



# JewishTimes

VOL. XVII NO. 7 — AUG. 23, 2019

*This Miracle's Message*

# A VOICE INSIDE FIRE

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**RABBI REUVEN MANN** Are Jews Superior?

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM** Titus "Killed" God

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**LETTERS** Mediums

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*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

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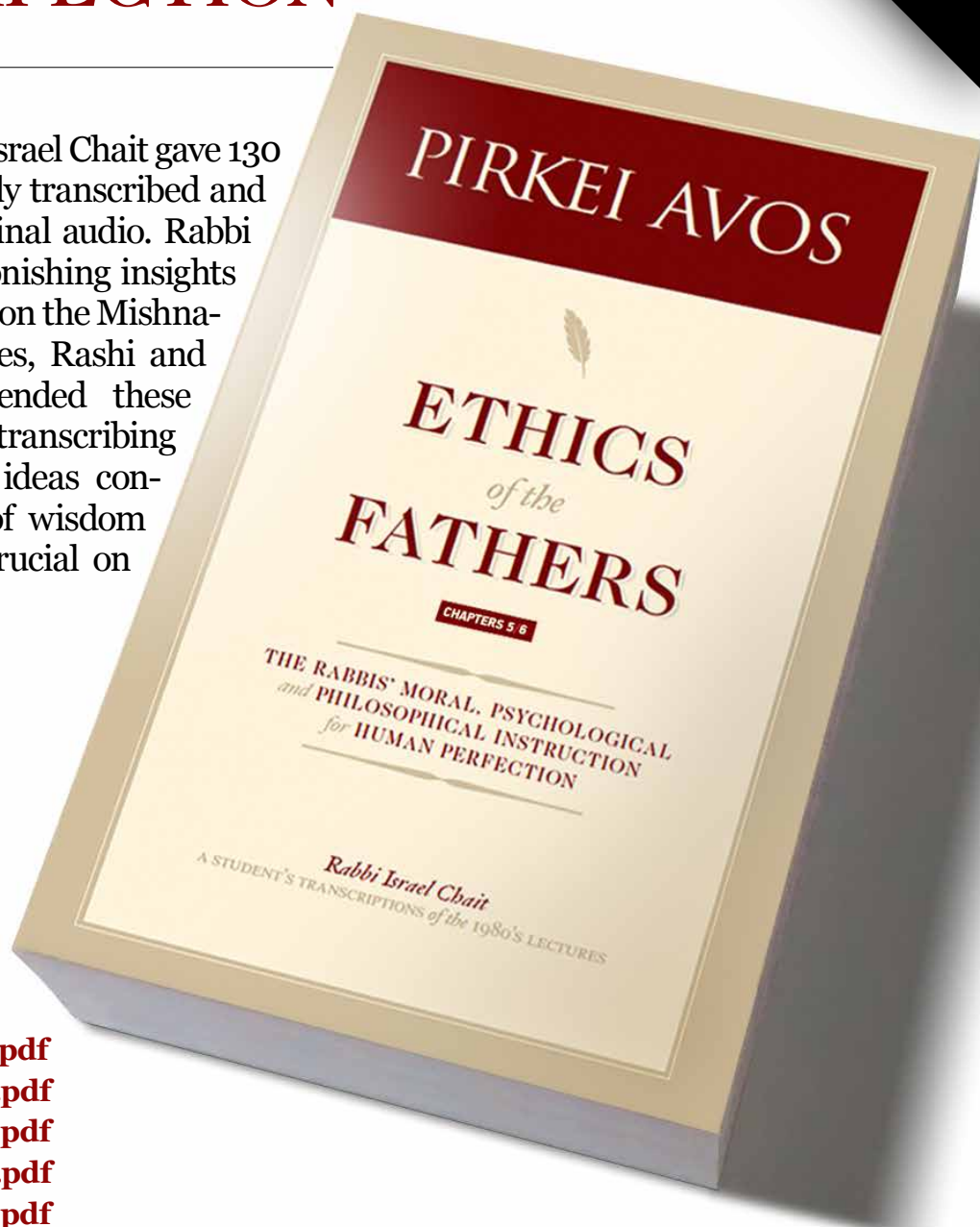
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## LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



## Reincarnation

**Reader:** If reincarnation is not true, isn't it unjust for people to be born blind, less spiritual, and deaf? How can we explain this in a non-Kabbala sense? To be clear, I am not saying God is unjust, far from it. He is just. I am just trying to understand your view.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** We don't have most of the knowledge of the universe, much less, God's knowledge in creating one person wise and another simple, one person deformed and another formed properly. Having yet to exist, deformity is certainly not due to the person's merit, and reincarnation is baseless in Torah. To believe in something unproven is not why God gave man intelligence.

