

JewishTimes

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**10 COMMANDMENTS
THAT NATURALLY GREW
INSIDE SAPPHIRE
TABLETS 3333
YEARS AGO**

the Greatest Miracle

**WHEN NOT TO
FORGIVE**

**A STAR
CALLED
“EVIL”**

**TALKING TO
ANGELS**



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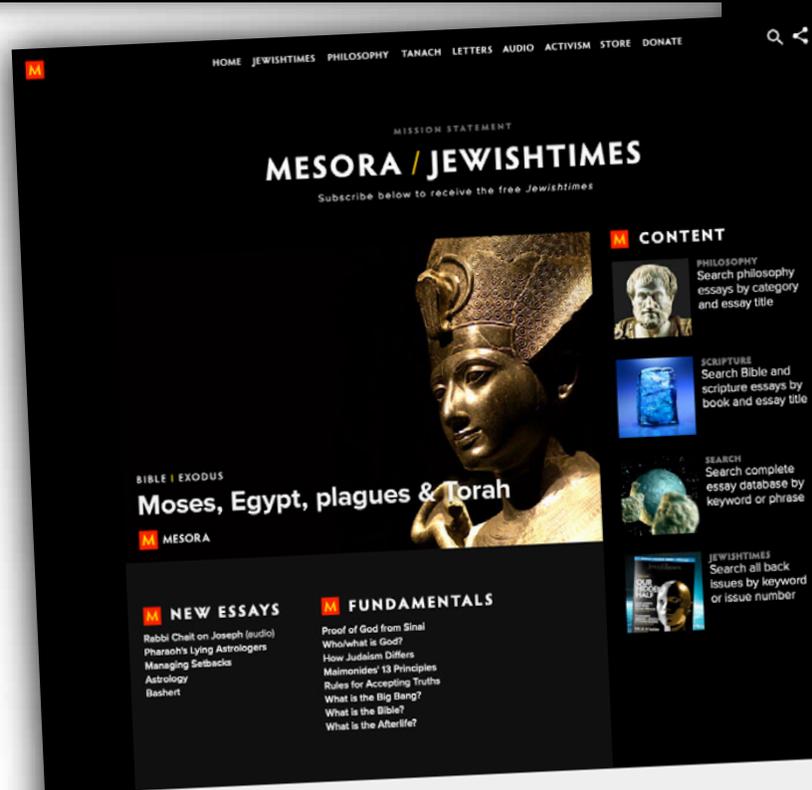
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OUR PURPOSE: WISDOM & MORALITY



God created man to live by truths concerning Him, creation, others and ourselves.

We must study God's instruction about what He is, what is idolatrous or fallacy, we must study nature, psychology, philosophy and morality. This draws us closer to God and He to us, and creates societal harmony which fosters greater Torah for all.

MORE BELOW

Kindness: As equals, all humans must treat others as we wish to be treated. Charity, kindness and justice demand we rise above personal and selfish emotions and recognize that God made others as He made ourselves. Doing so creates harmony, and earns His kindness.

Racism: A Lie: Man descends from Adam. **Black/white twins** unveil the lie of racism. Bible denounces it: Moses' wife was black, our kings married Egyptians and Messiah descends from Moabites. "Better is the day of death than the day of birth" (Ecc. 7:1). Birth doesn't define us; how we live does.

Insecurity: Man's insecurities can be false, but reality is greater, as it is truth. Man seeks security about his future, accepting fallacies like astrology, amulets, omens, horoscopes and others. God prohibited such practices precisely because they are false. God is more powerful than false notions. Rely on Him alone.

Happiness: Many think wealth and success secure happiness. But Torah teaches happiness stems from study. When pursuing wisdom, one is most happy as Torah offers childlike amazement at every turn. Study offers the daily novelty necessary to retain interest and the depth that offers amazement.

Pleasing Others: Don't seek approval over truth. Torah says, "What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:5), "Don't fear man" (Deut. 1:17). "Desist from man whose soul is in his nostrils, for what is he considered?" (Isaiah 2:22). Mortal attention is irrelevant. Following God earns all goodness.

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3 Codes & Forgiving

LETTERS

Do Torah codes exist, and if so, what should be our attitude towards them? And we examine when forgiveness is proper.

13 Rejoice in your Portion

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Mann's analysis of the 10 Commands reveals a sublime lesson on satisfaction.

5 The Greatest Miracle

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The most astonishing miracle has the most astonishing message.

14 Talking to Angels

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The Talmud cites 2 positions about talking to angels. Startling to read, but what's the meaning?

9 The Star "Evil"

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Rashi shares a midrash regarding Pharaoh's astrology. We unravel the lesson from the rabbis' clues.

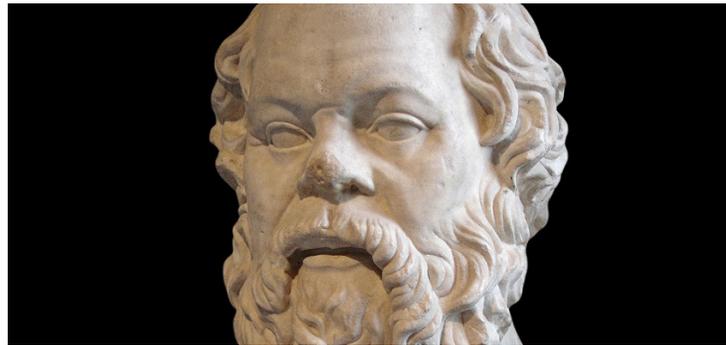
16 Talmudic Metaphors

Midrashim in Talmud contain important lessons, but they are quite cryptic. We examine "Rava creating a man."

11 The 5th Principle

MAIMONIDES

Maimonides' words clue us into his underlying lesson about serving God.



"It is better to change an opinion than to persist in a wrong one."

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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Torah Codes

READER: There is much debate nowadays about Torah codes. You hear a lot about them and yet most Jews are unfamiliar with them. An interesting article about them can be found here: bit.ly/torahcodes In the above link, the author argues that there is no proof to Bible codes. Admittedly, I find myself mostly in agreement with him yet still having a strong emunah in the Torah. What do you think of the Torah codes? —*Turk Hill*

RABBI: If Torah codes can be duplicated in other books, this exposes Torah codes as just "codes"—a mundane mathematical matter and not a divine phenomenon. But if Torah codes

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cannot be produced elsewhere, that is significant. But we should consider that from our prophets through our sages and rabbis, not one praised the Torah outside of its wisdom, its brilliant cryptic style, its depth, and its complete address of all matters. And if, while doing all this, Torah also contains codes, that is astonishing. But I would add that these codes—as present findings—do not unveil wisdom, but are references to past events. Of course, those codes were there prior to the events, so this indicates God’s knowledge of the future, but this we know already from Torah. ■

When to Forgive

READER: When must we forgive and when is it time to remember the harm others caused?

