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Our Souls at Sinai

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

ISRAEL

Disloyal Minorities

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Is Suffering Good?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

LETTERS
PROCREATING
MARRIAGE
ALCOHOL

KING
SOLOMON

Finding God's Wisdom

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



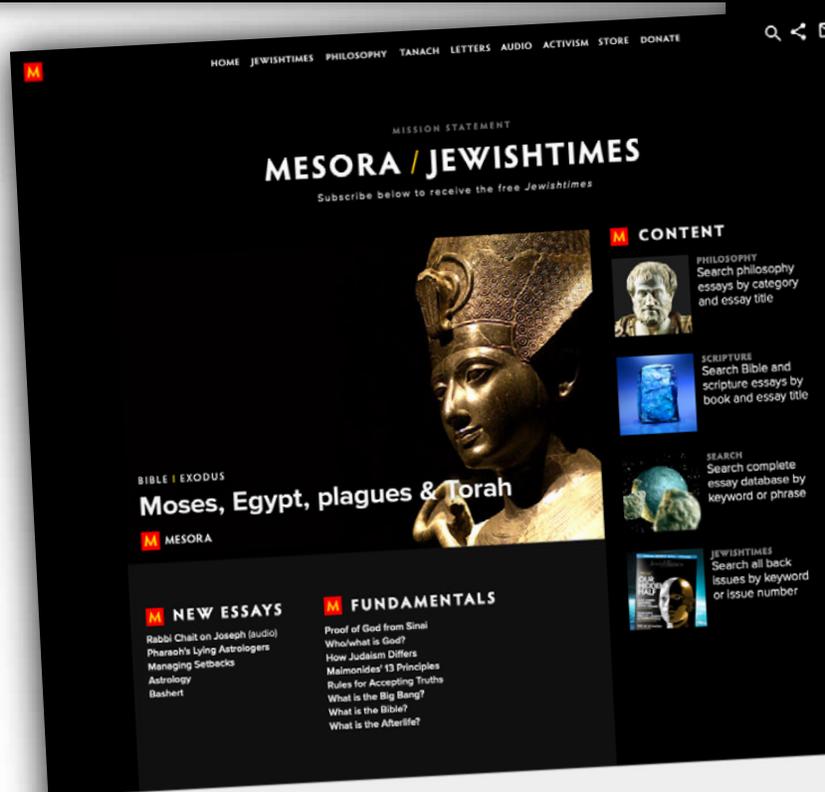
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OUR PURPOSE: WISDOM & MORALITY



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. 1:7). "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.

EMAIL

ASK THE RABBI

JewishTimes

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| Please send letters and questions to: Comments@Mesora.org |

3 Gentiles, Marriage Tips & Alcohol

LETTERS

Multiple questions are addressed.

6 Were We at Sinai and in Eden?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

We analyze a famous midrash.

9 Disloyal Minorities

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rabbi Mann draws from the parsha and applies to Israel's current state of affairs.

12 God's Wisdom

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

King Solomon's lessons on acquiring wisdom.

13 Suffering is not a Mitzvah

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Man's values and Torah's rejection.



"Hear the truth, whomever speaks it."

MAIMONIDES

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Must Gentiles Procreate?

READER: I have a question which no one can answer. At Sinai, Moses repeated the Oral "Noahide" laws which did not include procreation as it did at one time. My question is how do we know that Moses did or did not repeat the law of procreation? The Torah does not show what he said. Please help me on this if you can.

Thank you, Bill
Sturgeon Bay, WI

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RABBI: Talmud Sanhedrin 59b addresses your question:

Laws given to Noahides [prior to the era of Torah] which were repeated at Sinai apply to both Noahide (gentile) and Jews. But isn't there the mitzva of procreation, which was stated with regard to the descendants of Noah? As it is written: "And you, be fruitful and multiply, swarm in the land and multiply in it" (Gen. 9:7). And it was repeated at Sinai, in the verse: "Go say to them: Return to your tents" (Deut. 5:26), when the Jewish men were commanded to resume conjugal relations with their wives after having been commanded to separate from them in preparation for the giving of the Torah. [Thus, the mitzva of procreation should apply equally to gentiles.] Nevertheless, the mitzva of procreation was stated for the Jewish people and not for the descendants of Noah.