## Mediums

**Reader:** I've spoken to someone who is machmir Orthodox and a medium. She's consulted with rabbis and was told that being a medium is both real and not prohibited. They told her that the limitations that must be set for Judaism are not to summon spirits, not to ask spirits to do any bidding, and not to predict the future. What is acceptable is listening to spirits who contact you, and relaying evidence and messages to the person present.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Torah prohibits attempts at consulting the dead: "Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or

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MIDRASH

# Titus & Temple

Midrash

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

A close friend shared a gemara with me (Gittin 56b):

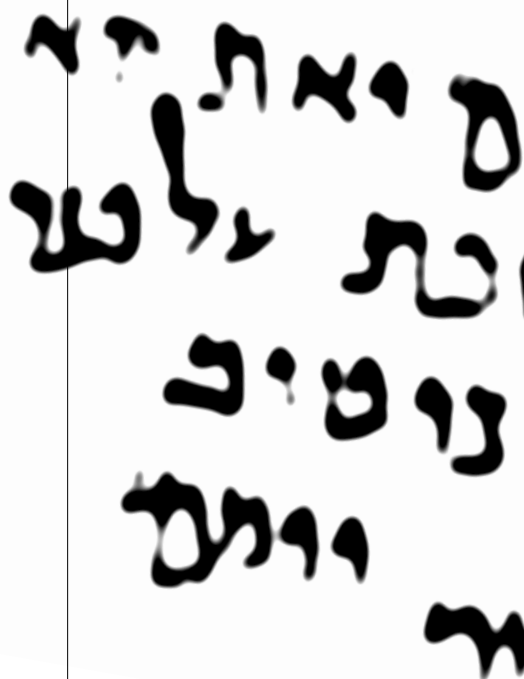
*Vespasian went back to Rome and sent Titus in his place. The Gemara cites a verse that was expounded as referring to Titus: "And he shall say, 'Where is their God, their rock in whom they trusted?'" (Deut. 32:37). This is the wicked Titus, who insulted and blasphemed God on High. What did Titus do when he conquered the Temple? He took a prostitute with his hand, and entered the Holy of Holies with her. He then spread out a Torah scroll underneath him and committed a sin, i.e., engaged in sexual intercourse, on it. Afterward he took a sword and cut into the curtain separating between the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. And a miracle was performed and blood spurted forth. Seeing the blood, he mistakenly thought that he had killed God. Titus saw blood issuing forth from the curtain in God's meeting place, the Temple, and he took it as a sign that he had succeeded in killing God Himself. As it is stated: "Your enemies roar in the midst of Your meeting place; they have set up their own signs for signs" (Psalms 74:4).*

Titus profaned the Torah and also sought to kill God. Why did he profane the Torah scroll in this manner? And did blood truly spurt from the curtain, or is this an allegory?

Intercourse is the most lustful drive. Titus expressed his true opposition to God and His Torah: he sought unbridled instinctual gratification. His profaning the Torah scroll and his stabbing of the parochess curtain expressed his hate for God's law and God, respectively. (The parochess sections-off the holiest cite, God's "place.")

My friend explained very well the parallel between Titus and Christianity, occurring in the same timeframe. "Killing God" is at Christianity's core, as Jesus replaced (killed) God. The son killing the father is what Sigmund Freud referred to as the Oedipus Complex. Titus—a devout Christian—thought he killed God; this was his intent in attacking the temple. Both Titus and Christianity share an infantile aggression against authority, reducing both to primitive attitudes deserving our disdain, not religious adherence and certainly not veneration.

How do we know the blood spurting from the curtain was not a real miracle, after all, the gemara calls it a miracle? The quote from Psalms indicates that Titus made this sign (he imagined this): "Your enemies roar in the midst of Your meeting place; they have set up their own signs for signs." This is an insightful verse. God's enemies chose to roar (rebel)



(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



in God's temple, His meeting place. This is because God's enemies truly accept God—as well as His temple—as real. This reality is disturbing to instinctual man, as said above, and therefore he is driven to rebel to justify himself. The enemy then interprets matters as a sign that favors his wishes. Perhaps Titus accidentally injured himself when stabbing the parochess, and drawing his own blood, he interpreted it as killing God, which was his true wish all along.