RABBI: When does God not forgive?

Perhaps there is among you some man or woman, or some clan or tribe, whose heart is even now turning away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations—perhaps there is among you one who increases wickedness in your midst. When such a person hears the words of these curses, he may fancy himself immune, thinking, “I shall be safe, since I follow my heart’s counsel”—but he will be punished now even for previously accidental sins. The Lord will never forgive him; rather will the Lord’s anger and passion rage against that man, until every curse recorded in this book comes down upon him, and the Lord blots out his name from under heaven” (Deut. 29-17-19).

One who follows idolatry, does not repent, and feels safe with himself, will suffer by not attaining God’s forgiveness and by receiving Torah’s curses. If God does not forgive such a person, it is a lesson for us. What of non-idolatrous sins? Dasan and Aviram joined in Korach’s revolt. Moses summoned them in order to conciliate them by peaceful words (Rashi), but they refused, saying:

“Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out our eyes, we will not come!” Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the Lord, “Pay no regard to their offering. I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them” (Num. 16:14,15).

Rashi says Moses asked God not to accept them. From here, if one remains in his sins with no desire to correct his wrong, Moses did not forgive them. As forgiveness means we accept the person has sincerely corrected their wrong. Thereby, we can forgo their prior acts. As they no longer value their wrongdoings, they are no longer that person who did wrong. There is nothing for which to hold a grudge.

Maimonides defines repentance as such:

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from his thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it, even as it is said, “Let the wicked forsake his way” (Isaiah 55.7); so too, shall he be remorseful on what was past, even as it is said, “Surely after that I was turned, I repented” (Jer. 31. 19). (Laws of Repentance 2:2)

God forgives such a person and so shall we. Ezekiel discusses how God views the penitent person as never having sinned:

Moreover, if the wicked one repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and right, he shall live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions he committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness he has practiced, he shall live (Ezek. 18:21,22).

When must we forgive interpersonal sins? Maimonides teaches that if one seeks your forgiveness, and you do not forgive, then you are the wicked person:

But sins between man and man, for instance, one injures his neighbor, or curses his neighbor or plunders him, or offends him in like matters, is ever not absolved unless he makes restitution of what he owes and begs the forgiveness of his neighbor. And, although he make restitution of the monetary debt, he is obliged to pacify him and to beg his forgiveness. Even he offended his neighbor only in words, he is obliged to appease him and implore him until he be forgiven by him. If his neighbor refuses, he must bring a committee of three friends to forgive him, if he still refuses he should bring a second, even a third committee, and if he remains obstinate, he may leave him to himself and pass on, for the sin then rests upon him who refuses forgiveness. But if it happened to be his master, he should go and come to him for forgiveness even a thousand times till he does forgive him. (Ibid 2:9)

Some evils are perpetrated against us, and they seem unforgivable. But what evil could be worse than Joseph’s brothers selling him, resulting in his imprisonment for 11 years? Yet, Joseph rose above petty emotions and valued only the good that resulted, as he was able to sustain many people during a great famine. He did not retaliate against his brothers, for in Joseph’s mind, revenge has no place in one’s attachment to God and a life of Torah.

But Joseph said to them, “Have no fear! Am I in God’s place? And although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children” (Gen. 50:19-21).

Remembering evil perpetrated against us means we value what people did, and not our relationship with God. To Joseph, the past was immaterial. What matters is what helps him and others relate to God.

In the end, there are those whom God and Moses did not forgive; we too must not forgive them, as they are committed to evil, and we are commanded to hate those whom God hates. We must detest one who wishes to destroy God’s reputation, His Torah or his prophets and rabbis. As such people cause others to be dissuaded from a good life. But those sinners who repent, God forgives as if they never sinned, so we too must forgive them. Then there are those who perpetrate crimes that are not against God or truths, but are against us. If they repent and seek our forgiveness, we must forgive them, or else we become the sinner. And even if they don’t repent, we must not retaliate by valuing social matters over our relationship with God, as Joseph expressed. And if they are approachable, we must properly rebuke their wrong so as not to harbor hatred in our hearts. ■



the
Greatest
Miracle

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The indispensable need for the tablets is derived from God's granting to Moses a second set of tablets after he smashed the first set. What I will eventually suggest herein astonished me, but I feel Maimonides' words point to this discovery:

The Guide for the Perplexed (Book I, chap. lxvi)

"And the tables were the work of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16), that is to say, they were the product of nature, not of art: for all natural things are called "the work of the Lord," e.g., "These see the works of the Lord" (Psalms cvii. 24): and the description of the several things in nature, as plants, animals, winds, rain, etc., is followed by the exclamation, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works!" (Psalms civ.24). Still more striking is the relation between God and His creatures, as expressed in the phrase, "The cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted" (Ibid. 16): the cedars being the product of nature, and not of art, are described as having been planted by the Lord. Similarly we explain.

"And the writing was the writing of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16): the relation in which the writing stood to God has already been defined in the words "written with the finger of God" (Ibid. xxxi. 18), and the meaning of this phrase is the same as that of "the work of thy fingers" (Psalms viii. 4) this being said of the heavens: of the latter it has been stated distinctly that they were made by a word, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Ibid. xxxiii. 6). Hence you learn that in the Bible, the creation of a thing is figuratively expressed by terms denoting "word" and "speech." The same thing, which according to one passage has been made by the "word," is represented in another passage as made by the "finger of God." The phrase "written by the finger of God" is therefore identical with "written by the word of God," and if the latter phrase had been used, it would have been equal to "written

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by the will and desire of God."

