God's wisdom in Torah and nature. This gives man the best life here, and grants him eternal life of the soul after the body dies.

Reader: Why tell the non-Jew that study of the Torah makes him/her like a High priest, when their reward for doing a mitzva which they are not commanded to do is less than the one who is commanded (i.e. the Jew)?

Rabbi: One aspect—Torah study—is human perfection in action. That is, one who studies Torah performs the highest act, and gentile and Jew are equal, i.e., the gentile attains the level of the High Priest in doing so. But when discussing reward, a different matter, one cannot reach perfection if not acting as obedience to God. Thus, not being commanded is a lower level. This applies to gentile and Jew.

Reader: Why restrict the revelation of Torah which you call as "perfection" to Abraham's descendants only?

Rabbi: Abraham was the only monotheist; no other nation at the time would have accepted the Torah. That's the Talmud's homiletical lesson (Ibid.) that "God offered Torah to others." But the Jew makes the Torah available through our unique act of resting on Sabbath. Maimonides says this deviant behavior attracts inquiry from other nations, to which the Jew replies with Torah knowledge and the command of the Creator to rest, as He rested. Thereby, the history of Creation and Torah is taught to all others.

Reader: What is the fate of sincere individuals within the nations who strive to break out of the idolatrous mindset of their societies and to live a righteous life obedient to G-d?

Rabbi: God equally rewards anyone following the truth.

Reader: For example the Arab prophet who lived among his polytheistic people in 6th century Arabia believed that there is one God and strived his best to spread that message to his people at the expense of being persecuted by them. Isn't he too an "Abraham"?

Rabbi: Anyone seeking truth and spreading it is like Abraham in his quest for truth and teaching it. But if he spreads lies of divine communication as did Islam and Christianity, then he is a false prophet. He deters man from God's truth. Without evidence of divine communication, he is a liar, as God will not inspire a person to lead others without also equipping him or her with validation, such as revelation at Sinai. The very reason God gave man senses and intelligence is that he should use them in his determination of truth. God's will is not that man follows blind faith, or any person who says that God spoke to him, making the senses and intelligence obsolete, and God does not perform futile actions. The very model of Revelation at Sinai performed in the presence of over 2 million people teaches how God wishes to validate His prophets and His will. With no validation, like Islam and Christianity, we know these religions are not divinely inspired, but are man's lies.

Reader: I find a negative image of the nations and how G-d at one of the passages view it as "a sport." I base this statement on the following Talmudic portion (Ibid.):

And then every one of these converts will tear loose his sign of performance of a mitzva and leave, as it is stated: "Let us tear their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (Psalms 2:3). And the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and makes sport, i.e., laughs or rejoices, as it is stated: "He that sits in heaven makes sport, the Lord has them in derision" (Psalms 2:4). Rabbi Yitzchak says: "There is no making sport for the Holy One, Blessed be He, but on that day alone."

Rabbi: "Sport" and "laughter" when attributed to God, as found in Proverbs 1:26, "I will laugh at your calamity, and mock when terror comes upon you," refers to God's absolute knowledge. That is, He "laughs" when the warned person (even a Jew) encounters troubles which are unavoidable outcomes once a person chose a wrong path in life. God's laughter refers to His "certainty" of downfall for the erring person. But not that God enjoys one's downfall. God speaks in man's language, as if to say, "I told you so," and "this must occur if you err." Laughing or making sport refers to God's certainty, not His wish for one to err.

Reader: In conclusion, it seems that G-d does not reward the Jew and non-Jew equally when it comes to fulfilling the mitzva, even when the non-Jew is doing it out of conscious obedience. You have a different view on this. The term "not commanded" here is the key: Does it refer to the gentile, or any person's intent behind the performance of the mitzva?

Rabbi: "Not commanded" is as I have said: performing a command, but without knowledge that God commanded it. I also cited "one law for the convert and the born Jew." God is 100% fair to all. Even a Jew who performs a command without knowing God commanded it cannot receive a reward like one who is commanded. For this Jew too is not being "obedient to God."

When the gentile consciously obeys God, he does in fact receive full reward. This is precisely the lesson that "a gentile who follows the 7 Noahide laws is akin to a High Priest."