And unless Jews witnessed this entire event about Titus, how do the talmudic rabbis know what occurred those few moments inside the temple? Perhaps they are scripting this event as a midrash, teaching us the general human trend concerning hate for God, embodied here in Titus.

To suggest God created the blood spurting poses a serious problem. In Torah, God carefully limits phraseology depicting Him as partaking of human qualities. As Torah must reach people of all levels, God saw fit to

refer to Himself as “angry,” “hearing,” “seeing,” “vengeful,” “sorrowful” and other terms, provided they do not cross a line. Such terms can be safely interpreted by less knowledgeable people in a true sense as God's disappointment (anger), that He knows man's words (hearing), that He knows man's actions (seeing), or that He punishes (vengeful). God even says He “smelled” Noah's sacrifice (Gen. 8:21) to indicate that He finds certain perfecting acts as pleasing before Him, but not that He can smell. But never does God say that He ate or partook of grosser physical actions, as this would suggest a deficiency in God (Maimonides, Guide; book I, chap. xxvi). Similarly, God will not create a miracle suggesting that He bleeds. Rather, the blood was Titus' own interpretation: “they have set up their own signs for signs.” The blood was Titus' own invention and interpretation. It is amazing that King David (Psalms) identified these core human truths long before Titus expressed them.

I thank my friend for sharing his insights. ■





## PARSHA

# Jews: Superior?

Rabbi Reuven Mann

**I**n this week's Parsha, Eikev, Moshe addresses Jewish "exceptionalism" in the context of the Jews'

"inalienable" right to the Land of Israel. We must never forget that our claim to this territory is based on Hashem's decision to give it to us.

What motivated this great gift? Why did the Creator dispense this most coveted treasure to the Jewish people? Is it because we possess such amazing qualities? The Jews can be characterized as a people who excel! No other group has a comparable record of achievement in virtually all areas of human creative endeavor. The life-enhancing scientific breakthroughs constantly emanating from Israel are truly astounding. And envy-inducing.

Jews take great pride in the personal and national attainments of their brothers and sisters. However, does this record of excellence explain why Hashem bequeathed us this unique dwelling place? To put it bluntly, are the Jews a superior nationality who were chosen by G-d and gifted with His favored land because among the nations they are simply the best?

The surprising answer is found in this week's parsha, where Moshe stingingly states, "Do not say in your heart, when Hashem pushes them away from you saying, 'Because of my righteousness did Hashem bring me to possess this Land and because of the wickedness of these nations did Hashem drive them away from before you.' Not because of your righteousness and the uprightness of your heart are you coming to possess their Land, but because of the wickedness of these nations does Hashem, your G-d, drive them away from before you, and in order to establish the word that Hashem swore to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And you should know that not because of your righteousness does Hashem, your G-d, give you this good land to possess it, for you are a stiff-necked people."

We should appreciate Moshe's brutal honesty. He was certainly uninterested in scoring any popularity points. One imagines he would not have lasted long as a contemporary pulpit rabbi. He clearly anticipated that the Jews would interpret their easy conquest of Canaan as proof that Hashem recognized their exceptionalism. So he put it to them in no uncertain terms that their divine inheritance did not come to them because of their exemplary moral character, for "you are a stiff-necked people."

The Sforno explains that it is impossible for a someone to be righteous and of upright heart if he refuses to listen to reason. Such a person chooses to function according to the whims of his heart and declines to turn his attention to the righteous teachers who would guide him on the proper path. Our propensity to eschew wisdom in favor of our emotional inclinations is a categorical moral shortcoming that Moshe detected in the Jews. And he shared this insight with them.

If we are so flawed, then why did Hashem choose us and favor us with His blessed Land? Moshe provides the answer, "Only your forefathers did Hashem cherish to love them, and He chose their offspring after them—you—from among all the peoples, as this day."