Onkelos adopted in this place a strange explanation, and rendered the words literally, "written by the finger of the Lord." He thought that "the finger" was a certain thing ascribed to God; so that "the finger of the Lord" is to be interpreted in the same way as "the mountain of God" (Exod. iii. 1), "the rod of God" (Ibid. iv. 20), that is, as being an instrument created by Him, which by His will engraved the writing on the tables. I cannot see why Onkelos preferred this explanation. It would have been more reasonable to say, "written by the word of the Lord," in imitation of the verse "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made." Or was the creation of the writing on the tables more difficult than the creation of the stars in the spheres? As the latter were made by the direct will of God, not by means of an instrument, the writing may also have been produced by His direct will, not by means of an instrument. You know what the Mishnah says, "Ten things were created on Friday in the twilight of the evening," and "the writing" is one of the ten things. This shows how generally it was assumed by our forefathers that the writing of the tables was produced in the same manner as the rest of the creation, as we have shown in our Commentary on the Mishnah (Avos, v.6)."

Understanding Maimonides

We must pay attention to Maimonides' words. He opens with "And the tables were the work of God." His intent is to first discuss the tablets—not their writing. He first explains how the tablets are made via "nature," meaning by God. They are not "works" or "art." By definition, if natural objects are used in a new construction or form, like woodworking or paintings, we call this "carpentry" and "art" respectively. But if something is formed undisturbed by external influence, as leaves are formed with veins and trees with bark, this we call "nature" and not art. Therefore, when addressing the tablets, Maimonides writes, "they were the product of

nature, not of art: for all natural things are called "the work of the Lord." This means that the tablets formed naturally independent from the rest of the sapphire that formed in that area of Sinai. That is quite amazing. We will get back to what this means. But they were not works of carpentry or art. Remain mindful of this distinction.

Maimonides then addresses the tablets' writing: "And the writing was the writing of God." He argues that although the Torah says the writing was "written by the finger of the Lord," this writing was no less natural than the tablets themselves, or God's natural creation of the heavens. He disputes Onkelos' suggestion that a tool was used to form these letters, and insists that those letters were created without a tool, just as God created the heavens, by His will alone.

But focus your attention on Maimonides' insistence that the writing was "natural" and not an act of carpentry or art. What does he mean by this? You must know that Maimonides bases himself on the verse that references both, the tablets and the writings: "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God" (Exod. xxxii. 16). Maimonides teaches that this verse is not redundant, but with it, God intentionally directs us to realize that not only were the tablets a natural phenomenon, but so too was the writing. This is essential to our discussion.

So, we must delve into understanding the distinction between writing that is natural, and writing that is art. How are they different?

We must ask a number of questions. God communicated 10 Commandments, shortly afterwards they would be committed to the Sefer Torah Moses would write. Therefore, for what purpose did God create the tablets with the same record of this communication? Is this not a redundancy?

Let's briefly recount the history. God orchestrated Revelation at Sinai. The nation heard great sounds. Moses ascends Mt. Sinai, he remains in commune with God for 40 days and nights and then he receives the two tablets from God. While still on Sinai, God informs Moses that the Jews sinned with the Gold Calf and that He

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will destroy the nation. Moses prays and God refrains from destroying the Jews. Before Moses descends the mountain we read these words, “And Moses turned and descended from the mountain, and the two tablets of Testimony were in his hands; tablets written from both sides[1], from this side and that were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, were they explained on the tablets.” (Exod. 32:15,16) Why is Moses’ descent interrupted with this detailed description of the tablets? Why was this description of the tablets not included earlier (31:18) where we read, “And God gave to Moses—when He concluded to speak with him on Mount Sinai—two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” This division of the tablets’ details into two Torah portions requires explanation, as does the term “tablets of testimony”... testimony to what exactly? And we wonder why “two” tablets are needed. Could not a larger tablet contain all the words; could not smaller letters accomplish the same message on a single tablet?

Maimonides also cited the Mishna in Avos, “Ten things were created on [the first] Friday in the twilight of the evening,” and “the writing” is one of the ten things.” Maimonides wishes to draw our attention to the necessity for God to have created the tablets and their writing, at the end of the six days of Creation, just before God ceased His creation. What is his message?

In Exodus 34:1, God instructs Moses to hew a second set of tablets, and He says He will write on them the matters that “were” on the first tablets. Why doesn’t God say He will write on them the matters that “He wrote” on the first tablets? He uses a less descriptive term.

I also wonder if there was more to Moses’ breaking of the tablets than already explained.

Revelation

Revelation on Sinai was intended to remove all doubts that a Supreme Intelligence created all, sustains all and communicates with man. However, God desired this message not end at Sinai’s closure. My friend suggested that the tablets were intended to be an everlasting “testament” (tablets of

Testimony). This explains why upon God’s completion of His communication with Moses atop Sinai, we read, “And God gave to Moses—when He concluded to speak with him on Mount Sinai—two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” That is, once God concluded His Revelation to the people and to Moses, He desired an everlasting testimony of this Revelation, to serve as enduring and conclusive evidence that He alone created and sustains the universe. Thus, “testimony” appears in this verse, and not later in the second description of the tablets. In order that this testimony is everlasting, the words are embedded in a permanent object: stone. So “stone” is also in this verse. But can’t anyone write words in stone? Of what proof are these tablets?

The testimony God intended is to the truth that He alone is the source of the universe. We read that these tablets were “written with the finger of God.” Maimonides said this was a “natural” phenomenon. Here now is the amazing idea and how these tablets “testified”...

Astonishing Tablets

These miraculous tablets contained something not found elsewhere in nature: naturally formed letters, sentences and commandments! Imagine a tree cut down, where its inner rings viewed closely were actually lines of text forming intelligent sentences, or lightning bolts that formed words as they streaked across the sky. That is how astonishing these tablets were. The Torah says the text could be seen from both sides of the tablets (Exod. 32:15). Some wish to explain this to mean that the letters were hollowed through, but that would not appear miraculous as a human being can carve letters into a stone. My opinion is that the letters were formed internally through the sapphire’s grain. And as sapphire is translucent, one can see the letters “from both sides.” The only explanation for words existing in the inside a stone is if the words formed naturally. That means the creator of the stone intentionally embedded His messages within the stone.

As God formed these tablets over time at the end of Creation, so too, He formed the “writing” simultaneously, and naturally. The commands were not subsequently carved into the tablets,

but they literally grew inside the stones grain as the stones naturally formed over time: “And the writing was the writing of God,” as Maimonides said above, this means a natural phenomenon. This explains why God tells Moses that He will write on the second tablets the matters that “were” on the first set, and not matters that He “wrote” the first set. For God did not do an act of “writing” on the first tablets. Yes, the words appeared “written” as the verse states[2], but not through an act of one thing acting on another resulting in writing. Again, the verse does not say, “I wrote” on the first tablets, but rather, “were” on the first tablets. The letters in the first tablets formed within the tablets. This is an amazing idea, and a phenomenon not seen elsewhere in nature. Perhaps for this reason, Maimonides includes in this chapter his critique of Onkelos’ suggestion that the stone tablets were carved through an instrument.

