

# JewishTimes

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PARSHA: JUDAISM'S CORE

# TZEDAKA

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*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

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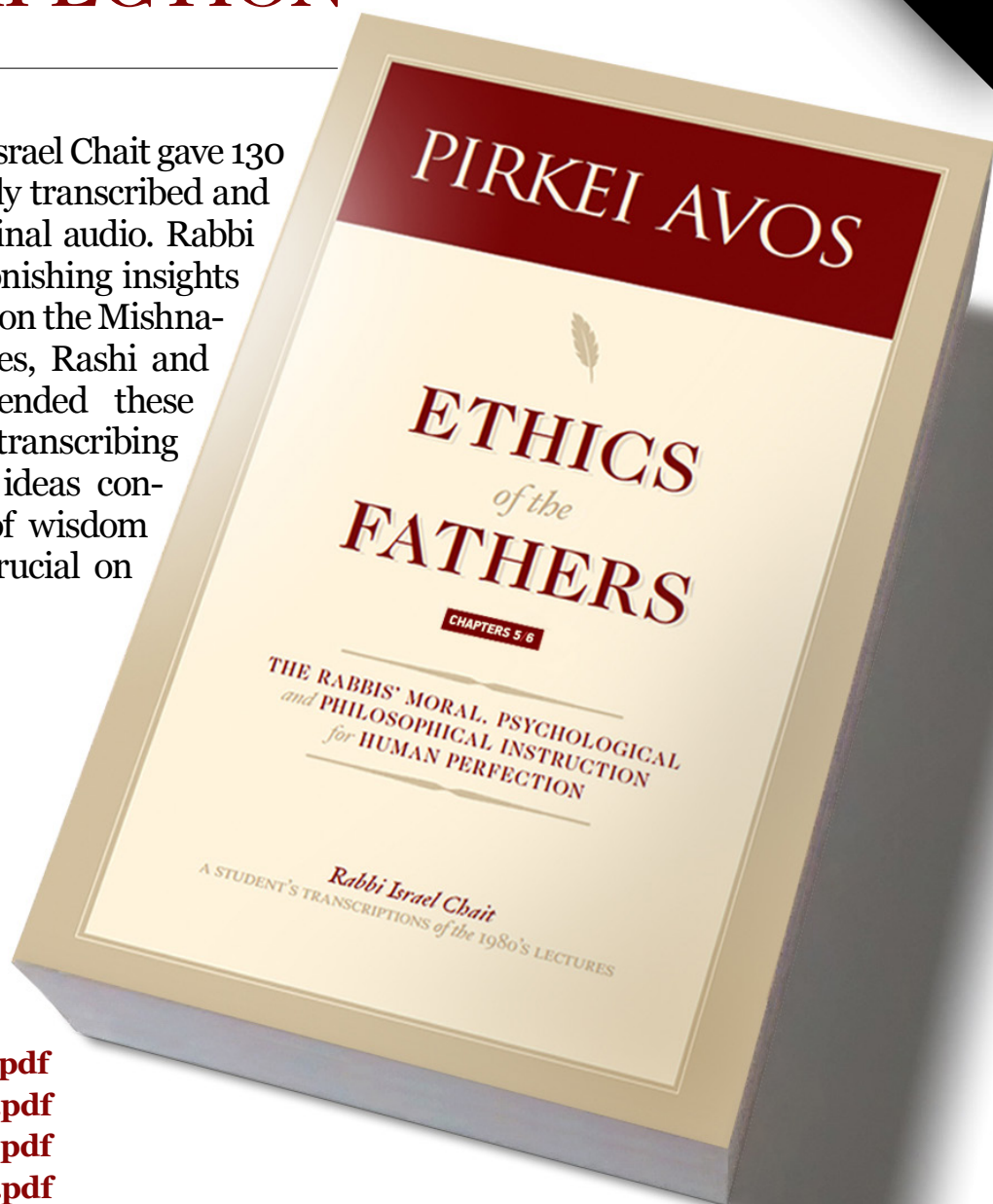
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## LETTERS

## Atonement: Like it or Not

**Reader:** Daf Yomi 7a Reish LaKish says Yom Kippur atones for sins, even if someone rejects its atonement. Why would that be?

**Rabbi:** One can't reject atonement, it's from God. Furthermore, I believe Rabbi Israel Chait once said that even the recognition of the problem is essential to the cure. Therefore, recognizing the day of Yom Kippur makes one realize his/her own flaws. ■



# Sabbath/ New Moon

## The Rabbis' Wisdom

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



**T**his Sabbath is also the New Moon. On this day, our regular Additional (Musaf) service is altered. Instead of the regular prayer, we recite “Atah yatzarta olamcha m’kedem; You formed Your world from long ago.” We must ask: Why was this prayer changed on account of the Sabbath/New Moon coincidence?

Looking at the altered text, we notice the altered concepts: 1) God’s creation, and 2) from long ago. The first step in approaching this question is to define the two days of Sabbath and the New Moon, independent of each other. We will then be better equipped to understand what concept their combination highlights.

The Sabbath has the unique distinction of God’s creation of the universe from nothingness, “creation ex nihilo.” All matter was brought into existence and completed, and God refrained from any additional creation from the seventh day and forward. The Rabbis teach<sup>[1]</sup> that the miracles throughout time were “programmed” into Creation. God did not enact new changes “in time,” primarily because He is above time, and also because His omniscience allows for His earlier plans. Maimonides teaches that time itself too is a creation. If this is so, that Creation was complete, why then do we recite “You formed Your world from long ago” only on the Sabbath/New Moon coincidence? We should recite it every Sabbath!

What is the New Moon? The New Moon is different from the Sabbath. On it, we do not commemorate the completion of Creation, but the completion of the circuit of the Moon. How is the Moon’s circuit different than Creation? It too was designed by God!

There is a distinction. Creation, celebrated by the Sabbath, addresses God’s creation of the universe from nothingness. Sabbath addresses the “material” of creation. The New Moon embodies a different phenomenon: natural laws.

God created two things; material and natural law. On the first Sabbath, although all matter was complete, the laws governing their behavior could not be seen in their completion. For example, the Moon’s orbit of the Earth is about 29 days. By definition, on the first Sabbath, the completion of the Moon’s cycle had a few more weeks to go. In truth, all of Creation could not be witnessed on the first Sabbath, as many of God’s laws would not display their complete cycles of behavior for months, and for the planets and stars, even years.