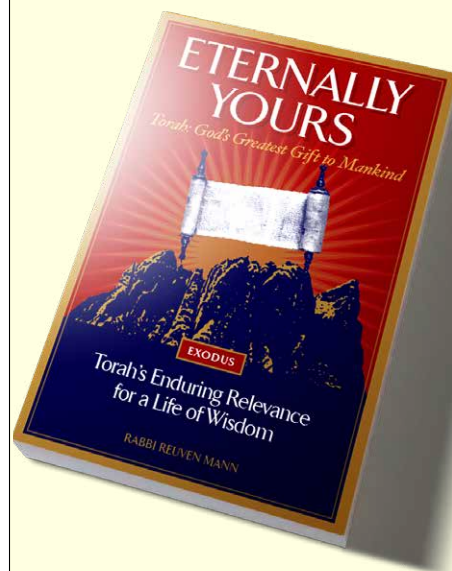
The uniqueness of the Jews is not based on any intrinsic spiritual quality. Rather, it is because we are the descendants of truly great people, the Avot, who earned G-d's special approval and favor. It is therefore vitally important that Jews divest themselves of false national hubris. We should humbly aspire to be genuine descendants of our great forefathers and emulate the ways of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, whose religious qualities found favor with Hashem.

Thus, all Jews, especially the most fervently religious, must honestly confront this question: Are we practicing the religion of Avraham Avinu? Hashem clearly

explained the reason for His closeness to our nation's founder. "And Hashem said, 'Shall I conceal from Avraham what I do, now that Avraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? For I have loved him, because he commands his children, and his household after him, that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice, in order that Hashem might then bring upon Avraham that which He had spoken of him.'"

That is the standard that Jews, as individuals and as a nation, must seek to aspire to in order to merit the Land of Israel and continuing Divine favor. May we merit to achieve it.

Shabbat shalom. ■



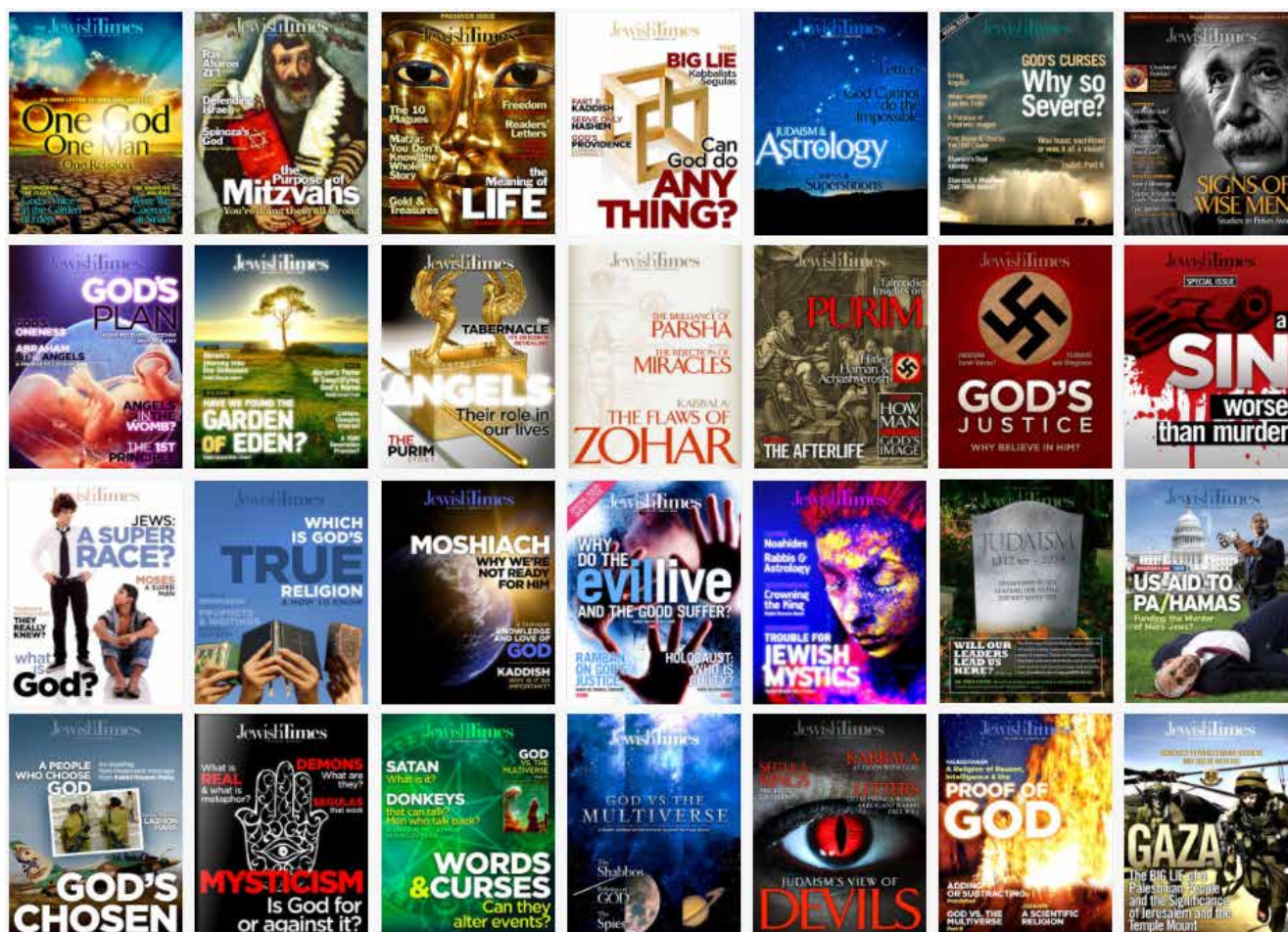
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one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead" (Deut. 18:10,11). These prohibitions are due to their false nature, as God does not prohibit what is true. Ibn Ezra (Lev. 19:31) says the following:

*Those with empty brains say 'were it not that fortune tellers and magicians were true, the Torah would not prohibit them.' But I (Ibn Ezra) say just the opposite of their words, because the Torah doesn't prohibit that which is true, but it prohibits that which is false. And the proof is the prohibition on idols and statues...*

## Before Creation

**Reader:** Is it possible to know what G-d was doing before creation? And was G-d forming past worlds in an endless cycle, as in preforming His creative energy? Think of reincarnation but on a larger scale, namely, the universe. Indeed some scientists think this was the case before the Big Bang. If true, it would entail that this world-building will continue to occur. What were our sages' opinions regarding this?

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Talmud Chagiga 11b says, based on a Torah verse, that man cannot know anything prior to Creation. This is because all human knowledge aside from prophecy depends on physical creation and our senses. What is beyond this field of perception, such as what God is and what existed prior to creation, is impossible to know.

## Jewish Superiority?

**Reader:** I came across this excerpt from an article written by a Rabbi on Parsha Balak as follows:

*"Just remember this very important point. Every Jew you encounter, including the Jews that Bilaam saw, are always trying to do what they think is right. When they mess up, it's because they made a mistake – in hindsight they wish they hadn't have done it. As much as you might think you are objective and clear thinking, G-d does not see iniquity in the Jewish people. So if there is a Jew somewhere to whom you ascribe dastardly motivations, G-d disagrees. That Jew is only making a mistake. The question therefore is, do you think you are more insightful than G-d? After all is said and done, you simply can't hate people who make mistakes. That's what an anti-semite does." (Full article: <http://bit.ly/rabbis11>)*

My question: If I were to assign dastardly motives to Jeffrey Epstein, who engaged in sexual trafficking of underage girls, does that make me an antisemite? To be honest, I find Parshat Balak uncomfortable as I read it from a non-Jewish lens. One Jew I know quotes this story frequently to tell us non-Jews that we should not be criticizing the Jewish people. But to what extent? I find the term "anti-semite" is used like a weapon to smear the reputation of those who have different views (which goes against the status quo). So please advise to what extent criticizing Jews constitute antisemitism? Am I anti-semitic if I condemn a Jew who deliberately puts me down?

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** This Rabbi opposes Torah. The city of idolatrous Jews are all killed, receiving the identical penalty of gentile idolaters. And God killed the Jews many times, as we read in the past few Torah portions. This Rabbi wishes to defend a Jew unconditionally, while God does not agree, as we see from His acts. Epstein was a sinner and deserved punishment. "Anti-Semite" is used by such people to whitewash truly bad Jews, and this is wrong. He suffers from the disease of assuming Jewish superiority.

You are justified to talk back to a Jew who put you down. This rabbi is wrong for attacking you personally, and he is corrupting Torah when he dismisses any evil perpetrated by a Jew as merely a "mistake": this is his own invention and not a Torah view.

What do our Rabbi say regarding his view "God does not see iniquity in the Jewish people" (Num. 23:21)? Rashi says this means that God does not act particular when the Jews' violate His word. Thus, they do in fact violate God's word. Jews sin. But as we have Torah, God need not be as particular with us as He is with gentiles who, with no Torah, have recourse to repent and perfect themselves. But in fact, Bilam helped the Jews sin through advising Balak to enticing them with Midianite women. The Torah openly states the Jews sinned, in many cases.