The Need

What consideration demanded that God create such a phenomenon? Although the exact words appearing on the tablets were duplicated in the Torah scroll, it was not the words per se that demanded the tablets’ existence, but the “manner” of existence of these words. This natural formation of words and commands is God’s clear message that He is behind the natural world, and Torah. Both form one unit. This is needed, for many people view nature as devoid of God’s creation and rule. Man becomes accustomed to matters by his very nature. The sun rises and sets, plants and animals grow, and species beget their own kind. We take all for granted, thinking all occurs due the nature itself...and not God. But with the existence of naturally formed words and commandments in natural objects, we can no longer maintain a view of an unguided world. Nature is finally understood to be the expression of an intelligent being: God. How can one ignore a natural object that has words naturally imprinted and not the work of art? This was the lesson of Sinai, and the sustained lesson of the tablets.

Therefore, the Torah scroll’s account of God’s communicated commands sufficed for the ‘content’ of His words, but not for an everlasting “testament” which was revealed through natural

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stones containing intelligent words! And perhaps to remove all doubt that this occurred without God's intent, there were two stones, not one. A freakish natural incident can possibly be dismissed if it occurs once...but not twice.

We can no longer separate nature from God. His very words are embedded in these stones in truly natural manner.

Why didn't God give the tablets to Adam the First? Perhaps Adam had no need for them. God's original plan was that man use intellect to discover God. The beauty and precision of natural law is sufficient for a person following a life of wisdom.

However, at this era in mankind's development, these tablets were intended to offer mankind a new leap in our wisdom of God. The ability for nature to produce such a phenomenon would offer us tremendous appreciation for the Creator of this nature. They were to be viewed and not placed in an ark.

But as these tablets were being delivered, the Jews sinned with the Gold Calf. The extraordinary lesson of the tablets would not be realized with those Jews. These first tablets required destruction. However, a lesson was required: the nation must now have a reminder of what they lost. God instructed Moses to hew a new set of stones; their tablet form would not come about naturally, but by human craft. God also "wrote" the matters on this second set; again, no longer a natural phenomenon of words that were part of their natural design. A gap now existed between the Jews, and God. The intended, intimate relationship that could have been, was now lost. To emphasize this break from God, these tablets must be stored out of sight; in an ark. Perhaps this explains why King Solomon hid the ark and no other vessel. He reiterated this message of "distance" between God and the nation through digging caverns to eventually hide the tablets and the ark.

"Ten things were created on [the first] Friday in the twilight of the evening"

As natural law needed to tolerate these unique tablets, they had to be planned with the creation of the substance of sapphire. This could not be created later, for the very blueprint of how sapphire forms must contain natural laws that would generate stones with embedded communication. As this would be a "property" of sapphire's substance, it must be set at the time that God endowed sapphire with its formative properties: during Creation.

And Moses turned and descended from the mountain, and the two tablets of Testimony were in his hands; tablets written from both sides, from this side and that were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, were they, explained on the tablets.

Why is Moses descent interrupted with this detailed description of the tablets? Why was this description of the tablets not included earlier (31:18) where we read, "And God gave to Moses"... "two tablets of testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God." It appears to me that the first account expresses the "purpose" of the tablets: testimony. Thus, we learn that the testament is in durable stone, and that the testament is a unique phenomenon. But when Moses is about to descend to the sinful Jews, we are told of the tablet's nature that conflicts with their idolatry: the tablets were "God's work," intended precisely to fend off idolatry. This aspect is relevant in connection with the idolatrous Jews, and therefore not mentioned until its relevance surfaces.

Now we understand the loss of the tablets: our knowledge of God has been impaired. This is the ultimate tragedy. What an amazing sight they must have been. Perhaps in the future, this will be the means by which God will make His name fill the Earth. For we do not know if the tablets were the only natural elements in which God embedded natural communication. And as this was God's will at Sinai, perhaps in the messianic era He will unveil this again to a more fitting generation. ■

[1] Ibn Ezra rejects the notion that the letters Mem Sofit and Samech (shapes like "O") had miraculous center pieces floating. The letters were not hollowed from one side completely through to the other. They were simply written on the two faces of the stones, as the stones were thick. Alternatively, I suggest the letters were internal facets in the translucent sapphire, that could be seen on "both sides," like a crack can be seen from any side of a diamond. Furthermore, God does not perform impossibilities, so to have legible writing passing through a stone, with the exact wording seen on the opposite side, is not possible. God can do miracles, but not impossibilities. Similarly, God cannot create a circle that is a square.
[2] Exod. 32:15

A Star Named EVIL

Pharaoh's Astrology: Was He Right?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



Moses approached Pharaoh once again, warning him of the onslaught of the 8th plague of locusts that would devour all Egypt's produce. Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long shall Moses be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?" (Exod 10:7) Pharaoh appears to give in and free the Jews. But when Moses said to Pharaoh he would take the entire nation including children, Pharaoh told Moses "you are facing evil." A simple understanding is that Pharaoh meant that Moses was asking too much; children aren't needed to offer sacrifices. But Rashi cites a midrash (allegory) about what the evil (ra-ah) is:

Pharaoh said, "There is a certain star the name of which is Evil (Ra-ah). By my astrological art I see that star rising towards you in the wilderness to where you travel. It is a sign of blood and slaughter." Later, when Israel sinned by worshipping the calf (in the wilderness of Sinai) and God intended to kill them, Moses said in his prayer, "Why should the Egyptians say, 'God brought them out together with evil intent (ra-ah)?" This is exactly what Pharaoh said: "Evil is before you." Immediately, the Lord retracted the evil (killing the Jews), and He changed the blood of death to the blood of circumcision when Joshua had them circumcised later. This is the meaning of what is said, (Joshua 5:9). "This day have I rolled off from you the disgrace of the Egyptians."