We see that Moses did in fact refer to procreation at Sinai, thereby satisfying the condition of making a law obligatory for Noahides. Why then are Noahides not commanded in this mitzvah? The Talmud answers that what Moses discussed at Sinai was not the core command of procreation found only in Genesis—"Be fruitful and multiply"—but Moses addressed a mere isolated detail: after Revelation ended, procreation may now resume. Thus, the "core" command of procreation was stated only once to Noahides (to Adam), and never repeated. Therefore, the Jew alone has this mitzvah. ■

Best Book on Marriage?

READER: Which books about dating and relationships do you think should be required reading?

RABBI: Torah: It teaches what matters in marriage. Rebecca ran to serve a stranger—Eliezer—and this made her a good wife. And it was this trait Eliezer sought for Isaac. Abraham ran and toiled to serve 3 complete strangers. He taught monotheism where ever he traveled. Rachel was not competitive and gave her betrothed Jacob to Leah. Ruth at 40 married Boaz, age 80. Boaz valued her humility and cared less that she was a convert. The same applies to Moses and Joshua: they both married converts. Talmud too has great stories like Rabbi Akiva's wife who valued Torah and his learning more than him being home with her. Esther was a brilliant psychologist and sacrificed her life and marriage to save the Jews. King Solomon depicts the Ayshes Chayil: industrious, her husband trusts her, she is

good to him—never bad—all the days of her life, she is very charitable, she is not lazy, she labors physically, she makes wise acquisitions, she is diligent when caring for her children, she marries a man of wisdom, her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with kind teaching. She is praised for her fear of God, not for her beauty or charm.

And Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers) outlines all primary moral, ethical, psychological and philosophical perfections. When couples, friends, family members and co-workers follow these character perfections, their relationships will flourish. They will put side ego, impatience, pettiness, and selfish wants, and they will act more out of objective truths, kindness, charity and harmony. The focus to "work on the relationship" will be obviated by core human perfections that will naturally lead to peace trust, friendship and happiness.

In Torah, God included all life's treasured and vital lessons. He is the best teacher. ■

Desiring Prohibitions

READER: My first question is about drinking [alcohol] with non-Jews. Talmud says one should not drink with non-Jews and gives some reasons like intermarriage. Personally I drink rarely like for festivals, recreation and happy occasions. There is a difference when I drink with believers and unbelievers. When I drink with believers the conversation is always about Hashem and the Torah and is really gratifying. But when I drink with unbelievers mostly there is unwanted talks and no productivity except some rare happy times. What is the advice regarding drinking with non-Jews?

RABBI: We don't drink with anyone but Jews for the reason you gave: lest we forge identification with them and marry their daughters: intermarriage.

READER: A Jew who ate pork later came to know it is forbidden, repented and abstained from eating pork ever again. But he still thinks about the memory and taste of eating pork in a positive way or relishes the moment but does do the action [eat pork]. As memories are impossible to delete, is this wrong?

RABBI: Thoughts of sin do not equate to sin (Kiddushin 39b). Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "Don't say, 'I dislike pork.' But say, 'I enjoy it, but God forbade it'" (Sifra Kedoshim, 20:26). Meaning, we don't deny real desires or create taboos. We are to accept reality—real desires—but in action, we follow God. Denying anything real is against Torah. We all possess emotions and strong energies; many thoughts are unavoidable, and thus, not sin. But acting on those thoughts would be sinful. ■