## Is this Rabbi Right?

**Reader:** I recently posed questions to a rabbi who gave me the following responses. What is your opinion on his views?

**Rabbi:** A Gentile who remains in Christianity / Messianic Judaism is more ethical than a Gentile who is a Noahide.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** False: Christianity is idolatry, so all its ethics have a false foundation. See all the heinous crimes the Church committed due to its "ethics." Whereas Noahides follow the Creator—the Author of ethics—and thereby its ethics are 100% correct.

**Rabbi:** A Gentile Christian feels more bound to obey the ethical rules in Torah as compared to a Noahide who is described to pick and choose which Torah law to follow.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** False: A Noahide must follow the 7 Noahide laws as a minimum. But he may add to them.

**Rabbi:** Noahide laws are rabbinic in nature.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Talmud derives them from a Torah verse.

**Rabbi:** A Gentile who believes the Torah is true must convert to Judaism.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** False: No such obligation.

**Rabbi:** Noahidism is employed to keep non Jews from embracing Judaism.

**Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim:** False: Noahide laws were God's gift to man to direct him towards a perfect life. Later, God added laws to those original Noahide laws. God's plan did not change but the world did (rise of corrupt Canaanites, Egyptians, the Exodus) and more laws like not following such people and celebrating the Exodus were required for that same plan. Thus, Noahide laws and Torah laws have an identical objective. The Prophets discuss the future when all gentiles will recognize Judaism. ■



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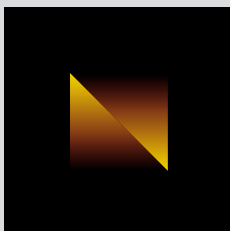
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# A VOICE INSIDE FIRE

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

**T**orah's inclusion of any idea indicates its significance. If repeated, greater stress is intended. And if an idea is found 8 times in Torah—let alone in a single parsha—how much greater importance must this idea share?

In Vaueschanan, Moses repeats 8 times that God's words emanated on Mt. Sinai's inferno, "from inside the fire; mitoch ha'aish." What is this crucial message? The Jews experienced many miracles; how does this miracle stand apart?

Biological life exists in all elements: in air, water, ice, gases and earth, from the greatest altitudes to the deepest depths of the seas. But in one element, all life perishes: fire. Through creating a voice of the 10 Commands emanating from fire, God taught that He is not biological; He is not of this planet. He is the Creator of the planet, and the universe. As God is unaffected by fire, He is the one who created fire. He is the Creator, who is unaffected by His creations. What is the intent of this message? It is this:

God, who gave us Torah from amidst the flames, is the same Creator of the universe and mankind. He knows what man is, and therefore, He knows what is the best life, and He gave us Torah to attain that life of goodness.

The message is that a Torah life, where one engages God's wisdom for the joy of learning itself—lishma—is the only life that offers man true and sustained happiness. It takes effort for one to detach from society that praises wealth, idolizes fame and values success, and prefer instead isolated or sometimes shared Torah study. Such activity doesn't cater to one's instinctual desire for socializing and accumulating wealth. But as King Solomon taught, ego and success are illusory, they are fantasies. They only temporarily offer "pleasure" but not happiness. The greatest minds valued the enjoyment of the mind over all else. It is wise to study the wise men, who followed God's advice, and not blindly follow today's ignorant societies who follow hollow emotions. ■



PARSHA

# The Manna

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

**W**hile the era of the manna was coming to an end, its role in transforming the Jewish nation was still being discussed in the final years of the Jewish sojourn through the wilderness. In the Torah portion of Eikev, Moshe exhorts the Jewish people (Devarim 8:2-3):

“And you shall remember the entire way on which the Lord, your God, led you these forty years in the desert, in order to afflict you to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He afflicted you and let you go hungry, and then fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your forefathers know, so that He would make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but rather by, whatever comes forth from the mouth of the Lord does man live.”

Ramban takes these two verses and draws a connection between them. He begins somewhat cryptically:

“[The Torah] is saying that [through remembering your days in the Wilderness] you will be able to know that through the performance of the commandments that there is complete goodness, and there will not be ‘a righteous man forsaken, nor his children begging for bread’”

Ramban then introduces his approach:

“For God provided sustenance for you in the Wilderness through great miraculous means, due to you following his commandments”

The sustenance he is referring to was the manna. Ramban expands his insight:

“...that it was a great trial for them, for they did not know [of] any [subsistence] plans for themselves, yet they entered the great Wilderness, which was not a place of bread.”