In short, Pharaoh seems to astrologically forecast Jewish blood in the desert. Once in the desert, the Jews worship the Gold Calf. God wishes to punish them with death. Moses prays to save the Jews so God doesn't appear evil in Egypt's eyes, saying that He took the Jews out of Egypt just to kill them. Due to Moses' prayer, God doesn't kill the Jews, but He doesn't completely remove the blood, as He converts it to blood of circumcision in later years.

Questions:

1) Most glaring is the suggestion that Pharaoh's astrology accurately forecasted the Jews fate of blood in the desert! And in fact, God would have fulfilled that forecast, had Moses not asked God to save the Jews. Are we to then say Pharaoh's astrology was correct?

2) Does God need Moses to alert Him to avert creating an evil reputation, that God only freed to Jews to slaughter them? Didn't God know this without Moses saying so?

3) The midrash says that after Moses prayed, "Immediately" the Lord retracted the evil. What is this "immediacy"?

4) What is the significance of the wilderness mentioned twice?

5) Why does God "convert" the blood of killing into blood of circumcision? Why not simply terminate the blood altogether! On the surface, God appears to be retracting His plan to kill the idolatrous Jews in order that Pharaoh should not be correct. That seems as odd reasoning. Why should God be concerned with what Pharaoh says, since the Jews deserved to be killed, God should kill them.

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The first step is to explain the puzzling correlation between Pharaoh's false astrology, and reality. God's wish to kill the Jews aligning with Pharaoh's forecast indicates that Pharaoh's astrology partook of reality...in some respect. But as astrology is false, we must look into man's psyche for this correlation, as he is the originator of astrology.

Man is worried and insecure about his unknown future; astrology was a method to offer man a glimpse into his future. Be it a good or evil forecast, at least with astrology, man would not be walking in the dark. The unknown is more disturbing than a known problem. So man conjured up a system based around the "mystical" heavens that can predict his future.

But besides time (the future), man worries about other matters: places.

Psalms 107:4-7 reads, "Some lost their way in the wilderness, in the wasteland; they found no settled place. Hungry and thirsty, their spirit failed. In their adversity they cried to the Lord, and He rescued them from their troubles. He showed them a direct way to reach a settled place." The desert is a place of isolation and hunger...a place of worries. Talmud Gittin 66a (Tosfos) says demons are seen only in 4 places, and one is the desert. This means that places of isolation generate worries, and imaginary beings intended to remove isolation. Leviticus 17:7 says, "And that they may no longer offer their sacrifices to the goat-demons after whom they stray." The Jews sacrificed to demons in the wilderness—the open fields—possibly to appease the demons of their imagined fears. And Isaiah writes (13:19-21), "And Babylon, glory of kingdoms, proud splendor of the Chaldeans, shall become like Sodom and Gomorrah overturned by God...nevermore shall it be settled nor dwelt in through all the ages [desolate]. No Arab shall pitch his tent there, no shepherds make flocks lie down there. But beasts shall lie down there, and the houses be filled with owls; there shall ostriches make their home, and there, shall demons dance." Again Torah teaches that desolate, isolated places like deserts produce fears in man where his fears conjure-up imaginary destructive forces.

Torah's repeated themes—as compared to singular instances—indicate a primary phenomenon. Astrology is a response to human insecurity. Therefore, astrology aligns somewhat with psychology. Here, the psychological lesson concerns the desert—a predominant fear. Pharaoh—like all other men—possessed a fear of the desert. This explains his astrological forecast of blood for Israel in the desert. But how was he right?

Israel miscounted Moses descent from Sinai. When Moses didn't arrive as they anticipated, they panicked. Had the Jews not been in the desert when they miscounted Moses descent from Sinai, they might not have been compelled to create the Gold Calf. The desert and its associated fears caused the Jews to overreact and create a Gold Calf to replace Moses. Moses prayed to God, "Let

not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains' (Exod. 32:12). "Mountains" refers to the wilderness of the Sinai desert.

Pharaoh didn't predict anything, but merely shared the same fear of the desert which the Jews feared. This is the alignment of Pharaoh's astrology and the Jews' reality.

Immediately, the Lord retracted the evil (killing the Jews), and He changed the blood of death to the blood of circumcision when Joshua had them circumcised later.

Immediacy means God was quite ready to cancel His decree; He didn't need Moses to raise the consideration of what Egypt would say of God. But God wished that His retraction of death be clearly understood as a concession to man, to Egypt's impression of God. Therefore He waited until Moses raised the concern about Egypt's view of God. In this manner, God is responding to Egypt, a concession. The world's impression of God overrides punishment of a small group of mankind.

But as the Jews sinned, a response was still warranted. In place of killing the idolatrous Jews, God converted the blood of death, into the blood of circumcision. This means that He would address the instinctual drive that leads to idolatry by minimizing human instinctual gratification. This is the purpose of circumcision. After circumcision, the Jews would have far less instinctual drive that could manifest in idolatry.

In the end, we realize that man's fear outweighs reality. Desolate places present danger, but only from wild animals, weather, and lack of food. King David killed a bear and a lion (I Samuel 17:37). He could anticipate their natural movements and from what angle and distance he should attack. Man can use wisdom to kill wild beasts, and certainly to shield from the elements and prepare food for long journeys. But to invent demons of the mind violates reality, and Torah. Pharaoh catered to this baseless fear when he said the star Ra-ah forecasts doom. There are no forces outside of God, nature and man. This is a fundamental, and why Torah repeats the theme of demons in deserts.

We appreciate the rabbis' ingenuity in scripting midrashim. They follow God's style of encrypting wisdom, and the prophets' metaphoric writings as seen on Proverbs. Encryption drives the mind to analyze, compare statements, search for the meaning of selected words, and unveil a deeper message than surface meanings. Doing so, our minds become more sharpened and probe greater depths. Such abilities are required as we are venturing to explore God's wisdom, which, by design, is not surface information, but is many strata of interrelated wisdom. To plunge to deeper levels, one requires a mind that can analyze and interpret. Midrashim facilitate these skills. ■