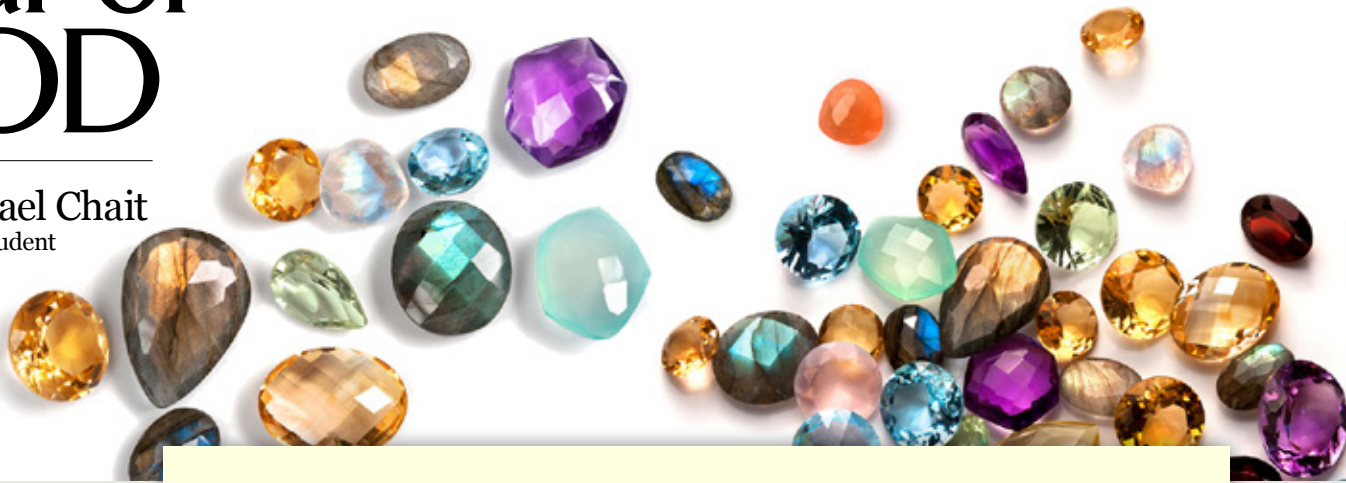
Reader: Lastly, my apologies if I break any rules pertaining to gentiles and our access to the Talmud (if there are any prohibitions).

Rabbi: You seek the truth, you must be able to study the sources. ■



On the Fear of GOD

Rabbi Israel Chait
Written by a student



Rabbi Israel Chait cited the prime case depicting fear of God.

A pious merchant realized it was time to recite his prayers. He commenced praying, during which time a customer wished to purchase a certain piece of merchandise. The customer, unaware of the merchant's involvement in prayer, offered \$100. The silence of the merchant due to his prayers was perceived by the customer as a rejection of that offer. The customer continually raised his offer, and of course the merchant could not respond. Finally, the merchant completed his prayers and told the customer he would accept the first offer of \$100.

Although the merchant could have accepted the higher amount and the customer

would be no wiser, the merchant feared God and knew that God also knew that in his heart, he had accepted the \$100 when it was first offered.

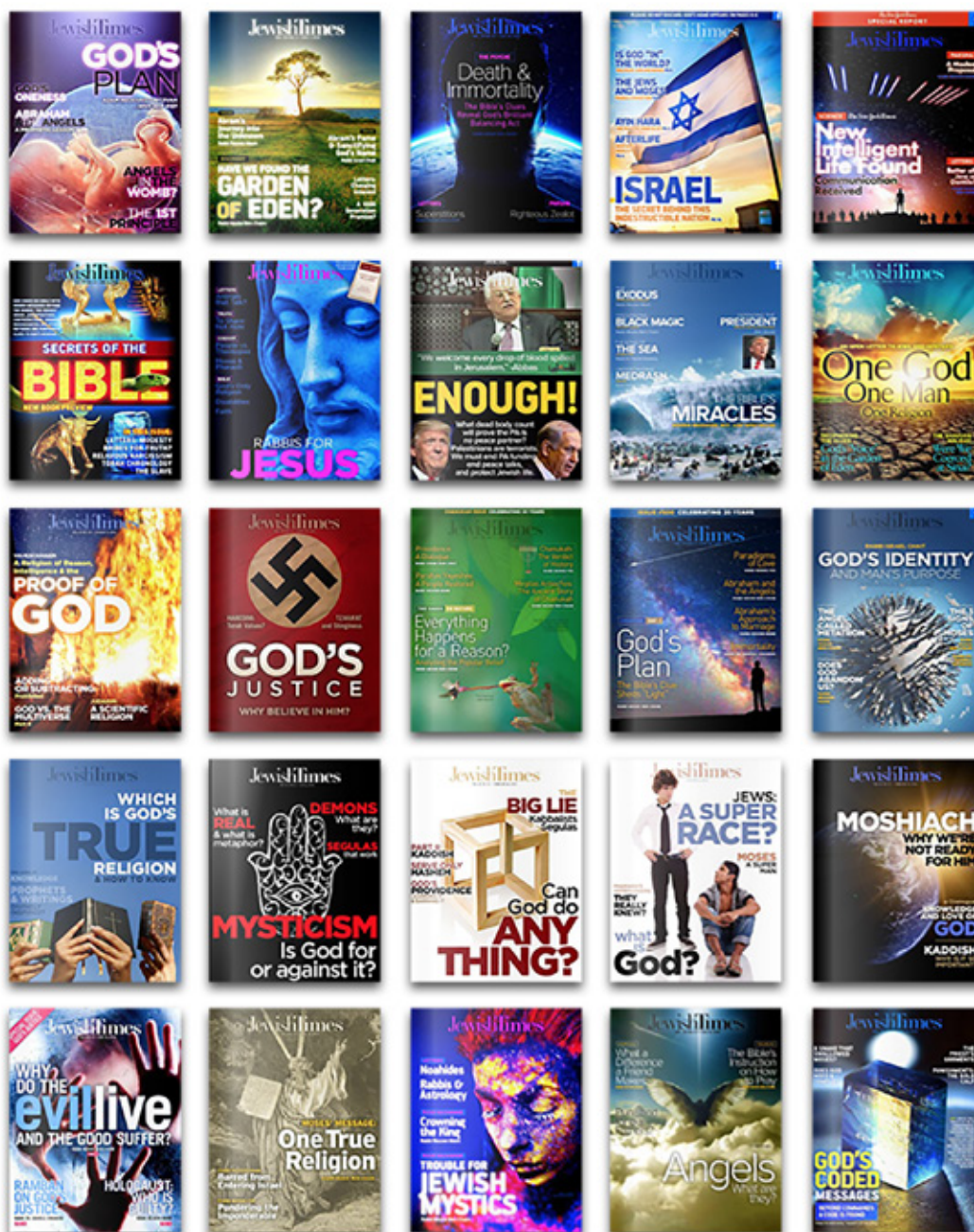
God knows all and one must be concerned with his relationship with God.