What happens on the Sabbath/New Moon combination? On this day, both systems coincide, displaying a completion of both; God’s physical creation of substances (Sabbath) and the fulfillment or completion of the universe’s laws (New Moon). On this special day, it is appropriate to offer this unique praise to God, “You formed Your world

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



from long ago”: formation of the world corresponds to the Sabbath, but “long ago” corresponds to a system, which, although enacted at a prior time, only fulfills its mission much later. “Long ago” is a reference to time and laws—not substance. Physical creation can be beheld in a glance, but a system of operation unfolds its design only after a span of time.

Both aspects of Creation are witnessed on this special Sabbath/New Moon: Sabbath recalls physical creation, and the new Moon testifies to God’s laws operating in their completion.

### **Postscript**

While it is true that sunrise or sunset can teach this idea observed in the New Moon, perhaps its frequency and familiarity diminishes its significance in man’s eyes. Therefore, the New Moon was selected by the Rabbis as the more impressive phenomenon on which to establish praise to God.

I believe this second aspect of Creation, i.e., its laws, are alluded to in Genesis 2:4.

[1] Ethics 5:6 ■

PARSHA

# Fake Judaism

Rabbi Reuven Mann

**T**his week's parsha, Re'eh, takes up the subject prophecy. Belief in its validity is a fundamental requirement of Judaism. One who denies that there is a genuine method by which the Creator of the Universe communicates His will to man, is regarded as a heretic.

We thus maintain that there are specially talented and trained individuals called prophets, who achieve a high level of moral and intellectual perfection wherein they merit an authentic revelation from Hashem. However, not all who claim this distinction are necessarily legitimate. History abounds with stories of pretenders who convinced masses of people that they spoke in G-d's Name.

Judaism demands that we obey the words of the true prophet. Our parsha teaches that we must be equally assiduous in rejecting the claims of the false prophet.

This is not as easy as it might seem. The seer described in Re'eh performs impressive "signs and wonders," conveying the impression that his claim is genuine.

Although this person can produce miraculous occurrences, we must repudiate him, because he calls upon the Jews to worship other gods. He therefore contradicts the clear words of the Torah that explicitly and categorically forbid all forms of idolatry. So, miracles notwithstanding, we know that the content of his "message" is phony, and we must deal with him as a false prophet.

Many have asked, why would Hashem enable a false manipulator to bring about supernatural events that support his impressiveness and lend an air of veracity to his lying words?

The answer is openly spelled out our Parsha which adjures us, "...do not listen to

*the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of a dream, for Hashem your G-d is testing you to know whether you love Hashem your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul."*

The Torah is teaching us that miracles are relevant only when the content of a prophetic message is possibly true. However, no miracle in the world, including resurrection of the dead, can validate a demonstrable falsehood.

Let me ask you a question. Suppose a claimant to prophecy came along and asserted that the Holocaust was a myth. And when he was challenged to show a "sign," he performed the most amazing miracles. Would anyone change their conviction that the Nazis had murdered six million Jews?

But then, how was this charlatan able to bring freezing weather and massive snowstorms to Phoenix, Arizona, in midsummer, at his word? The demonstrations that he wrought were, according to all the scientists, clearly impossible by the laws of nature. So would you believe his insistence that the Holocaust did not happen? I would not. I can't explain the "miracles" but I know beyond a doubt that genocide against the Jews is a fact.

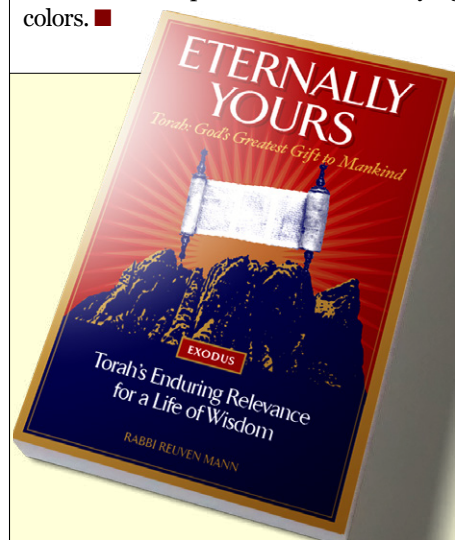
Throughout history, the Jews and the world have been subjected to false prophets. While formal prophecy has officially ceased in Israel, the emergence of deceptive teachers and ideological movements has been and remains a problem. False messianic movements inspired by charismatic leaders who misled the masses have brought great harm to the Jewish people.

There are, today, many religious leaders who have great powers of persuasion and

convey the impression that they are truly godly individuals whose understanding of Torah must be followed. The parsha of the false prophet warns that we are not to be impressed by externals, even miracles. Genuine love of Hashem demands the ability to differentiate between true and false ideas. It is essential that we become familiar with the basic ideas of Judaism and learn how to be suspicious of deviations, no matter how subtle.

We must strive to cultivate a true love of Hashem that supersedes any allegiance to "prophets." We must also resist the tendency to overly and inappropriately revere humans to the point where we mindlessly accept all their teachings as divinely ordained. True love of Hashem is founded on an abiding and unyielding quest for truth.

When Hashem enables a false prognosticator to arise, He is testing us to see the quality of our love for Him. Let us pray that all Jews reach the level of wisdom and discernment to pass that trial with flying colors. ■