MAIMONIDES 13 PRINCIPLES



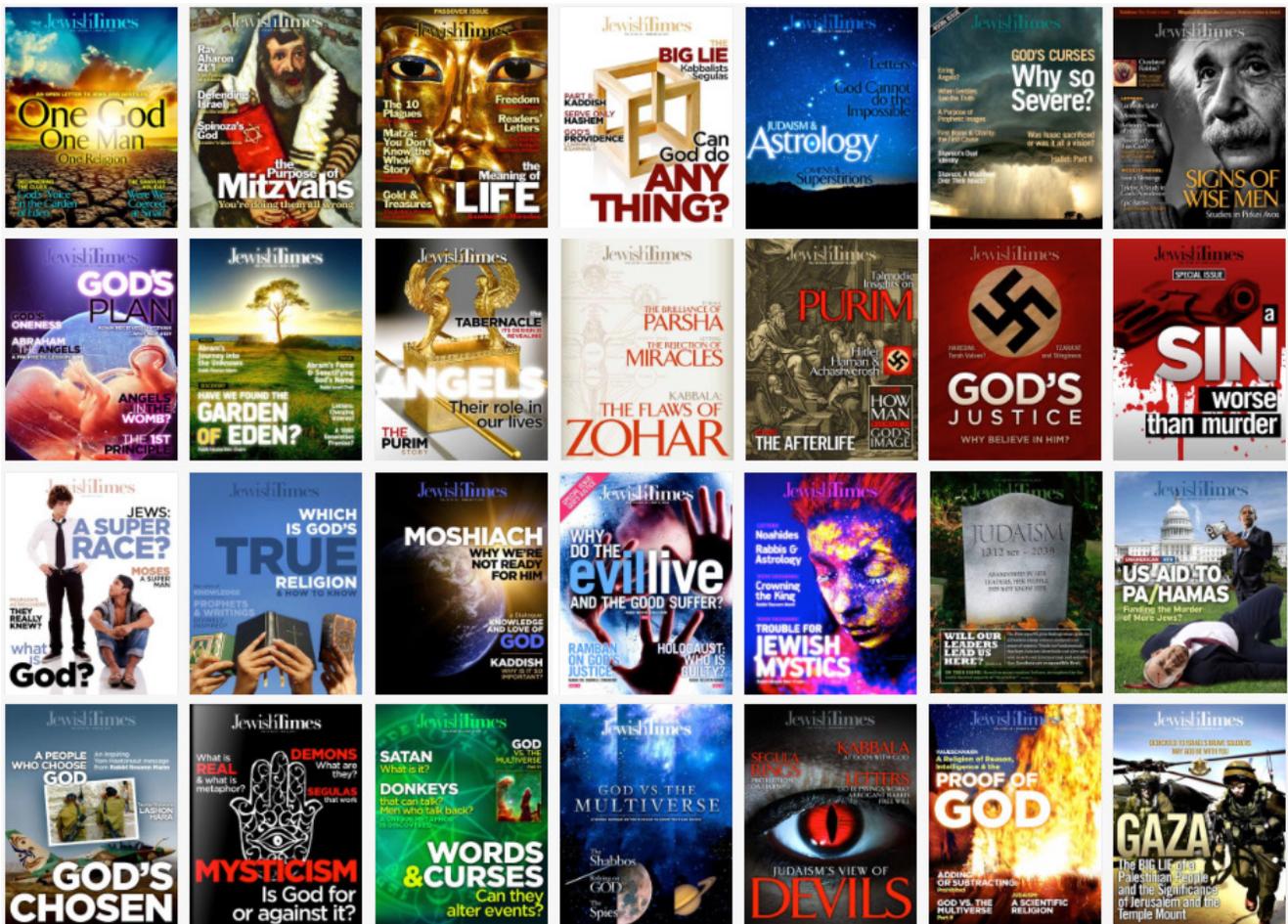
Principle 5. That God, blessed be He, is worthy that we serve Him, to glorify Him, to make known His greatness, and to do His commands. But not to do this to those that are below Him in the creation: not to the angels or to the stars or the planets or anything else, for they are all created things in nature and in their functioning, there is no choice or judgment except by God Himself. (Commentary on the Mishna, Sanhedrin chap. 10)

“For they are all created things in nature and in their functioning, there is no choice or judgment.” This is a salient point: all that is created follows a nature imposed on it, that it cannot change. By definition, this means something “other” coerced its behavior to be as it is. This points to an intelligence that created this created thing and its behavior. Thus, the star or angel owes its existence and design to a Higher Authority, thereby making it unfit for our praises. We must direct our prayers and praises to the Greatest Being alone.

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RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Yitro, contains the account of the greatest event in human history, the Revelation at Sinai. An entire nation was gathered at a mountain to witness miraculous phenomena and hear a voice from heaven proclaiming the "Aseret Hadibrot" (Ten Statements) which are the foundation of the Torah way of life.

These "Proclamations" can be divided into 2 categories each of which was inscribed on a separate tablet. The first contains the fundamentals of what are known as "bein Adam laMakom"— laws that govern man's relationship with his Creator. The second grouping, known as "bein Adam lachaveiro" (between man and his friend), include the prohibitions of murder, theft, adultery and false testimony. It concludes with the unique Torah injunction called "Lo Tachmod", not to covet the possessions of one's neighbor.

Judaism believes that a truly religious person cannot confine himself to those activities such as prayer, fasting and studying holy writ which pertain exclusively to his relationship with Hashem. These matters are extremely important but sensitivity to the needs of others is equally consequential. Even when performing the most significant Mitzvot one cannot trample on the rights of others.

This can be seen from a teaching in Tractate Yoma which deals with all aspects of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple. Nothing was more important than this worship as the atonement of all Israel depended on it. Only on this day could the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) enter the "Holy of Holies" and perform the "Ketores" (Incense) ritual. When the entire room was filled with smoke he withdrew by the way he had come. He paused in the chamber known as the heichal and recited a short prayer and did not lengthen it "so as not to frighten the Israelites who anxiously awaited him." The commentators explain that the people were nervous lest some mishap occur while he engaged in the difficult and dangerous Ketores service. So while this prayer was extremely important

to the Kohen Hadol he was cognizant of the anxiety of his fellow Jews and deliberately kept his supplication brief.

This past Sunday funerals were held in Jerusalem for great Torah Sages which were attended by many thousands. This was, however, in dangerous violation of government restrictions that were enacted to halt the spread of the Covid pandemic. It is a great mitzva to display honor to exalted Torah scholars but to do so in a manner which harms oneself and others is sinful. The proper service of Hashem should refine a person's soul and cause him to behave in a just and compassionate manner in all areas of life.