Earthly life is quite brief. Eternal life with God is just that. And the quality of our eternal life, if we merit it, is due to our righteousness and intellectual perfection.

It is also helpful to be mindful that we take not a single penny with us when we die. What we take is our righteousness and knowledge of God. This is where one should invest his time. But the true reason to follow God's Torah is because of its great wisdom that leads us to be astonished by God. This is "Fear of God," man's purpose. ■

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AFTER

THE PURPOSE OF THE PATRIARCHS' TOMB

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT
TRANSCRIBED BY A STUDENT



“Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial inheritance among you, that I may bury my deceased before me.” And the Hittites replied to Abraham, saying to him, “Hear us, my Lord: you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead.” Thereupon Abraham bowed low to the people of the land, the Hittites, and he said to them, “If it is your wish that I bury my deceased from before me, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar. Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns,

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which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial inheritance in your midst.”

Ephron was present among the Hittites; so Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all who entered the gate of his town, saying, “No, my Lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.” Then Abraham bowed low before the people of the land, and spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.” And Ephron replied to Abraham, saying to him, “My Lord, do hear me! A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead.” Abraham accepted Ephron’s terms. Abraham paid out to Ephron the money that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites—four hundred shekels of silver at the going merchants’ rate. So Ephron’s land in Machpelah, near Mamre—the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field—passed to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town. And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan. Thus, the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site (Gen. 23:3-20).¹

There is an interesting midrash on the Hittites’ response, “Hear us, my Lord: you are a prince of God among us”:

The Hittites said, “You are a prince in our midst and you are a god in our midst.” Abraham replied, “Do not diminish from God’s honor.”

This shows that the Hittites had no recognition of God. In the adjoining Torah section, Abraham tells Eliezer his servant to select a wife for his son Isaac, but not to take a wife from the Hittites for they were on a low primitive level. That is why although Lavan was evil, and his father Betuel too was evil (he sought to prevent the marriage of Rebecca to Isaac and therefore died), nonetheless, Abraham wanted a wife from their lineage. This is because the nature of their imperfection was important to consider. Lavan was a very sublimated person, while the Hittites were primitive. Lavan was wise but all his energies were directed towards improper goals. But his heredity was proper. And since the Hittites were primitive, incapable of raising themselves from their instincts and primitivism, Abraham did not desire his son to marry any of their daughters, although the verse sounds like they recognized God, “you are a prince of God in our midst.” But the midrash clarifies what they meant: they believed in divine powers [attributed to Abraham] and did not truly believe in God. Therefore, Abraham replied that they should not diminish recognition God.

Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead.

The Hittites said, “You are so respected; no one will prevent

you from burying your deceased wife. So what is your request? Of course, you can bury your deceased wife.” Abraham then bowed to them and started speaking again:

If it is your wish that I bury my deceased from before me, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar. Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial inheritance in your midst.

You notice that Abraham used the same term before “achuzas kever”—burial inheritance. What did Abraham answer? He did not answer the Hittites’ point, “none of us will withhold his burial place from you.” If Abraham [merely] wanted to pay for the plot, he should have simply said, “Please allow me to pay for it.” Chazal say that Ephron was put into leadership position that day in order to honor Abraham, that Abraham should acquire the plot from a recognized individual. It would be inappropriate that Abraham purchase a plot from the average person.

Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all who entered the gate of his town, saying, “No, my Lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.” Then Abraham bowed low before the people of the land, and spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.” And Ephron replied to Abraham, saying to him, “My Lord, do hear me! A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead.” Abraham accepted Ephron’s terms.