Why was this done?

“And [Moshe] explained that [God] did this in order to inform you that it is He who preserves the life of man with whatever He decrees; if so, observe His commandments and live”

It would appear, according to Ramban, that the manna was the test, and the passing grade would be the subsequent following of the commandments. The basis for this causal

relationship should be understood, as one does not seem to follow from the other.

Moving forward, Ramban explains how the avot, or forefathers, never received any information about the future manna; thus, there was no tradition the Jewish people were aware of regarding this miracle. He then offers a different explanation:

“...that [God] has done with you this great kindness that [even] your holy forefathers did not achieve [by their merits].”

Ramban elucidates, suggesting that even though the forefathers followed whatever God commanded, they were not on a high enough spiritual level that would warrant God sustaining them with something such as the manna.

The obvious question here is the implication of the lowered status of the forefathers to the current Jewish nation in the desert. A brief review of some of the clear lack of faith exhibited by the Jews in the desert would easily belie Ramban's claim.

There is an inconsistency present in this entire line of thinking. It would appear the manna was only formulated to “encourage” the Jewish people to follow the commandments from that point on. Clearly, the presentation of the ideological supremacy of the commandments was insufficient. The avot certainly did not suffer from this problem, and therefore the idea of them requiring the manna would be absurd. And yet, Ramban writes that not receiving the manna was reflective of their lower status in comparison to the Jewish people of the time. How do we reconcile this?

There is one last question that should be asked. What was it about the manna, as opposed to the other miracles (such as the plagues or the splitting of the Red Sea), that would be the phenomenon leading to a complete acceptance of the commandments?

When we look at the other miracles, what they shared in common was the imminent threat to the Jewish people and the subsequent rescuing by God. The normative response to such a salvation is a sense of a debt of gratitude. God saved the Jewish people, and they would do as He says because they were rescued. However, the issue is that over time, the feeling of what was owed would dissipate, and the attachment to the commandments would falter along with it. God chooses a different venue.

The environment of the desert, as presented by Ramban, has an almost experimental feel to it. The Jewish people were being placed in a unique situation, where they would have no access to food. It is important to emphasize that they were not in danger, as there were other paths they could have travelled, all with towns that had supplies. What God was therefore designing was a method to create a specific

type of dependency on the part of the Jewish people.

As we know, the idea of being a dependent existence is one that challenges our very core sense of importance. We would like to think we are truly independent, that our decisions are made in a vacuum, and that our ability to survive and thrive is in our hands. While we do exhibit some degree of control, the reality is our existences are essentially dependent. We can only exist because of God. God sought to create this very sense of dependency in the desert. He wanted the Jewish people to experience the idea of a direct dependence on God, where their existences were clearly in God's “hands”. Creating a means of sustenance via the manna accomplished this objective.

Why was this so critical? God wanted to teach the Jewish people a foundation of the commandments. A great challenge of the commandments would be for the Jewish people to view them as more than a set of rules. Our very existence as a nation was tied to the Torah. The dependency exhibited via the manna would be transferred to the relationship we were required to have to the Torah. Experiencing this dependency would etch into our consciousness the way we needed to relate to the Torah as a whole.

This explains the relationship presented by Ramban. Clearly, presenting the philosophical benefits of the Torah was insufficient to ensure the long-term commitment by the Jewish people. The avot, of course, did not have the same challenge, making the manna something unnecessary for them. Ramban is pointing out that while it may be true they did not need the environment of dependence established by God, they were still missing out on something quite remarkable. Existing in a state where one is acutely aware of one's dependence on God is an extraordinary phenomenon. Our general state of life puts us in conflict with this ideal, and we must battle our sense of self importance in order to recognize our true relationship to God. The avot may not have had this conflict to the extent of the average person, but it was present. To live an extended period without such a conflict was a tremendous opportunity. Ramban seems to be emphasizing to the reader that while it is true there was a need for the manna “experiment”, one should understand the powerful growth its effect had on the Jewish people as a whole.

Creating a scenario of complete dependence on God made it clear what was on the line when it came to adhering to the Torah. The lesson the manna served then, and should still serve today, is to remind us of how our existence and identity as a Jewish nation is solely dependent on the covenant established through the Torah. The commandments are not mere rules; they are what give us life. ■