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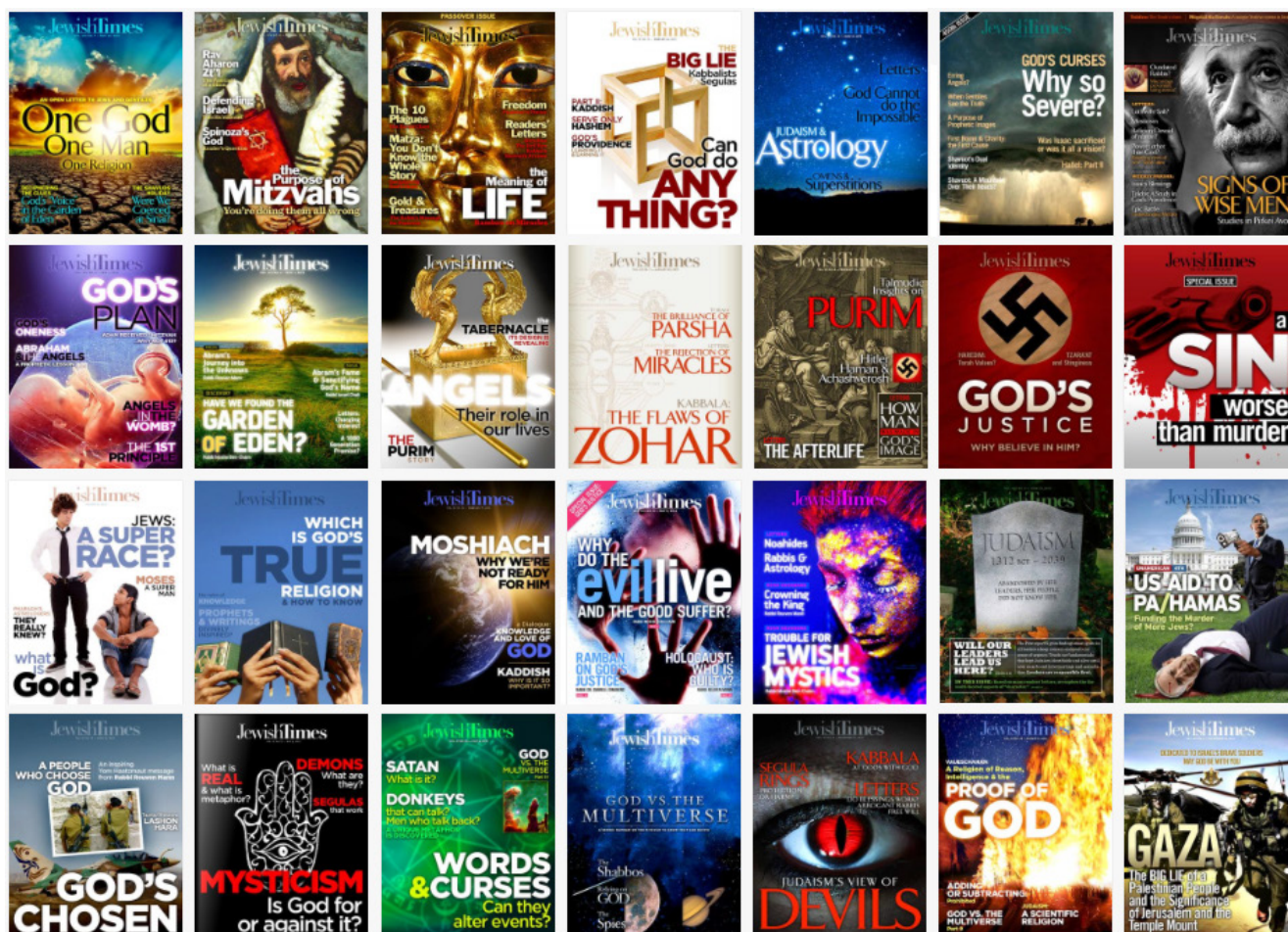
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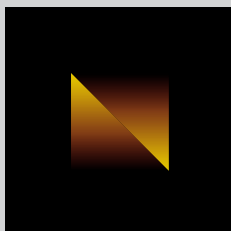
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# A VOICE INSIDE FIRE

*Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim*

Torah'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

# Blueprint for Success

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg



**T**here are times when studying the Torah that we are faced with a verse with seemingly obvious directives yet lacking any formal sense of how to apply them to our daily lives. In these instances, the commentaries serve a pivotal role in teasing out the ideas the Torah is presenting. One such example occurs in Parshas Re'eh, where the plan to the proper life is drawn up in a fascinating manner.

Within the midst of the section regarding the false prophet, we come across an awkwardly written verse (Devarim 13:5):

*"You shall follow the Lord, your God, fear Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to Him."*

Taken literally, the verse does not seem to add anything whatsoever to our understanding of the obligations of the Jewish people. Rabbeinu Bechaye (1255-1340), in his commentary on the Torah, offers an explanation as to what is being referenced. He begins with the instruction to "follow"

God, an allusion to God's middot, or traits. We find a similar concept noted later in the Torah with the directive of "vehalachta bedrachav", meaning "you should follow in His ways". However, in following these middot, we must act in a cautious manner. We should "fear Him", meaning we should investigate not the essence of the middot, but the actions themselves.

Rabbeinu Bachaye continues to the next directive, that of keeping His commandments and heeding His voice. Keeping His commandments refers to adhering to the written Torah given to Moshe at Sinai, containing the 613 commandments. What about heeding His voice? He explains that this alludes to both the prophets, as well as the Oral Law, the tradition emanating from the prophets. The very structure of the mesora, the passing down of the Torah and its ideas from generation to generation, is prefaced on the initial receiving of the complete Torah by Moshe at Sinai. Moshe passed it to Yehoshua, Yehoshua to the

elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Great Sages. Rabbeinu Bachaye pivots to the idea of worship from the verse, offering a one word clarification: tefila (prayer). This all culminates in the final command, that of cleaving to God.

Rabbeinu Bachaye offers three distinct explanations for cleaving. His first possibility is that even in a time of "reshut", meaning a time where one is not engaged in a specific commandment, one's thoughts should be attached to Him, and one should not separate oneself from this state of mind for even a singular moment. The second possibility is that one should not ever desire to leave the worship of God. Normally, a servant naturally yearns to be free of his master. Even if his master is caring and benevolent, the notion of being subservient to someone else produces a strong urge to be free of the state of slavery. Thus, we are told we need to cleave to the serving of God, and to not desire to separate and be free, as serving God is the "true freedom". Finally, he

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offers one more explanation – God, in using the term cleaving, is referring to the promise of the reward of olam haba, the World to Come. If we follow all the above directives, we will merit the highest possible “cleaving”, found in olam haba.

We are faced with several questions regarding this elaborate explanation. For one, what ties together these different orders? How does tefilah fit alongside adherence to the Torah? What is Rabbeinu Bachaye referring to in the first and second directives, following God’s middot with limitations and caveats? Then there are the three different explanations offered for the concept of “cleaving”; what is each one teaching us?

The overall approach could be in understanding that the verse is alluding to the blueprint established by God for humanity’s perfection as a species. The first part deals with the appropriate philosophical framework of the individual. One must be drawn to God, looking to emulate His ways. The middot of God, observed through Divine Providence, offer the gateway to understanding Him. One should recognize that these middot reflect the paradigm man should strive for in his thoughts and actions. However, in this very analysis lies the critical reality that we are qualitatively removed from God. We can never truly understand the essence of God and His relationship with man. Thus, we see the framework of how man should approach the study of God – drawn to study but understanding the intrinsic limitation.