What was this dialogue? They first said to Abraham that no one will prevent him from burying Sarah anywhere he wants. Abraham’s response was this, in other words:

This is not just a practical burial. Ordinarily, burial is merely the removal of the body. But this is not the removal of Sarah’s body, but the establishing of something positive. This is a burial inheritance—achuzas kever. This burial is the continued existence of a person and not her absence.

What was the importance in Abraham wanting to pay for the plot?

So Ephron’s land in Machpelah, near Mamre—the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field—passed to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town. And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan. Thus, the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site.

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And again, we read at the end of the parsha:

His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife. (Gen. 25:9,10)

And again, regarding Jacob, while Torah saves words elsewhere, here it expresses itself fully subsequent to Jacob's blessings of his sons:

All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him. Then he instructed them, saying to them, "I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site—there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah. (Gen. 49:28-31)

So many verses...what is the concept?

Torah spends much time on this. The idea is that burial is not simply a place where a person's body was removed. But it was the establishment of a positive entity: a place of a burial inheritance. This is why Abraham did not accept permission to use the field, but there must be a status of an acquisition—a *chalos kinyan*. Since Abraham was establishing a positive entity, he felt he must do so through proper means. The act of acquisition demonstrates the positive entity. The midrash says the field and the burial plot became a new entity. And only once the burial plot became a positive entity does the verse say that Abraham buried his wife.

What is the concept of the *Maaras Hamachpelah*? We find an interesting point. When was this grave used? Talmud Sota 34b says [regarding the Spies' expedition]:

"And they went up into the south, and he came to Hebron" (Num. 13:22). Rava said, "We derive that Caleb separated himself from the counsel of the spies and he went and spread himself out on the gravesite of the patriarchs. He said to them, "Forefathers, seek mercy upon me that I am saved from the counsel [conspiracy] of the spies."

This was the first use of the patriarchs' gravesite that we find. The Rama says that on Tisha b'Av after Kinot, one should visit the graves. Preferably, one should go to a Jewish cemetery, but one can also go to a gentile cemetery. This is derived from the gemara in Taanis 16a:

Why does one go to the cemetery on a public fast? Rabbi Levi the son of Chama and Rabbi Chanina argued: one said [to embody the sentiment] "Behold I am before you like a dead person."

When praying on a public fast, any egoistic feelings are a direct contradiction to one's prayers. One must feel he is worthless if he depends upon God's mercy. [As if to say] "We have no merit and our prayer is just that You should help us." The gemara continues with a second opinion:

And the other one said: "[one visits the cemetery on a public fast] so the dead will seek mercy upon us."

This explains the first choice to visit a Jewish cemetery which fulfills both views, as the gemara says in the second view that our "forefathers" seek mercy for us, which cannot be fulfilled in a gentile cemetery. But according to the first view, a gentile cemetery suffices.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger says [in Taanis] if one wishes to understand "the dead seeking mercy upon us," one should read Tosfos "Avosai" (Sotah 34b) addressing Caleb spreading himself over the patriarchs' graves requesting that they seek mercy upon him, which says as follows:

And if you will say that the gemara in Berachos says "the dead know nothing," and the conclusion implies that even the patriarchs know nothing. But you can answer that through the prayer that this one [Caleb] prays, God notifies the patriarchs of his prayer.

Of course, you must know that one of the 13 Principles [of Maimonides] is that one cannot pray to anyone except to God:

To Him alone is it fitting to pray, and it is not fitting to pray to anyone else.

Therefore, when Caleb is said, "seek mercy upon me," that does not mean he prayed to the patriarchs. It simply means he had a request.

The nucleus of the idea in Pirkei Avos 4:22 is that earthly human existence is only one stage of the soul's existence:

Those that are born will die; the dead will be revived; and the living will be judged.

That [living to be judged properly] is the purpose in this world. If one thinks that the totality of existence is limited to one's earthly stay, all his values must be distorted. This is the basis of paganism. Thus, Rabbi Elazar Hakapor said that this idea must be clear to you: earthly life is only one stage of existence [a small stage].

The grave of the patriarchs and matriarchs—*Maaras Hamachpelah*—is precisely that idea: perfected people who continue to exist now. That is why Tosfos does not ask, "How could Caleb pray to the dead?" The answer is that Caleb was not praying to the patriarchs; he was talking to them, as their existence continues. It is no different than speaking to a living person.

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[Here is the primary point]: Maaras Hamachpelah is a site embodying the truth that the souls of the patriarchs and matriarchs are still in existence. But continued existence applies only to those who live perfected [Torah] lives. Thus, the graves of the patriarchs and matriarchs reflect the existence of the soul after death. [Thus, Abraham, upon burying Sarah, established the reflection of this idea of the soul's enduring nature. The gravesite reflects the positive existence of the soul and must be acquired to create that status.]