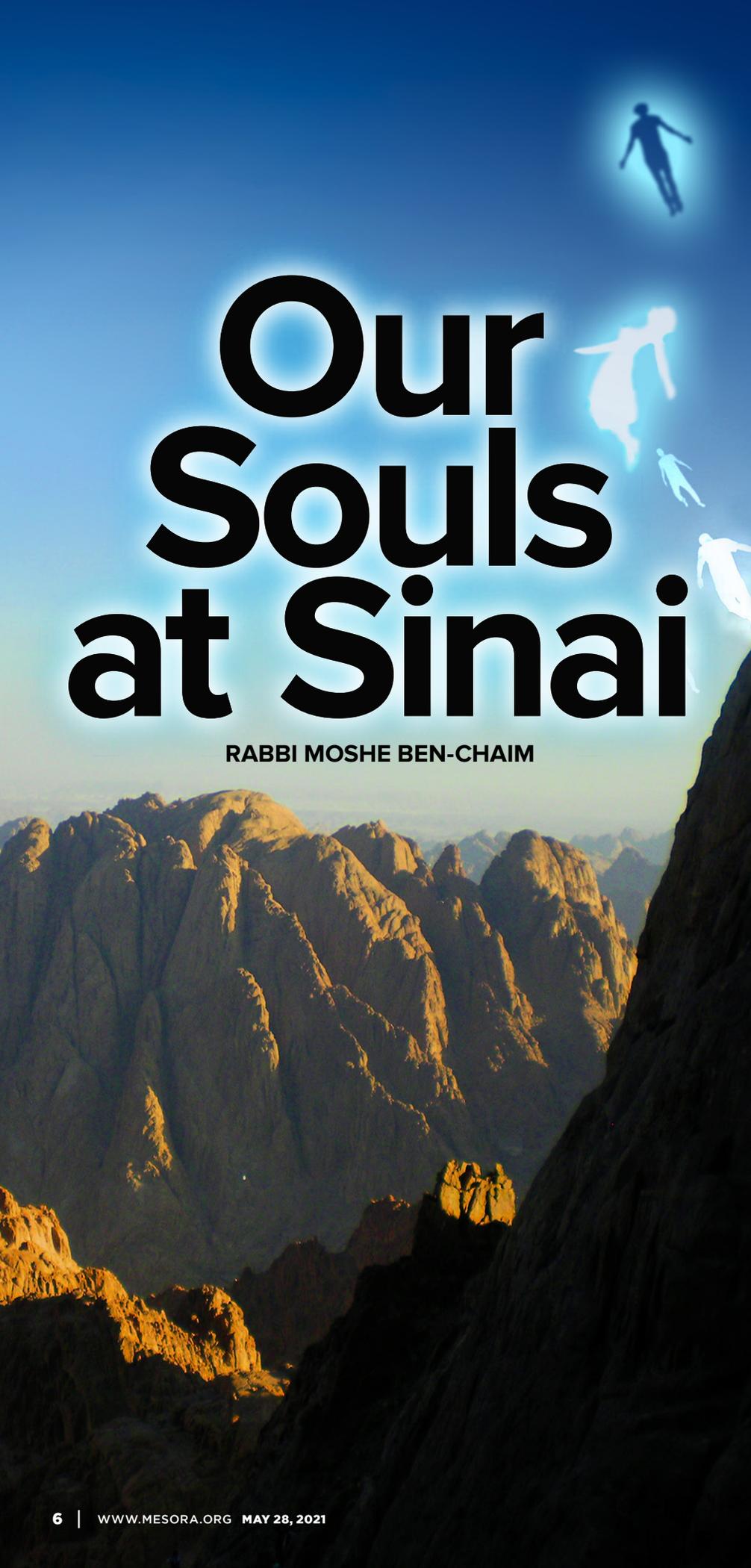
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Our Souls at Sinai

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

READER: Shalom. I read your response to a letter entitled “False Ideas on Conversion.” My question is rather simple. Being that Judaism is both a faith and a nation, would it not be impossible to join a “nation” if one did not already be Jewish or possess a Jewish Soul? Deut. 29:13,14 states:

I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God [at Sinai] and with those who are not with us here this day.

Who is that group that God refers to as “not here today”? Also Talmud (Shevuot 39a) explains that this refers to future converts, whose souls were also at Sinai. Talmud says there, “A convert who comes to convert...” This begs the question: why does it say a “convert” who comes to convert? Rather, it should say a “gentile” who comes to convert! The reason is because the future convert already has a Jewish spark/soul inside of him. Peace & Blessings.

Peter Inverso,
Titusville, NJ

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



RABBI: Talmud does not say future souls attended Sinai. It says future generations will be obligated in Torah. As my friend Benjamin Kaplan mentioned, “those who are not here today” means that exactly: those not yet born, and hence, not at Sinai. They weren’t born, and their souls were not yet of this earth. To suggest their souls were at Sinai is to deny Torah’s words, “they were not present.” The meaning is simply that future generations receive Torah obligation just as those real attendees.