In the second section, we see the importance of observing the commandments, along with recognizing the entire system, whether it be written or oral, is of Divine origin. Simply put, this is focusing on the practical requirement for the individual, that the Torah be followed.

Finally, there is tefilah. Tefilah is another paradigm, a paradigm of humanity ordering the psyche in the proper way. When a person engages in tefilah, one offers praise to God, understanding oneself as compared to the Creator. Requests are placed for needs, an acknowledgment of being a dependent existence. These experiences re-orient one’s normative psychological makeup, leading to the correct state of mind.

To summarize, then, one can see from the above explanation that God is giving the Jewish people a formula to achieve the correct path of life: develop and advance the appropriate philosophical mindset, adhere to the commandments, and orient the



psyche away from the ego and towards the true understanding of one’s self. Put together, the paradigm individual emerges.

This overall approach is essential in understanding the next explanations concerning cleaving to God. Quite obviously, cleaving to God cannot have any interpretation rooted in the physical. Thus, Rabbeinu Bachaye sets out to offer three different possibilities.

The first of these, as mentioned above, is that one should always be involved in thinking of God, even in times of “reshut”. In essence, what he is saying is that if a person correctly follows the blueprint laid out in the verse, an overall change emerges in one’s existence. One naturally desires to remain there, abandoning any pull towards that which is outside. The concept of cleaving in this instance refers to the person’s strong attachment to the ideal state of existence,

that which follows the various directives of the verse.

In the next explanation, Rabbeinu Bachaye writes that one should not desire to leave the state of servitude to God, as a slave normally would seek freedom. There is a certain intimidation that can overcome someone when beginning to contemplate what God has demanded of us. Every part of one must be dedicated to serving God. This counters a normative viewpoint that people have of the idea of being free. Freedom quite often conjures up the notion of “doing whatever I want when I want”. To live an unrestricted life without boundaries is to many the highest expression of freedom. Yet such a person fails to see how often in fact he is not as free as he hopes to be. One is beholden to the physical needs of the body, forced to obtain nutrition. Often there is succumbing to emotional whims and fancies, unable to shake free of overwhelming desires. One can be constantly fooled by an outsized view of the self, the ego changing fantasy to fact. The point here is that a person’s notion of freedom is in fact quite often an illusion. Judaism, according to Rabbeinu Bachaye, offers the true idea of freedom. It re-defines how freedom should be viewed, noted in his use of the term “true freedom”. When a person follows the formula for the ideal life, the objective of creation is reached. This is the “true” freedom. If someone understands and internalizes this idea, he will never perceive the worship of God as a servitude to escape.

Finally, there is the explanation of olam haba as an expression of cleaving. When a person reaches the highest state of existence, knowing and serving God become the *raison d’etre*. Olam haba, as Rabbeinu Bachaye notes, is conceptually the same idea, albeit in a completely different situation. While the rationale for following God’s commands should not be to receive some type of reward, we still must have knowledge of olam haba and how it is our eventual fate. One hope to merit an eternal state of paradigmatic existence in the World to Come.

Clearly, this is a brilliant exposition of the above verse by Rabbeinu Bachaye. God presents to the Jewish people the blueprint for true success. No doubt, there is a certain elegant simplicity in all this, almost like a mathematical formula that leads to the ideal state. On the contrary, the path is a challenging one, where we face emotional hurdles and intellectual quandaries. Fear of traversing the path, though, is not an option, as long as we see the objective ahead. ■





PARSHA

# TZEDAKA

## HOW IT DEFINES JUDAISM

Rabbi Israel Chait

**R**abbeinu Yona says that one who does not give tzedaka is a rasha, for he can't perceive of tzedaka due to his inherent character. He cannot tolerate tzedaka and is thereby a rasha. But if one gives tzedaka, as Torah says it is proper, he is an intermediate person and not a rasha. He does not give tzedaka intrinsically, but only after being told to do so.

"4 character traits in man" sets forth to define man's goodness. Man's first evaluation is in Avos 5:10, his sense of possessions. The greatest imperfection is one who relates improperly to his possessions. This explains a passage in tefilas Neilah:

*So that we abandon the oppression of our hands and that we repent and perform the statutes of Your will with a complete heart (Yom Kippur closing Neilah prayer).*

The last moment before Yom Kippur passes, we mention this mishnah's theme. The worst sin is not overcoming one's sense of possession.

The last possibility is the chassid, the pious man, who says "What's mine is yours and what's yours is yours." He operates on a different level which is the underlying concept of tzedaka; the height of tzedaka.

Tzedaka forms the very core of Judaism. Wherever one looks in Torah one finds tzedaka:

*For I have selected him, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is tzedaka and right..." (Gen. 18:19)*

God's very first words to Abraham regarding the founding of the nation concerns tzedaka: the institution

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that is Judaism's very essence and core.

*And Rabbi Chiyya bar Rav of Difti taught, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha says: "Anyone who averts his eyes from the obligation to give charity, it is as if he engages in idol worship. It is written here concerning charity: 'Beware that there be not a base [beliya'al] thought in your heart...and you will not give him' (Deut. 15:9), and it is written there concerning idolatry: 'Certain base [beliya'al] fellows have gone out' (Ibid. 13:14). Just as there, in the latter verse, the word 'base [beliya'al]' is referring to idol worship, so too here [regarding charity] this expression [beliya'al] indicates a sin equal to idol worship" (Kesuvos 68a).*

Why is an uncharitable person considered an idolater? He's a metaphysician, he believes in God, he has knowledge! You would not think such a person is on par with an idolater. Maimonides explains why this is so at the end of his Guide (book III, chap. liv):

*Thus, says the Lord, "Let not the wise man glory in his [moral] wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorifies himself glory in this: that he understands and knows Me, for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and tzedaka in the world; for these I desire," declares the Lord. (Jer. 9:22,23)*

Knowledge of God means that one possesses knowledge of the total reality; he understands the source of all reality as far as he is capable. He is related to God. In this matter, a person can feel proud. This pride is not egoism. It is the one healthy pride permitted to us. This pride is where one realizes his place in the universe, which is tied to the greatest humility. This is because once a person realizes his place in universe, he is filled with the greatest humility.