Caleb saw he was going to get caught up in conflicts with the spies. But their corruption was based on a distortion of human existence. That is why Caleb spread himself out over the patriarchs' graves [to reaffirm his concept of true human existence: earthly life is only one stage and the perfected soul lives on]. If this is the idea behind visiting a cemetery on a public fast, one cannot fulfill his obligation by visiting a gentile cemetery. For those dead did not follow Torah and their lives truly ended with physical death.

Thus, Caleb was able to remain true to the truth after he went to the patriarchs' graves. Torah always uses tangible objects to teach ideas; that is the nature of halacha. Tefillin are tangible but the ideas are intangible. Maaras Hamachpelah is the tangible object that teaches the idea of Pirkei Avos 4:22, of the immortality of the soul. That is what Abraham told the Hittites.

Mase mitzvah koneh mikomo

Mase Mitzvah is a mitzvah of burial of one who died with none to bury him. The idea that it acquires its place—koneh mikomo [it is buried there]—teaches that we don't simply discard a body, but it is a tangible reflection of the idea of the immortality of the soul, and that earthly existence is but one stage in the entire existence of the human soul. [The dead person is not passive but decides a halacha; it generates a positive effect.]

Maaras Hamachpelah had four couples buried there: the three patriarchs and their wives, plus Adam and Eve. The latter two embodied man's goal in creation, and the patriarchs and their wives are those who lived by their model.

Torah only deals with this world. It defines a lifestyle that is best for earthly existence. But Avos 4:22 says that those born will die; that one should view the reality of death. How do we make sense of both?

If the soul expired after earthly life, it would be a distortion of the soul's value. It would be an imperfection regarding God's creation, that He creates such a profound entity and limits it to physical existence. Torah does not promote itself [as a means] for the next world, as that would be improper motivation [one would then not learn for the beauty of its wisdom, but for the reward]. And it is proven from this world that Torah is the best life. However, the soul's nature to endure in the next world is a truth which relates to the nature and value of the soul. How then do we straddle the Torah's focus on this life, while Avos 4:22 refers to the next life?

If we discuss motivation to observe Torah, one who understands this life will know that a Torah life offers man the happiest earthly existence, what we refer to as lishma: following Torah for its own sake. But to say that God created the soul with a nature that exceeds physical existence, and yet limited it to earthly life, is false. The idea that the soul exists beyond earthly existence is necessary in order to have an accurate idea of the soul. But it is wrong to motivate Torah observance with the promise of an afterlife, for then the person will not follow Torah for its own sake. The proper motivation to observe Torah is because this lifestyle is the proven [best] way to live. The Torah life that God gives man must be the best earthly existence. Thus, the motivation is only from this world.

In Hilchos Avel (mourner's laws) Maimonides says that [the mitzvah of] comforting mourners is superior to visiting the sick because it is a kindness performed with both the living and with the dead. We derive that kindness is possible even towards the dead. But this is only possible if a person's existence continues after death. The concept of honoring the dead means there is a person in existence that is higher than the physical.

Mase Mitzvah—burial for one who has no relatives to bury him—pushes aside even the restrictions of the high priest and nazirite [who typically cannot come in contact with the dead]. The concept of Mase Mitzvah is at the root of the idea of the soul's immortality. That is why it pushes aside those two laws.

The gemara teaches that when Rabbi Akiva was still an ignoramus, when he encountered a corpse with no one to bury it, he carried it two miles for burial. The rabbis told him he was wasting his time doing so. This is because Mase Mitzvah is koneh mikomo—acquires its location and is buried there. The proper way to demonstrate the soul's immortality [the reality of the soul of the dead person] is through koneh mikomo. This is the theme of Maaras Hamachpelah. But Rabbi Akiva did not know this yet and carried the corpse for miles [to bury it]. By gaining knowledge, Rabbi Akiva was finally able to express the proper way of honoring the dead. Without the correct concept of honoring the dead, carrying the corpse two miles degrades the deceased.

The gemara learns the principle of acquisition from Abraham's acquisition of the grave. The gemara applies that model of acquisition to a person acquiring a wife. But what type of analogy is there between Abraham's acquisition of the field to man acquiring a wife? The answer is that the analogy is in terms of creating a status in an entity. Abraham's acquisition was necessary to create the entity: a positive state of Sarah's existence after death. Marriage too creates a status.

As a final note on Tosfos in Sota, where it says that "they tell the patriarchs about Caleb's prayer," Caleb was not requesting the patriarchs' help [Tosfos is not citing a literal event]. "Telling the patriarchs" means that the patriarchs became aware. It means to demonstrate their continued existence after death. ■



GENERALS ARE NOT STATESMEN

RABBI REUVEN MANN



This week's parsha, Shelach, describes the debacle of the spies, which sealed the fate of the generation that experienced the Exodus and generated consequences that affect us to this day. It is important to seek a deeper understanding of this calamity and grasp its appropriate lessons.

First, why was there a need for spies in the first place? The Book of Devarim recounts that when Moshe issued the order to "go up and inherit the Land," the people came to him and requested that scouts be sent to search out the terrain to determine "the path on which we should ascend and the cities we should conquer." The idea found favor with Moshe who, in consultation with Hashem, appointed the leaders of the twelve tribes and delineated their mission.