We can therefore understand why the injunctions against serious anti-social behavior are juxtaposed to the first 5 commandments which are rooted in our need to recognize and honor Hashem. However, the 10th Statement, not to covet, is, at first glance, difficult to comprehend. Jealousy of others, however unattractive, seems to be an ordinary and natural emotional response. This is not to say that it can't be overcome with the requisite effort. But why is this seemingly benign and mundane tendency so terrible that it warrants inclusion in the Aseret Hadibrot?

The Rambam explains that one who covets an object that belongs to another and schemes to obtain it, even by legal means, and even agrees to pay a very high price for it, commits a serious sin. Desire for the possessions of others, he says, leads to coveting i.e. pressuring the reluctant owner to sell. This in turn can lead to theft, for if the owner will not sell then the prospective buyer could be tempted to take it by force. And the matter can even come to murder for if the owner fights to protect his property, blood might be spilled.

We can now see how central the issue of jealousy is to the tranquility of the social order. Man is a competitive being who constantly measures his worth in terms of how he compares with others. Life would be

a lot simpler and happier if people would determine their needs purely by what is necessary with regard to their personal goals and aspirations.

Indeed, many people have all that they need to be happy but cannot enjoy it because of their perception that there are others who have "more". Most of the political and social strife that afflicts society revolves around the discontents of the so called "have nots". It is regarded as a serious injustice that there are some extremely rich people while at the same time there are many who, by comparison, are poor. It doesn't matter if the well to do perhaps earned their wealth by dint of skill, creativity and hard work. The emotion of jealousy convinces a person that it's "just not fair". The Torah recognized this and incorporated the prohibition of coveting into the Aseret Hadibrot.

The Rabbis teach, "Who is wise? One who rejoices in his portion." This formula for happiness requires that a person be able to determine what it is that he truly needs in life. It is not the money that he has but the activities he engages in that will determine his contentment and happiness. One should rejoice that he lives a life of meaning and that Hashem has given him what he needs to sustain it. That is the gateway to a genuine Ahavat Hashem and Ahavat Hachayim. May we merit to obtain it.

Shabbat Shalom ■

Dear Friends,

In this time of social isolation, we should seek ways to avoid boredom by staying occupied with meaningful activity. The world of virtual reality allows us to stay in touch with friends and attend all kinds of classes available online. But that can only take you so far.

Comes Shabbat and Yom Tov, and you need books, especially on the parsha. I personally recommend Eternally Yours on Genesis <http://bit.ly/EY-Genesis> and Exodus <http://bit.ly/EY-Exodus>, and my newest one on Numbers <http://bit.ly/EY-Numbers2>. They are easy to read, interesting, and thought-provoking conversation starters. I am especially interested in your feedback and hope you can write a brief review and post it on Amazon.



One who enters a bathroom says to the angels, “Be honored, honorable holy ones, servants of the One on High, give honor to the God of Israel, leave me until I enter and do my will and come back to you.” Abaye said, “A person should not say, ‘leave me’ lest they abandon him and go. Rather he should say, ‘Guard me, guard me, help me, help me, support me, support me, wait for me, wait for me until I enter and come out, as this is the way of man” (Talmud Brachos 60b).

On Saturday evenings after Shabbos concludes, when leaving our elevated and day of exclusive Torah study and prayer and we reenter the mundane existence of work, we read Psalms 91 which includes, “For He will order His angels to guard you wherever you go” (Ibid. 19:11). Evidently, during Shabbos, our worthiness of God’s providence is earned through our elevated state. Leaving shabbos is similar to one entering the bathroom where we must leave our exclusive thoughts of Torah study and mitzvah.

Prior to entering the bathroom, we recite the above in recognition of this break from our real metaphysical guardians. As angels are real, we must relate to them as real, expressed through dialogue. In contrast, when man finds himself isolated from society—in the wilderness, on a mountain top, in a cave, or at night (Gittin 66a, Tosfos)—the rabbis warn us from offering greetings to shadim (demons): those psychological illusions of “people” we create to escape our painful isolation. So painful is isolation, that the worst prison punishment is solitary confinement. When isolated, man naturally removes his loneliness by imagining others are present. The rabbis warn us from raising this fantasy into reality through talking to such phantoms. The fantasy will be created, but we must not treat our imaginations as real.

In his fifth principle, (Commentary on the Mishna, Sanhedrin chap. 10), Maimonides states that angels and the stars have neither dominion over their natures, nor free will. So when one addresses the angels it is a reflection on himself, not on the angels. Meaning, when Abaye says telling the angels to leave “may cause them to leave and not come back,” he’s referring to the person, and his worthiness of God’s providence. It is not that the angels listen to the person. Rather, if a

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Talking to Angels

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

person tells angels “leave me,” this statement distances himself from God (via degrading His providential angels), which thereby can diminish God’s angelic protection. Thereby, through such a poor expression, the angels might truly leave him. But the angels are not acting freely, but God’s design of angelic protection follows rules of justice and human perfection. The less perfected person loses God’s angels. But as we must relieve ourselves, our minds turn away from Torah and mitzvah. In order to express our attachment to God’s goodness via His angelic guides, we double the language: “Guard me, guard me, help me, help me, support me, support me, wait for me, wait for me.” Double language expresses a loss and a human longing, like “please, please.” We express a longing to reunite with the angels once exiting the bathroom. Why must angels be told to wait? This is due to our detachment from Torah and mitzvos while in the bathroom, matters that earn God’s providence. Instead of saying, “leave me” (Rav Acha) we should say as Abaye recommends “wait for me,” expressing a loss at parting with the angels. Rav Acha’s “leave me” indicates that there must be a

separation, but not that one regrets that separation as Abaye’s “wait for me.” Rav Acha also renders the reuniting a human decision, “leave me until I enter and do my will and come back to you.” While Abaye attributes it to the angels, “wait for me, wait for me.”

“As this is the way of man”

This means that tending to one’s natural needs is unavoidable. This compliments Abaye’s position to maintain a positive relationship with the angels. It is a manner of saying, “I don’t want to leave Torah and mitzvos, but I have no choice, as this is human nature.”

Last week’s Torah reading validates angels as real beings performing God’s mission: “The angel of God, who had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them” (Exod. 14:19). There’s no repetition: the angel first guides its metaphysical control over natural laws and then the physical world (here, a cloud) responds to those laws. So too, Psalms 104:4

reads, “He makes His angels winds and His ministers a blazing fire.” Natural forces governed by angels carry out God’s will on earth and in the universe. The Hebrew word for angel is “malach,” and the word for labor or action is “malacha.” The 2 words share the same root as angels perform God’s actions. Rabbi Israel Chait explained that one concept behind the angels connected to the ark’s cover is to teach that man attains knowledge through the assistance of a system of knowledge, in which angels play a role. Angels are connected to our attainment of wisdom from God.