*"...for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and tzedaka in the world; for these I desire," declares the Lord.*

Maimonides says, [God says], "as I am, so should you be" [mah Ani, af atah]. This means that if a person perceives God's character [middos Hashem], his own charitable acts should be a natural result. One should give tzedaka because God gives tzedaka. One understands that this is the underlying system of the universe and the scheme of creation. Once a person understands that, his meager positions are worthless. That is why tzedaka is the mark of an individual's level of perfection. If one possesses all other perfections but not tzedaka,

it is worthless. He is a fraud because he may have intellectual knowledge, and he might be a great scholar and rav, but it's all worthless, because without giving tzedaka the person does not believe in what he is saying. His emotions don't follow his mind. Tzedaka is the barometer of perfection.

Why does the gemara equate the uncharitable person to an idolater? This is because his idea of God must be distorted. Torah holds of a psychological principle: if one harbors a bad trait and does not break it, his mind must become distorted. It is impossible to quarantine a bad trait where it will not affect the rest of one's personality and intellect. Why did Chazal prohibit the study of metaphysics until one excels to a great level? It is because one cannot obtain knowledge while harboring emotional distortions. Here, Judaism disagrees with the world's educational institutions which have no demand for prerequisite intellectual training or perfection of character. One cannot be a great metaphysician while partaking of poor character. Poor character must affect one's mind; it is impossible otherwise. This is a foregone conclusion in Judaism. This is why we are prohibited from reading the writings of flawed personalities. This is why the rabbis wrote Pirkei Avos. Without perfection, all areas of study will be distorted. Maimonides says that one can study Torah, but if he has the wrong idea about God, he has no portion in Olam Haba [the afterlife]. Tzedaka is the barometer [of perfection]. If one gives, then his ideas about God are true:

*"...for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and tzedaka in the world; for these I desire," declares the Lord.*

That refers to metaphysical knowledge. Judaism's metaphysician is not limited to the intellect, but to metaphysics regarding God and how He relates to the world. Judaism's metaphysician will follow the principle of imitating God—"as I am, so shall you be"—and he will give tzedaka because he is in line with God's will to be charitable. But if one's idea of God is corrupt [as he does not give tzedaka] he is akin to an idolater, for the definition of idolatry is harboring a wrong notion about God. If one's idea of God is correct, he would have to copy God; it is a natural result. Maimonides says, "The perfected individual emulates God and acts towards the creatures as God does." Meaning, just as God does not act out of selfishness [as God is bereft of all emotions] and God's actions are purely in terms of His wisdom, so too an individual must remove himself from his emotion of selfishness and operate on a broader perspective of sustaining the species, acting out

of kindness for others apart from himself [his own emotional desires] and apart from his own interests. But as long as one is tied to his self-interests like selfishness, self-recognition, and money, he is not functioning in a way similar to God but on an instinctual plane. Whereas God is completely removed from any instinctual activity.

*And you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy (Lev. 11:44)*

How are we holy like God? This is achieved by acting without any instinct, acting purely objectively. When operating under this framework of kindness, one performs a different type of kindness. This is why the mishnah discussing the 4 traits of man commences with the discussion of man's possessions, for this is the area of perfection: tzedaka is the barometer of perfection. In fact, the only mitzvah where God says one can test Him is tzedaka:

*"Please test Me in this" said the Lord of Hosts. "I will surely open the storehouses of heaven and empty out for you a blessing that is more than sufficient" (Malachi 3:10).*

This means that God returns one's tzedaka tenfold. Chazal say that one cannot perform a mitzvah just to receive a reward, but in tzedaka it is permissible. This is because if it is performed properly, it means God has to return the kindness because God is the source of all kindness, of all tzedaka.

Why is the idea of tzedaka the most paramount and the most basic idea in Judaism? It is because tzedaka runs contrary to a very strong type of thinking: "hedonistic logic" as I would call it. Hedonistic logic tells you that if you give something away, you are losing. And you cannot show that to be wrong. But the essence of Judaism is that this type of logic is absolutely false. Beyond the hedonistic reality is a greater reality. If one is not in line with that greater reality he is simply not in line with Judaism. He denies the whole basis of Judaism, which is that a reality exists beyond the physical and instinctual reality that man perceives sensually. [God's promise above of abundant wealth for giving tzedaka overrides the hedonistic mathematical logic.] When one gives tzedaka it is not a loss, but a gain, because now he is in line with God. [The physical world is governed by laws that God created, controls and alters through His providence. All miracles in Torah convey this message, as does this promise of wealth if one tests God in tzedaka.]

Who is the chassid, the pious individual? The gemara says that Yoav ben Tzaruya had no

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concept of possession. They say his home was “in the desert.” But would such a prominent person live in the desert? In actuality it means that his home was “like” a desert, where anyone could just walk in. [Yoav ben Tzaruya did not act like an owner regarding his home, but it was as publicly accessible as the desert.] This is the very nucleus of Judaism. The chassid views other creatures just like God views them, but in a human manner. He views others with total objectivity and understands that they must operate with the institution of possession, since they cannot survive otherwise. That is, people must have an outlet for their egocentricity [which is expressed in ownership]. The chassid’s personality is “what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is yours.” He is above that concept [of ownership]. He gives tzedaka like God. His possessions are not “his” in his eyes. (One must reciprocate good done for him and be charitable and perform kindness first, to those who showed him kindness.)

The gemara says that if one does not give tzedaka, God takes that money from him. He may not even know how God does this. But despite this [God taking it from him] it is still considered as if he gave tzedaka. This is because through losing his possessions and his realization that his loss was due to his failure to give tzedaka, it is considered tzedaka because the person broke his emotion [his attachment to money, through recognizing his flaw].

Very few people give 10% tzedaka; it is a difficult mitzvah. I know only a handful of people who fulfill the mitzvah. And it is unrelated to one’s financial status. If one does not give tzedaka when he is poor, he will not give when he is rich, and vice versa. It [generous character] is a personality trait, a perception. Maimonides says that no one becomes poor by giving tzedaka. A person will say, “If I had \$10 million, I would give \$1 million to tzedaka.” But he says this now only because the money is presently not his. But the moment it is his, he can’t give it away.