Your second suggestion, “future converts have a Jewish spark/soul inside of them” is also false. God did not create different souls: some with “sparks” or Torah inclinations, and some without. This would violate God’s principle of Reward and Punishment, as this suggests that God made it easier for some people to follow His will (future converts), and He made it more difficult for others. God credits us only for our free will decisions, and not with our predisposition prior to birth...this notion of a “spark.” Such predisposition in theory is therefore wrong, and factually, it is not a truth. Every human must decide to study Torah, to recognize truths, and to overcome his or her emotions to follow what his/her mind dictates is true. We are credited only for what we do in life—not for anything prior—and we each have equal free will to sin or perform the good. No one does the good without free will. No one sins without free will. Sparks don’t exist.

Joining the Jewish nation is open to every human and simply means that one follows Torah. No one is barred in any manner...not due to lineage, race or previous sins.

But we can give an explanation for the midrash (allegory):

R. Johanan asked, “Why is it written, ‘Who does great things past finding; yea, marvelous things without number’ (Job 9:10)?

You should know that every soul, from Adam to the end of the world, was formed during the six days of creation, and that all of them were present in the Garden of Eden and [also] at the time of the giving of the Torah, as it is said, “With him that stands here with us this day, and also with him that is not here with us this day” (Deut. 29:14).” (Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 3)

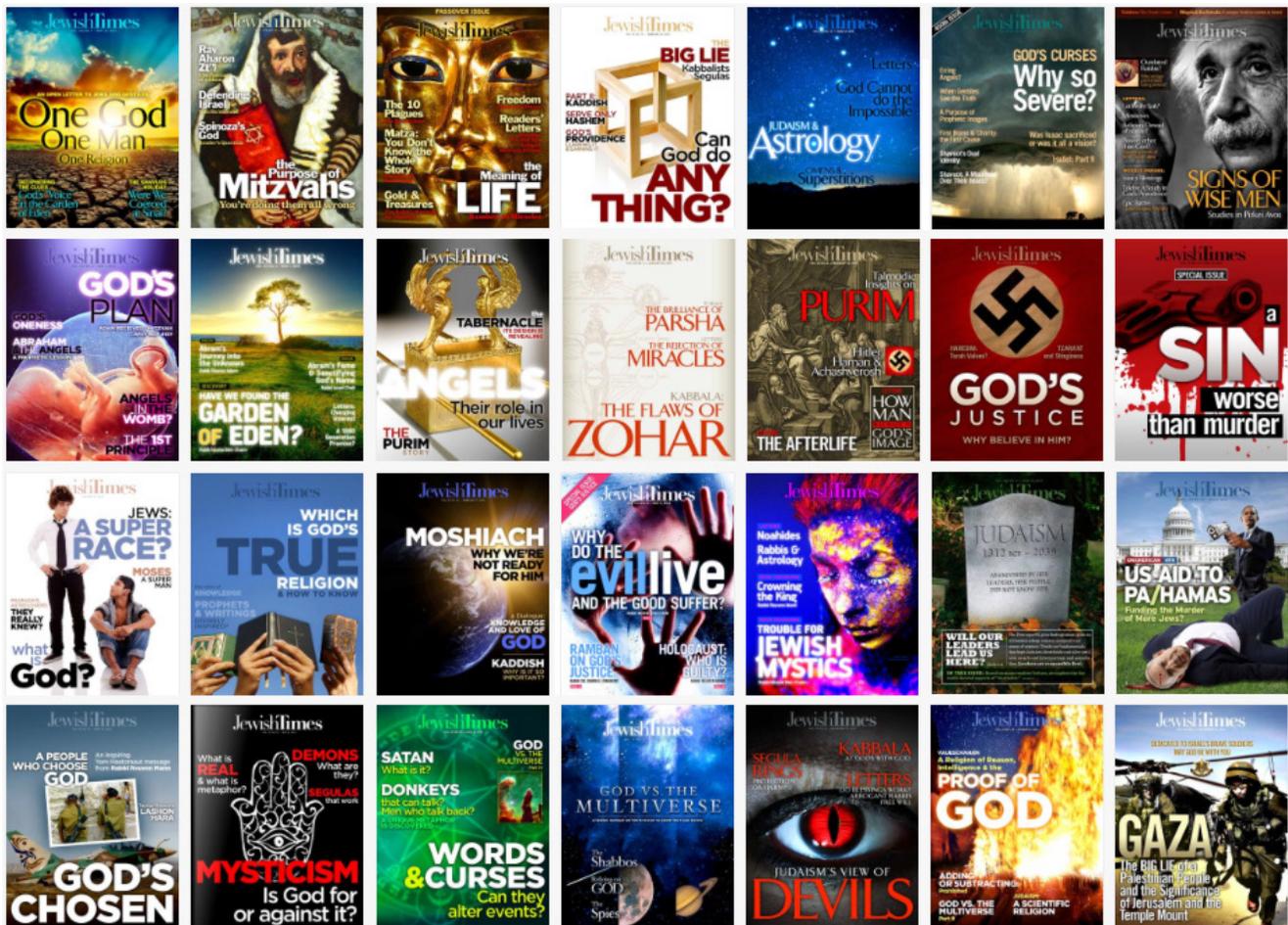
What distinguishes the era of the Garden of Eden? It was the time prior to God’s altering the human psyche when He implanted a newly created morality in us. In the garden, Adam and Eve were not embarrassed at their nudity (Gen. 2:25); they yet did not possess morality. They were on a higher level of existence, occupied only with truths, not with what’s right or wrong morally. “All souls of mankind were in the Garden” metaphorically means that all mankind possesses that duplicate capacity: later generations were not created with compromised souls. That is, just as Adam and Eve possessed a base perfected state capable of pondering great truths, and were later altered by receiving the additional moral faculty, we today also possess both components. Do not think we have fewer faculties than Adam and Eve. But the literal meaning that “all souls were in the Garden” is false.