In summary, angels are real, demons are not. We talk only to what is real. And when we address the angels, we understand they are a great benefit to our existence so we express a longing to reunite with them as Abaye said. And we pray to God that He guards us with His angels as we exit Shabbos and enter mundane matters of work. Our prayers are directed only to God who controls all, even angels. But we can address angels as an expression of our conviction in their reality and purpose to assist man. ■

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Talmudic Metaphors

Rava said, *‘If one is righteous, he could create worlds [like God]. As it says, “For your sins separate you from your God”[1]. Rava thereby created a man, and sent him to Rav Zeira. He spoke to him but he did not answer. Rav Zeira said, “You are from the chavrei [sorcerers], return to your dust.” On each Friday evening Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah would indulge in Sefer Yetzira [book of Creation] and would create a third-grown calf and eat it.’[2]*

That is some portion of Talmud! Over the years, we hear others recite such metaphors with literal acceptance. However, we know God is the only creator, so this dismisses any literal interpretation. As always, we must ask what are the questions that can unravel metaphors.

What strikes us first, is that Rava “created” a human being, and others created an animal. Such stories must be metaphoric, and perhaps the Talmud commences with the most glaring impossibility, to set the tone that the entire story is metaphoric. Why did Rava send the man he created to Rav Zeira, and about what did Rav Zeira disapprove? Also, what is the flow of the quote from Isaiah? What is the connection between the two acts of creation of a man, and a calf? And why were Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah apparently successful, as they enjoyed their creation, while Rava was not?

Comparing the two creations, the second one is animal, not a man, and that it had a positive outcome. My understanding of this story follows.

The Talmud cites a quote from Isaiah that might be misunderstood, “For your sins separate you from your God”[3]. It appears that only our sins separate us from God, otherwise, we would not be separated, and perhaps similar. But this is not so, as we recite numerous times daily that God is “Kadosh”—unlike anything He created. The Talmud then goes on to show how man cannot even understand human creation, let alone perform creation. But the Talmud does so in a metaphor. Sabbath is the day of Creation. As such, the Rabbis were accustomed to study areas of Creation on sabbath, as they always studied “matters of the day.” On one such Sabbath eve, Rava studied

man’s creation, and felt he had a new understanding about how God created man, as if Rava “could create a man” himself. Rava did not send a “man” to Rav Zeira, but rather, he sent his findings from his studies, asserting he obtained a new insight. His sending must have been out of some doubt, so he desired his teacher’s analysis. Rav Zeira asked a question to Rava, to which Rava had no answer. Rav Zeira said “return to the dust” meaning, return to studies about dust (lower matters), and not man (a higher level being). Rav Zeira was saying that we cannot know so much about how God created beings with a soul: metaphysics is difficult. “Return to the dust” is Rav Zeira’s ridicule that Rava should return to studying lower areas within his grasp, i.e., “dust.” However, Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah studied matters of biology alone, well within their abilities. “Creating” a calf and “eating” it mean, “understanding biology” and “enjoying” it, respectively. But even in the more approachable area of biology, we read that Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah were only able to create a “third-grown” calf. This means that human knowledge, although grasping some amount, is still incomplete. Perhaps also explained, is that Rava’s independent studies resulted in errors, while Rav Chanina and Rav Oshiah who studied together were successful. This illustrates how essential it is to test one’s ideas on another, removing the possibility of errors generated by overestimation of the self and personal infallibility. Gaining a critique almost always minimizes mistakes, “...in a multitude of counselors there is safety.”[4] And as a Rabbi once taught, the very first verse of Proverbs also teaches this idea: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, King over Israel” was stated by King Solomon to teach that he had a great teacher, and the environment that fostered wisdom. The King wished to express that his work Proverbs was substantiated by great minds who influenced his thinking. ■

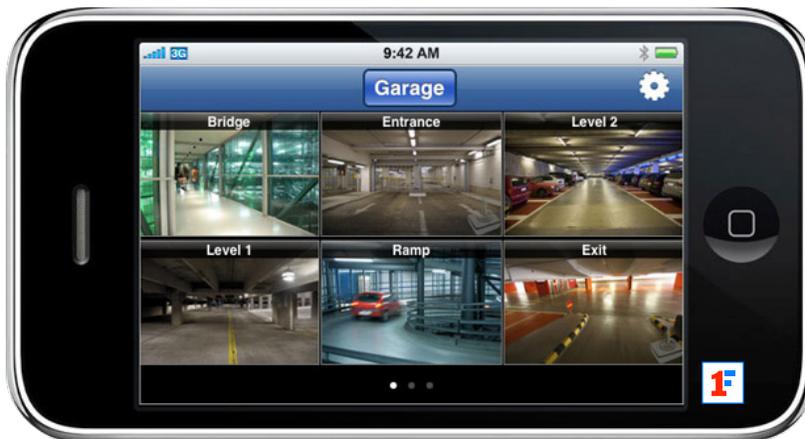
[1] Isaiah 59

[2] Talmud Sanhedrin 67b

[3] Isaiah 59

[4] Proverbs 11:14

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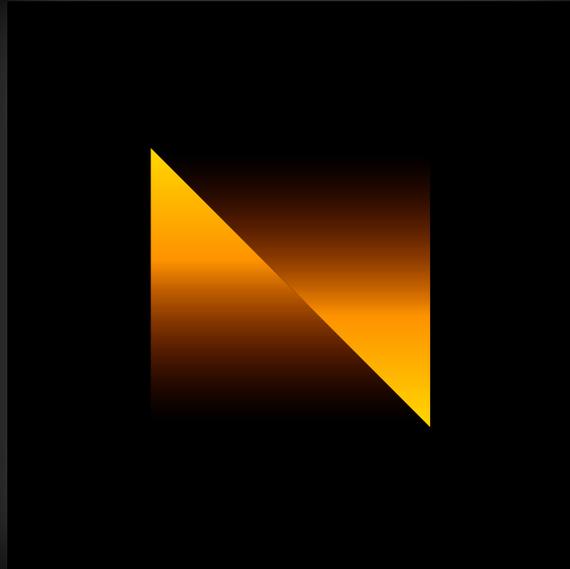
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