The gemara says that tzedaka is performed with one’s money, but kindness is greater since it is performed with one’s money and one’s body [actions]. Any person who gives tzedaka because of the true reason must be on the highest level. This perfection is related to knowledge of God. God is the creator of the entire universe and what He gives is pure kindness and not to satisfy any emotion [as He has no emotions]. Abraham gave Malchitzedek tzedaka, for he was a priest to God:

*And King Malchitzedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him, saying, “Blessed be*

*Abram of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand.” And [Abram] gave him a tenth of everything. (Gen. 14:18-20)*

Malchitzedek had a yeshiva where he taught true ideas. That was Yeshivas Shame v’Ever.

The gemara equates both cases—tzedaka and idolatry—as Torah refers to both using the same word “beliya-al.” [Hiding one’s eyes from giving tzedaka is akin to idolatry.] Rashi explains “beliya-al” as “bli ole”—“without a yoke” [the yoke or burden of mitzvos]. But at first sight, it is difficult to relate the refusal of giving tzedaka to idolatry. Idolatry is a misconception regarding God, and [not giving] tzedaka is a separate matter, a poor character trait. What is the correlation? The answer is related to what we previously discussed:

*“Understand and know Me, for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and tzedaka in the world; for these I desire,” declares the Lord.*

“Understand and know Me” refers to knowing God as the creator [of the universe and of Torah]. But how do we relate to God’s ethical ways [His morality]?

How is an idolater “without a yoke?” He sacrifices his children to his god! Ancient primitive idolatry was far more difficult than any Torah command, which involves no pain. How then is the idolater without a yoke? The answer is that “yoke” does not refer to something difficult or painful. People think that “accepting the yoke of the heavenly kingdom; kabbalas ol malchus shamayim” refers to accepting something very difficult. The goal of the idolater is ultimately to satisfy the self. He may perform the most painful acts, but his purpose is for himself: self-security, self-preservation, or self-enjoyment. He projects a false reality and pains himself [in his idolatrous rites] as he believes he will benefit himself. Torah is not painful, “Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths, peaceful” (Prov. 3:17). We don’t submit to a painful system. We submit to the reality of God. We break our motions and subordinate ourselves to God’s reality. That is the meaning of yoke. The greatest kabbalas ol malchus shamayim is reading the Shema. If a person would attempt to explain how to accept the yoke of heaven, he would not suggest that it is performed by reading the Shema. He would say it is achieved by accepting upon himself all Torah’s prohibitions and difficulties. But in fact, it is achieved by saying, “Listen Israel: God is our God, God is one.” “He is our God” means that

His providence relates to us. “He is the eternal God, and He is one” refers to the recognition of God’s reality, which is a reality outside of our own small world of personal wishes. This is the true acceptance of God. Accepting the reality [existing] outside of oneself is accepting the yoke of heaven, when the purpose is not self-benefit. The acceptance is for the reality itself.

Pirkei Avos 5:23 says, “lifum tzaar agra; in proportion to the pain is the reward.” But this does not mean that one should seek pain. Rather, it is a barometer of how dedicated one is to the system [of Torah]. But the pain [which one might experience] is not the essence. Those who look through the Shulchan Aruch to fulfill all chumros [halachic stringencies] are not intending on what Torah says. Rather, they are interested in suffering. Many times, this mindset is due to the feeling that through suffering, one will secure for himself some great gain. In that case, one operates without the yoke of heaven [since he is self-serving]. Chazal studied Torah under the best conditions and under the worst conditions, as Maimonides says, whether sick, blind or diseased, Chazal learned Torah. This is because that is reality, and a perfected person does not learn or perform mitzvos for any other reason. [Torah is what is true, and the perfected person seeks out and acts upon truth.] Shelo lishma is for the self. It has value only if it brings one to lishma. But if not, it has no value.

What is the meaning of “Ma hu, af atah; As God is, so shall you be?” To my mind, it is a very interesting idea; it is unique and found only in Judaism. It means that there is a common denominator between understanding God’s wisdom and [understanding] His kindness. You might ask that these sound like 2 different things: gaining wisdom of God is relegated to creation, but kindness is more of a human trait and we do not understand what is meant by God’s kindness. In that case, how can we emulate God? It is difficult.

However, what it means is that if a person perceives God’s wisdom, even in terms of creation, if he is on a very high level, what he sees in God’s wisdom is a certain objectivity. He sees a truth that is far removed from any kind of human personal trait. Anyone who investigates creation arrives at this conclusion. It is difficult to discuss because such an appreciation is based on personal experience and from the process of investigation. One’s delving into God’s wisdom leaves him with a sense of a Being who is far above man’s small outlook. It is a grand objective sense about God. Some great natural investigators have expressed this, among them is Albert Einstein, but also others. From studying God, one’s appreciation of Him, is, in a

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sense, an appreciation of how removed God is from our smallmindedness and our constant preoccupation with ourselves. From seeing Torah's wisdom, one certainly gains this sense. But even from studying creation one sees this.

Now, what prevents a person from being a baal chessed—a kind person—Avos 5:10 says pertains to how one relates to his possessions. The breaking of the feeling of ownership is perfection, for the chassid embodies this: “What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours.” And again, as we say in the Neilah prayer, “That we might abandon the oppression of our hands.” This is perfection, and this is accomplished if one perceives enough of God's wisdom. Such a person will see how small is the sense of “mine.” He comes under a different way of thinking:

*For My thoughts are not your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8)*

We can't understand God's kindness. How then is there a principle to emulate Him, “Ma hu, af atah?” Moshe and Job did not understand God's kindness. [How do we copy that which we don't understand?] But this much we understand: God's kindness is furthest removed from the sense of “mine.” That much we can perceive.

Judaism maintains an interesting thesis: understanding God's wisdom enlightens us to also understand His kindness.

*The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: “God, God, the Almighty [is] merciful and gracious, long-suffering, with abundant kindness and truth, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin” (Exod. 34:6,7)*

These traits of God are the greatest knowledge [they were God's response to Moshe's request to understand God's honor]. But what was the great wisdom that Moshe saw in the cleft of the rock (Exod. 33:22)? Of course, the verse cannot explain it to us. A person can only understand this according to his level of understanding and his depth of thought. Moshe Rabbeinu understood this in the greatest way. But it means that Moshe Rabbeinu was able to see to the greatest degree possible, the relationship between God's kindness and His wisdom. And Moshe saw how God's kindness fits into the realm of the same Being who also displays infinite wisdom.