What is meant by “all souls existed at the giving of Torah”? This means that those people literally present at Sinai had no greater evidence of Revelation than later generations. “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you forever” (Exod. 19:9). God told Moses that Revelation at Sinai will contain an eternal, undeniable proof of His existence and of Moses’ authority. An eternal proof means that later generations are equated to Sinai’s attendees...as if later generations stood at Sinai. ■

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PARSHA

Disloyal Minorities

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week’s Parsha, Behaalotcha, depicts a series of calamities that took place prior to the disaster of the Spies which sealed the fate of the generation that experienced the Exodus from Egypt but failed to achieve the goal of conquering and settling the land that G-d had chosen for His Chosen People.

Ironically, a rebellion broke out over the matter of food. This, at first, sounds strange. It wasn’t as if the people were starving. Their nutritional needs were well cared for through the miraculous cuisine known as Manna. This was a special food designed and produced by the Creator which satisfied all of one’s dietary requirements.

And it was also easy to obtain. The Torah attests:

Now the manna was like a coriander seed and its color was like the color of the bedolach. The people would stroll and gather it and grind it in a mill or pound it in a mortar and cook it in a pot or make it into cakes, and it’s taste was like the taste of dough kneaded with oil. When the dew descended upon the camp at night, the manna would descend upon it.

The manna was available, easy to acquire, uncomplicated to prepare and could assume a variety of forms. Nevertheless it failed to satisfy the people. They inexplicably complained,

Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge; the cucumbers, melons, leeks and onions and garlic. But now our life is parched, there is nothing; we have nothing to anticipate but the manna!

Everything depends upon perspective. It is frightening to see the extent to which people can distort reality and convert a great benefit into something terrible. They could not appreciate the great blessings that Hashem had rained down upon them and instead waxed nostalgic about the wonderful old days they had enjoyed in Egypt. Seriously?

It is difficult to understand how the Jews could behave in such a lowly manner after all the miracles Hashem had performed for them in Egypt and the wilderness. Not to mention the gathering at Mt. Sinai where they witnessed the Revelation. If they had attained the proper mindset of devotion to the service of Hashem they would have been quite satisfied with the manna and completely oblivious to the “delicacies” which had apparently been so abundant in Egypt.

The verse provides an additional clue to understanding this bizarre episode. In introducing this story it says, “The “Safsuf (rabble) that was among them cultivated a craving, and the Children of Israel also wept once more and said, ‘Who will feed us meat?’” Apparently there was a group of troublemakers in their midst known as the “rabble”. Who were they?