Interestingly, the mandate of the spies was not limited to obtaining specifically military information. Moshe instructed them to report on the agricultural character of the land, its topography and climate. He even urged them to bring back a sampling of the fruits so the people could see for themselves what a choice place this was.

The reconnaissance mission turned out to be a disaster because it induced paralyzing fear in the hearts of the people. And of course, the spies, except for Yehoshua and Calev, are regarded as great sinners.

However, it pays to be attentive to the initial words of the scouts. They began by praising the rich quality of Eretz Yisrael, affirming that it "flowed with milk and honey" and displayed its choice fruits. Then they said, "However, the nation that dwells there is strong, and its fortified cities are very large, and the descendants of Anak (an ancient race of giants) we have seen there." This statement stimulated the fear that eventually morphed into a massive national panic.

The great commentator Ramban (Nachmanides) asks, What was sinful about the report of the spies? Weren't they supposed to give an accurate report of what they had seen? Should they have distorted the assessment to make it more palatable? That would clearly have been a violation of their vital mission to bring totally honest information on the matters Moshe had specified. So what was the sin of the spies?

In my opinion, it is that they violated the terms of their mission and usurped the boundaries of their authority. This type of behavior is very prevalent in our time and has enormous negative consequences. For example, the proper role of a physician is to treat the ill and to preserve life wherever possible. Doctors' expertise lies exclusively in the practice of medicine and the alleviation of human maladies.

The question of when life begins and whether it can be terminated because of very compelling circumstances, in what is known as physician assisted suicide, is outside the realm of medical jurisdiction. Doctors have no more authority or professional insight into this matter than ordinary laymen. However, physicians are typically accorded credibility in these areas that they do not deserve. When life begins or may be terminated are very complicated moral and religious issues that are wholly outside the subject of medicine.

One who is charged with a mission must know its objective and the limits of his authority. Moshe carefully laid out the assignment of the spies. They were to gather information regarding the layout of the land and its bounty. They were to bring this information back to Moshe who, alone, would decide how to use it.

However, the purpose of the reconnaissance mission was not to be the basis of determining whether to go ahead with the conquest or not. That decision had been made by Hashem and was not subject to negotiation. The objective of the spying was to formulate the best way to carry out the Divine charge to go up and conquer the land.

The sin of the spies was that they changed the character of the mission and decided to make it the basis of determining if it was feasible to fulfill Hashem's command. They exceeded their authority and caused devastating consequences.

But did they not speak the truth? The Ramban explains that they employed great cleverness. The Hebrew word for "however" (in the statement "However, the nation is strong...") is efes which means, literally, nothing. With their deceptive use of innuendo they were communicating that, yes the land was very good, but it was all for nothing (efes), because the people there were so powerful and gigantic that they would slaughter us.

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By their subtle manipulation of words, the spies exploited the emotional vulnerability of the people, because they had decided that their task was to make the assessment as to whether it was possible for the Jews to disinherit the land's inhabitants.

This lesson has great relevance in our time, especially in Israel. Military experts have great influence in this country because of the great challenges to its security. However, there is a very thin line between military and political issues, and quite often it is blurred. There is a tradition of former generals entering politics, and this doesn't always work out well. The Oslo Agreement, which has been responsible for so much devastation, was negotiated by a former Chief of Staff. Similarly, the hitnatkut (withdrawal) from Gaza, which has become a Hamas launching pad for missiles and terror tunnels on Israel's southern border, was orchestrated by the hero of the Yom Kippur War.

Generals' expertise is in the conduct of battle. The decision get into a war is not a military, but a political one. So too is the issue of negotiation with the Arab enemies. Questions pertaining to "land for peace" the "two-state solution" are political matters, and leaders of the Army are not especially qualified to deal with them. Sadly, the record shows that when these people decide that they should be the ones assuming responsibility for issues with which they have no special qualifications, tragic results can ensue.

This brings me to the matter of the status of the Har Habayit (Temple Mount), which is the holiest place in Israel and the one most suited for prayer. There are areas where we may not ascend, according to Torah Law, because we are all in a state of ritual impurity. However, there are certain places where expert halachic opinion holds that we may visit.

Those who wish to do so are categorically prohibited from even uttering a word of prayer, because the Arab administrators of the site will not allow it. The Jews have always longed to return to Yerushalayim and all its holy places. When East Jerusalem was under Jordanian control, Jewish cemeteries were desecrated, and Jews could not visit the Kotel (Western Wall).

All that changed in June 1967, when heroic Israeli soldiers shed much blood and fought gruesome battles to liberate the Old City and its holy places. Who can forget the immortal words of Commander Motta Gur, who simply said, "Har Habayit beyadeinu" (The Temple Mount is in our hands)?