Moshe was not able to understand it by himself [independent of God's words]. I once gave the analogy of the watch. A person who does not understand the relationship between the ticking sound and the watch hands' movement can understand this relationship by

seeing the watch's interior mechanisms. But that person will not be able to produce the watch from scratch [for although he now sees the cause of the ticking and the movements, he remains ignorant of the machine's ingenuity]. He cannot produce the watch from on his own; that is a different kind of understanding, an understanding from the beginning [of the inventor], which God referred to as “but My face you will not see” (Exod. 33:23). Even Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand God that way. “You will see My back” (Ibid.) means that Moshe could understand the relationship between God's kindness and His wisdom. Moshe could see this relationship, but not from the beginning [he didn't have God's knowledge]. Moshe could [only] see the relationship between the ticking of the watch and the hands' motion.

Every Jew is obligated to understand this much of God's kindness. This is the principle of emulating God, where a person acquires that objective sense where he loses that sense of “mine.” He does so because he sees that God's wisdom is not in line with that notion but is diametrically opposed to it. Such a person's kindness can operate on a totally different level: “What's mine is yours and what is yours is yours.”

As we said, the chassid knows that people have that weakness of needing to express their ownership. The chassid has reached such an objective level that he tolerates even the subjective framework in which others operate. That is emulating God. God tolerates man in spite of his nonsensical imperfections. The chassid also tolerates the “mine” in others.

We now see that the analogy is complete between the “bliya-al” [rebelliousness] of one abstaining from giving tzedaka, and the “bliya-al” of the idolater. Because if a person is lacking in kindness, he is lacking in knowledge of God. And idolatry is a complete lack of knowledge of God and of accepting the yoke of heaven. The idolater is unable to remove himself from [catering to] the self, which is the ultimate objective of idolatry. Idolatry represents the highest level of self-indulgence.

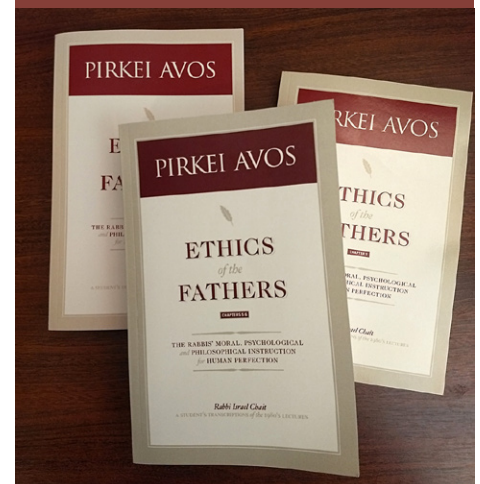
It is the unique principle of Judaism that God's wisdom is intricately tied with God's kindness. An imperfection regarding man's kindness in emulating God is also an imperfection insofar as his knowledge of God. That is the gemara in Kesuvos about bliya-al. The source of one's abstention to give tzedaka is idolatrous. The person has no knowledge of God and he doesn't understand God's kindness. Therefore, he cannot emulate God. It is an exact analogy. The idolater can never conceive of kindness in any real way. He is devoid of any sense of

objective kindness. And the Jew is enjoined to perform kindness, not just on an emotional level, but kindness on the level of emulating God where the sense of “mine” does not register anymore.

That is the verse of “*be wise and understand Me for I am God who performs kindness, justice and tzedaka in the land.*” Knowledge of God is related to kindness. Abraham perceived that unification between wisdom of God and God's kindness. That was his greatness. Why did Abraham adhere to kindness over other perfections? It is because kindness is an intrinsic concept that is tied to knowledge of God.

Everyone seeks God's kindness to be expressed in individual providence (hashgacha pratyos; God's specific intervention in their lives) because they are interested in the self. But it should be emphasized that God's kindness is manifest in Tehillim (Psalms), in all His creations, in natural law and in how man is created [designed]. In his Guide, Maimonides explains that the universe unraveled itself in a way that on the whole, man should be able to obtain not just necessities, but even enjoyments, in infinite ways. The way the body is constructed, man can cure himself from most maladies naturally, and not only through divine intervention. A person must be outside the self to perceive God's kindness. (Emulating God is relegated only towards kindness and not to other traits, like God's jealousy.) The reason to emulate God is because a normal person desires to be in line with reality. And when one sees what the greater reality is, he should naturally strive to be in line with that reality. ■

This essay is an excerpt from Rabbi Chait's 1980s Pirkei Avos lectures available in free PDFs and printed books on Amazon:  
[www.Mesora.org/Store](http://www.Mesora.org/Store)







## Thank you Representative Hanes



We asked Representative Tommy Hanes to pen a letter to us responding to his call to expel Ilhan Omar. The Representative graciously responded:

"Throughout world history the Jewish people have endured one hardship after another. They have endured everything from enslavement to mass genocide. It is shameful that a sitting U.S. Representative would spew hate-filled, anti-Semitic language given the long held alliance between the United States and the Nation of Israel.

The last time the Jewish people were subject to this type of animosity in the public forum was during the era of Nazi Germany. We remain committed to the promise that we will never allow an atrocity such as that to ever take place again.

There is a special bond between America and Israel, between Christians and the Jewish people. Nothing will break that bond, and certainly not the radical socialist Congresswoman from Minnesota. I stand with Israel's right as a sovereign nation to ban Ilhan Omar from entering its borders.

Sympathy for radical Islam, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism has no place in our federal government. That is why I am calling on Congress to invoke Article 1, Section 5 of the constitution to expel her from her seat in the U.S. House of Representatives."

USAIsrael is Mesora.org's activism site. For over 20 years, USAIsrael has launched dozens of campaigns defending Jewish life and Judaism: [www.USAIsrael.org](http://www.USAIsrael.org)



PARSHA

# Innovation

Rabbi Bernie Fox

*Guard yourself lest you be ensnared by them after they are destroyed before you. Lest you seek their gods saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? I will also do so." Do not do so to Hashem your L-rd. For every abomination that Hashem abhors they did for their gods. Even their sons and daughters they burned in fire for their gods. (Sefer Devarim 12:30-31)*

## I. Meaningful synagogue services

Synagogues are confronted with the challenge of creating and conducting services that are meaningful and moving. Some congregations introduce more communal singing or even dancing. Others streamline the services. Some create opportunities for more members to participate. In others a chazan – a cantor – leads the services. How much latitude do we have? What criteria determine whether an innovation is proper? Although the following discussion will not completely answer this question, two principles central to the issue will be discussed.