Rashi says that they were the “mixed multitude” of Egyptians who joined with them as they left Egypt. Moshe was very generous and tolerant in his decision to accept them. But was that such a good idea? Rashi regards them as responsible for contributing to many of the sinful behaviors of the Jews in the Midbar. In fact the Midrash depicts Hashem as taking issue with Moshe for not consulting with Him on this vital matter.

The lessons of this story are very relevant to contemporary life in the land of Israel. A nation which has a specific identity and mission must be very careful about who it allows to “join” it.

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Judaism actually welcomes the right of a convert to enter the nation as is clearly depicted in the Megillah of Ruth that we read on Shavuot.

Ruth was a great woman who embodied the supreme virtues of the Jewish people especially that of Chesed. Indeed, she was the great grandmother of King David from whom the Moshiach will descend. Our history abounds with the stories of illustrious converts who made great contributions to the Jewish Nation. It is very important to maintain the proper attitude of respect and full acceptance to all who convert to Judaism with full integrity.

But the story of the “rabble” alerts us to the dangers of uncritical acceptance of those who don’t share our basic values. During the recent war with Hamas serious riots broke out in the “mixed” cities which contain large numbers of “Israeli” Arabs. They physically attacked Jews and set fire to many synagogues thereby giving vent to the great hatred that they harbor in their hearts. Why would a Jewish state give rights of citizenship and political power to a group of people that identifies with its most extreme enemies and desires its destruction?

It should be noted in this regard that many Arabs such as the Druze and certain Bedouins are loyal Israelis and in fact serve with great distinction in the I.D.F. I have nothing but great respect for these people and appreciation for their service.

But the problem of granting significant political power to a group that opposes the very foundational principles of the State cannot be brushed aside. The Arabs comprise about 20% of the Israeli population and the Knesset. All of the Arab political parties call for the dissolution of the Jewish state and its replacement with “some else” in their charters. In the

clash with Hamas they opposed Israel’s military response to the rockets that were flying in from Gaza. It is foolish and very dangerous to grant such people a voice in determining the policies and direction of the state of Israel.

The war with Hamas brought to the surface many latent problems in Israeli society. The country can no longer ignore the danger of explosive violence in the mixed cities. It must also address the difficulty of preserving Israel as both a democratic society and a Jewish state. I believe that this is possible but only by maintaining a guaranteed Jewish majority. New laws must be written with great wisdom and insight that will assure that the Jewish character of the state is enshrined forever.

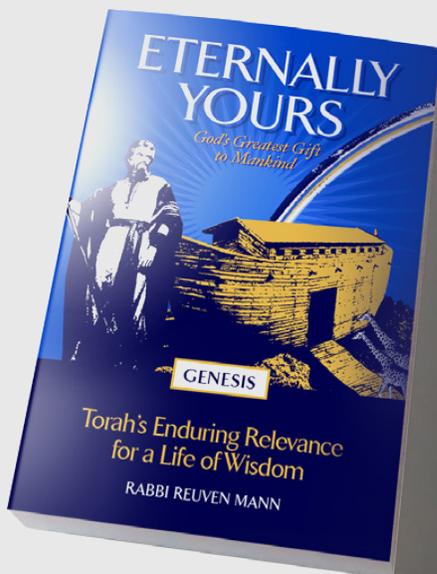
Shabbat Shalom ■

Dear Friends,

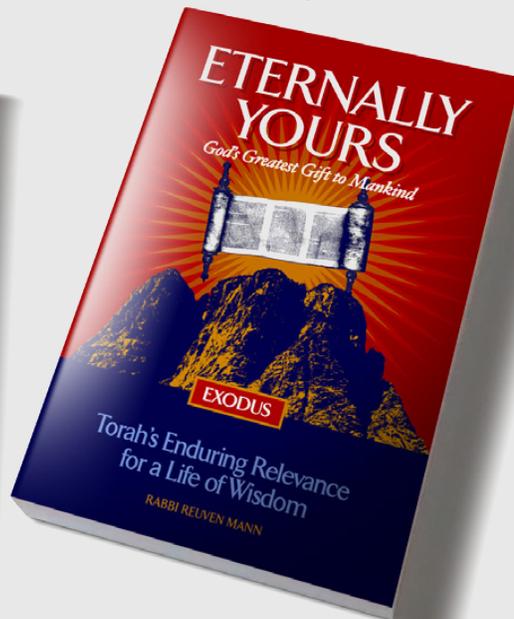
In this time of social isolation, we should seek ways to avoid boredom by staying occupied with meaningful activity. The world of virtual reality allows us to stay in touch with friends and attend all kinds of classes available online. But that can only take you so far.