Not for long. On that same day, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, one of Israel's military legends, made a misbegotten political decision to restore the "status quo" by returning control of the Temple Mount to the Jordanian religious authority known as the Waqf, who ruled that only Moslems could pray there; anyone of a different religion could not recite any religious supplications in that place.

A crucial decision such as that should not have been made by a Defense Minister. It should have been made by the government, which would have considered all the implications, especially the impact on religious Jews, and hopefully have come to a more just resolution. At the very least, the right of Jews to not only visit, but to also pray at their holiest site, should have been guaranteed.

It goes without saying that the generosity of Mr. Dayan was neither reciprocated or appreciated. He was a great military leader making a major decision in an area outside his scope of expertise. Such was the sin of the spies. This syndrome afflicts us to this day. We must be cognizant of it and guard against it.

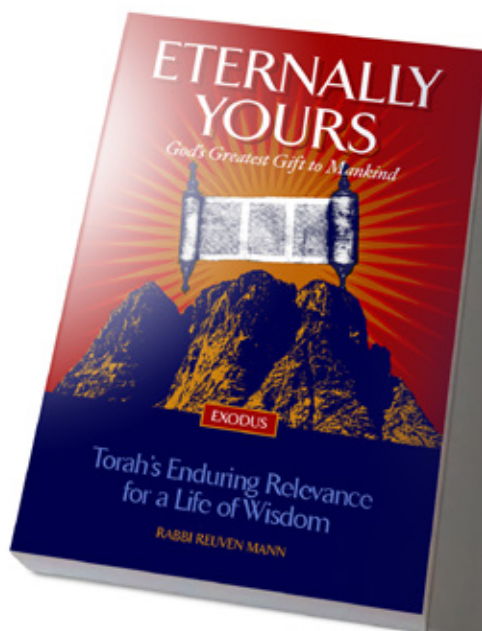
And we must develop the ability and capacity to think for ourselves and not be so beholden to "experts". According to Rashi there was no real need for the spying mission as Hashem had already told them that He would bring them to a "good and ample land which flowed with milk and honey". Had they utilized their own seichel (intelligence) they would have come to the proper decision. Instead they allowed others, the experts, to do their thinking for them with catastrophic consequences.

A "Holy Nation" is one whose individual members have the ability to think for themselves in a rational manner and, in consultation with genuine experts, arrive at intelligent conclusions. May we strive to reach that exalted level. ■

Shabbat shalom.

Sometimes you wake up early on Shabbat morning while everyone is still asleep. The peace and quiet stimulate a desire to contemplate. Prepare a hot cup of coffee and open up my new book, *Eternally Yours*, on Exodus, and start reading. You will soon find yourself in the world of ideas. Please go to <http://amzn.to/2G6V3QI> to obtain your copy and join the coffee and Chumash club.

—RABBI REUVEN MANN



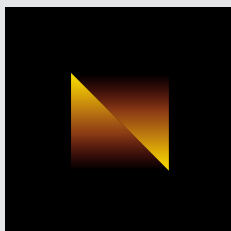
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On HAPPINESS

Rabbi Israel Chait

Excerpt from the Pirkei Avos Lectures (1986)

In human maturation, somehow, man's infantile enjoyments cease to offer satisfaction. A person then chooses replacements that somehow reflect the original, but they are [still] substitutes. That new substitute becomes glorified in man's eyes and he is convinced that the substitute will offer him the identical satisfaction as his original objects of desire offered [during infancy]. A mirage is a good example, as here, one's desire is so great that he fantasizes that this is the object of his desire. Neuroses is the same phenomenon where one believes something to be real, when it is nonexistent.

Man's energies require an outlet. Therefore, he can select or imagine something that will offer him the satisfaction he craves. Man becomes convinced that the substitute is the object that he needs. Therefore, he attaches his desire and even his mind [to that object of his desire] and then applies all his energies to obtain that object. But, as this object is a substitute, he never achieves full satisfaction. His disappointment compels him to search for another replacement. [Man continues in this cycle his entire life, never achieving happiness, as the objects of his desire are in fact, not what he truly desires...they are impostors.]

Why does man have such a nature? Because without it, he would never be capable of a life of wisdom. In the pursuit of wisdom, one must remove oneself from the attachment to the physical and entertain [focus on the world of] the abstract. Man would not be able to entertain the abstract and pursue knowledge, had he the capacity to gain real [complete] satisfaction from physical pleasures. [Complete satisfaction in the physical world would deter man from seeking satisfaction elsewhere.] Therefore, God structured man in such a way that he undergoes a process [a maturity] where certain energies are freed from their attachments to the physical. This energy can now be redirected toward wisdom. Man differs from animals in this ability to direct his energies toward wisdom so that he can enjoy pondering wisdom. This psychological phenomenon that might appear as a curse—as man does not obtain complete satisfaction from physical desires—turns out to be man's greatest blessing, for this enables man to enjoy the world of wisdom, which is the greatest pleasure. This is man's purpose and design: to engage in the tremendous pleasure of wisdom. [This explains God's gift of Torah, with Torah study—not mitzvos—as the primary involvement and source of happiness.] This happiness is the result of man's ability to fully satisfy his energies seeking satisfaction. Those energies now frustrated by dissatisfying physical pleasures, find 100 percent satisfaction in the pursuit of wisdom.