## II. The attraction of pagan rites

Moshe tells the Jewish people that they will overcome the nations of the Land of Israel and take possession of the land. The inhabitants that they will displace are pagans. They worship many gods employing various rituals. Moshe warns the people not to adopt these forms of worship and apply them to Hashem. Hashem abhors these practices. Moshe notes that these heathens even sacrificed their children to their gods.

Moshe assumes that the people will consider adopting the rituals of the pagans. Why would they wish to incorporate these strange rites into their service of Hashem? Ramban – Nachmanides – responds to this issue.

*"We should not think to ourselves that Hashem has destroyed from before us those*

*who worshiped other gods because they gave honor through complete service to the product of human hands – wood and stone. It is not appropriate to give His honor to another or his praise to idols. For this reason, [the Torah] prohibited to sacrifice, offer incense, offer libations and to prostrate oneself to [any other than] Hashem alone.*

*It is the custom among kings that one who glorifies oneself with their honor [for example,] to place the crown on one's heads or to wear the vestments of the ruler, it is undisputed that such people should be executed. This being so, I will do to Hashem – the Honored One – as the nations did to their gods. It will be good before Him. Therefore, he [Moshe] admonishes do not do so." (Ramban, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 12:30)*

Ramban explains that the motivation for co-opting pagan rites is based upon a Torah concept. It is prohibited to sacrifice, offer incense, libations or to prostrate ourselves in the service of another god. This applies even if the god is not worshiped in this manner. In other words, we may not offer a sacrifice to a deity, even if it is not worshiped through sacrifices. Why is this prohibited? Offering a sacrifice to such a deity is not a form of its worship. Apparently, these services are used to worship Hashem. They are reserved for Him alone. When one sacrifices to another god – even one not worshiped through sacrifices – one assigns to another an act of service reserved to Hashem.

Extending this reasoning, the people may assume that the heathen nations were destroyed because the rites they performed in the worship of their gods should be reserved for Hashem. In other words, these rituals have significance. They are expressions of adulation. They should be used only in the service of Hashem.

## III. Moshe's argument

It follows that it is fitting to co-opt the heathen rites. We are reassigning them to the only true G-d. We are declaring that the pagan deities are not worthy of worship. Only Hashem deserves our service. Moshe is explaining that this reasoning is flawed. Ramban explains Moshe's critique.

*"Therefore, he [Moshe] admonishes to not do so. For things that are disgusting before Him, they did for their gods. The Torah did not prohibit them because the activity was honorable and fit to be performed only before Hashem. Rather, [it prohibited them] because the intent was to serve [other deities] and also their sons and daughters they burned in fire to their gods. It is a revolting thing before Hashem to spill innocent blood. Also, [it is revolting] to be cruel to one's offspring [and] not have compassion." (Ramban, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 12:30)*

Ramban's response has three components. First, he dismisses the basic justification for adopting these rituals. Hashem did not prohibit worshiping other deities with these rites because they are honors due to Him alone. They are not honors. Second, these rites are repugnant to Hashem. Ramban focuses on Moshe's example. Sacrificing one's children is both cruel and counter to the fundamental instinct of a parent to have compassion for one's offspring. Third, he explains that these rituals are invented by these heathens for the worship of their deities.

## IV. The role of imagination

Moshe's argument seems unnecessarily elaborate. Why not simply explain the flaw in the argument for adopting these rites. He should have explained that these rituals are not meaningful. They are ridiculous pagan

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inventions. They do not confer honor.

According to Ramban, Moshe is explaining why these rites cannot be meaningful. He argues that rituals created to serve other deities are innately foolish and often perverse. Why is this? Why must a ritual designed for serving another deity be preposterous or degenerate?

Ramban has explained in the previous chapters of Sefer Devarim the fundamental difference between the Torah and other religions. The Torah is an objective truth. It is not the product of human imagination. One of the cornerstones of his position is that the Torah was given to the nation at the Sinai Revelation. Through the events of Revelation, the Jewish people for all generations have proof of its authenticity. Other religions are not objective truths. They are inventions of human imagination. This is true of the deity served and how it is served. Imagination is the source of the religion's rituals.

Let us consider an example. We serve Hashem through prayer. How do we know that this is appropriate? This may seem an odd question. We take it for granted that prayer is appropriate. The Torah takes the question seriously. We pray to Hashem because it is a mitzvah in the Torah. This mitzvah authorizes prayer and establishes its parameters. Because we do not take prayer for granted, we carefully follow the format dictated by the Torah.

Another religion must ask, "How do we know that our god, wishes or accepts our prayer?" These religions do not have a

means to answer the question. Instead, they rely upon imagination. The answer is derived by imagining what the invented god desires. Moshe points out that this approach to ritual resulted in sacrificing one's children to an imaginary deity envisioned as desiring such sacrifice.

#### V. Innovation within the bounds of halachah

This discussion provides the first principle that we must consider when evaluating an innovation in synagogue service. Is it within the bounds of halachah? If it is, we can move on to the second consideration. If it is not, then it is the product of our imagination. It has no place in our service to Hashem.

*Observe and obey all these things that I command you so that it shall be good for you and for your children after you forever – when you do the good and just in the eyes of Hashem your L-rd. (Sefer Devarim 12:28)*

#### VI. Beyond halachah

Moshe tells the people that they will be rewarded for observance of the mitzvot and their obedience to the Torah. He adds that they must do that which is good and just. What is added by this? If one observes the Torah, is not one living properly and justly? What more is needed to be good and just in the eyes of Hashem?

Ramban explains that the Torah cannot create a law for every situation. Instead, it

gives us an extensive system of halachah. This guides us in most situations. The system of halachah also provides a basis for extracting underlying principles that guide us in those instances not directly addressed by formal halachah.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we are required to conduct ourselves according to halachah and in conformity with its underlying principles.

This is the second principle we must consider in assessing innovations. An innovation cannot be judged solely by whether it contradicts halachah. This is because there are two possible reasons for why it does not contradict halachah. It may be that it conforms to halachah. Alternatively, it may be that this innovation does not contradict halachah because it is not directly addressed by it. In this case, the underlying principles must be consulted. This requires a scholarly analysis. If the innovation is consistent with these principles and will enhance the service, then it should be considered and perhaps, implemented.

In closing, many communities are blessed with various synagogues. They provide the community's members the opportunity to find the one that most resonates with each. It is wonderful that so many synagogues are interested in conducting services in the manner that best serves their memberships. We should try to make services meaningful. Hopefully, the principles discussed above will help us appropriately accomplish this. ■



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