One finds happiness when he pleurably consumes [all] his energies seeking satisfaction. In the physical world, this is impos-

sible, since man's objects of satisfaction are only substitutes, and his search ends in dissatisfaction, a relentless [unhappy] search. But in the pursuit of wisdom, man finds complete satisfaction for his frustrated energies. This was God's purpose: to create a creature who can utilize those energies that were deflected from pursuing physical satisfaction, and direct them to the enjoyment of wisdom. This explains why we find people like Rav Moshe Feinstein of blessed memory who engage the world of wisdom and gain great satisfaction from it.

This also explains why abstinence [removal from physical pleasures] is the highest level. It might sound like an austere matter, but it is in fact a very happy situation. The person who attains that level is in a blissful state because he is capable of using so much energy in wisdom that he doesn't want to waste it on anything inferior. This is what Rabbeinu Yona means about one being in line with his nature.

One could ask why God didn't design man naturally attached to wisdom [from youth], instead of going through this [maturation] process of redirecting his energies from the physical. But there are creatures like that—they are called angels. We have no right to ask why God created man that way. King Solomon expressed it as follows:

For what is man who comes after the King, after He already made him? (Kobehes 2:12)

Man can investigate only those matters subsequent to creation. Why man was created a certain way is God's knowledge alone.

If it were possible for man to experience his original infantile physical enjoyments, he would not be happy because his energy level is too great to be satisfied with physical enjoyments. Man can only find complete satisfaction in the world of wisdom. [Wisdom is the only pursuit that enables man to consume 100 percent of his energies, which is the meaning of "satisfaction."] That is why as long as man does not pursue wisdom he will fail to achieve satisfaction. [The physical world is limited, and therefore man's immense energies are not consumed in the pursuit of the physical, thereby yielding frustration.] Most psychological problems are due to man's abundant energies. People fall ill because of neuroses, and certain adolescents have a high likelihood of experiencing mental illness because of their levels of dissatisfied energies. Before adolescence, there are insufficient energies to cause problems. But with the onset of adolescence, when there is a new influx of large quantities of energies, one's emotions become dammed-up as one's psychological mechanism is incapable of enjoying so much, creating a lot of pressure. This also explains why intellectual people—despite this damage—do not fall ill, as they are capable of directing their great amounts of energy toward thought. This spares them from mental illness. This is a psychological fact.

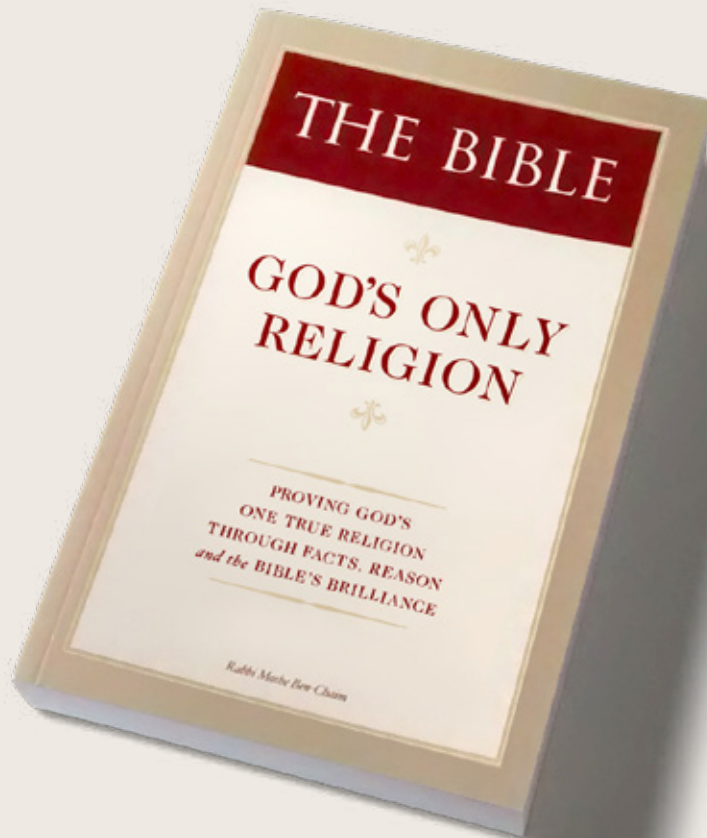
To combat one's instincts, one must be totally honest with oneself and examine his inner workings and his mind. Only then can a person detect the fantasies lurking behind his desires. When a person sees that fantasy, he can remove his energies from it. But as long as one is fooled by the substitute object of desire, he will not be able to remove himself as the emotion is too powerful.

Pirkei Avos strives to make a person a general over his soul. Abstinence is the end of the process where man is closest to his nature. ■

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