Comes Shabbat and Yom Tov, and you need books, especially on the parsha. I personally recommend Eternally Yours (below) 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.

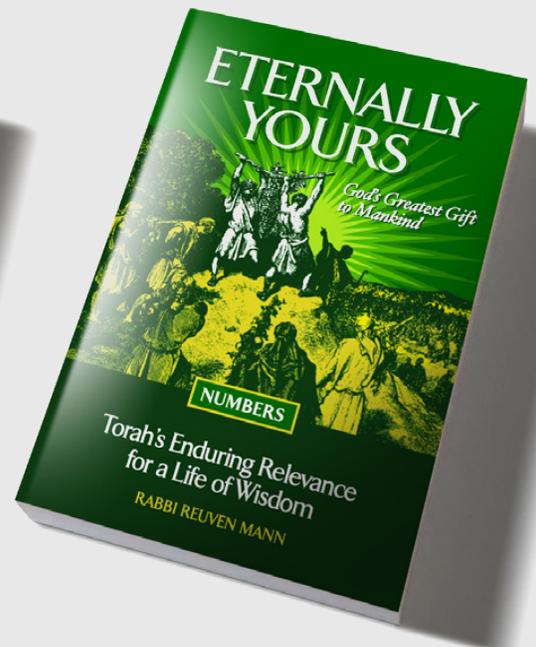
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CONDÉ NAST





God's Wisdom

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



My son, if you accept my words And treasure up my commandments; If you make your ear attentive to wisdom And your mind open to discernment; If you call to understanding And cry aloud to discernment, If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for treasures, Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God. For God gives wisdom, from His lips come knowledge and understanding. (Proverbs 2:1-6)

At age 12, King Solomon ascended to the throne after his father King David passed at age 70. In a prophecy, God asked King Solomon what he wished; he asked for wisdom. God granted that wish. Therefore we must be careful when studying King Solomon's words which are divinely inspired.

Proverbs 2:4 above says, "If you seek wisdom as you do silver and search for it as for treasures." The king says we must cultivate 2 attitudes in our search for wisdom. Silver is a known entity; we know what to look for and we know when we have found it. This equates to a search for wisdom where we have direction and an expectation. But another type of valuable is a non-descript buried treasure. We know only that there are great fortunes from shipwrecks, but we don't know the location or what are the sunken contents of the treasure chests. This equates to times when we study Torah or science, and our bearings are not clear. Despite our uncertainty, we must sustain our search due to the knowledge that King Solomon says in verse 6: "For God gives wisdom, from His lips come knowledge and understanding." King Solomon says 2 things: God is the "source" of wisdom, and further, His articulation—lips—His Torah verses, contain great wisdom in their very formulations. In addition to the content, how God said something offers additional wisdom.

If we develop the appreciation for Torah's wisdom—by recognizing its Source and also its precise articulation—we will search for it as silver and as buried treasure. Then verse 5 applies: "Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God." God designed Torah and science in layers. We discover ever-growing insights with a deeper and longer search. Einstein said, "It is not that I am smarter, but that I remain with a question longer." This means that the human mind takes many paths when exploring; it detects many elements when studying Torah or science. We stop and analyze discoveries and insights. We then forge ahead. Duration in exploration is vital to this course of thought and analysis if we are to uncover new truths. ■

PERFECTION

SUFFERING

is not a Mitzvah

RABBI REUVEN MANN



Many religious people believe that it is a good thing to deprive oneself of physical enjoyments. They base it on the fact that the Torah contains many restrictions in the areas of eating, sexual activity and the like. In some religious circles a person's spiritual level is measured by the extent of his perceived capacity for self denial. The question arises: Is the popular viewpoint which extols the virtue of asceticism in accordance with the authentic teachings of Torah?

The Rambam discusses the issue of bodily and emotional indulgence in Hilchot Deot. He says that it is incumbent on a person to act in accordance with the principle of moderation. This means that we must avoid extremes: that of excessive indulgence as well as of extreme denial. With regard to those who seek to renounce all worldly pleasure as a service to Hashem, Rambam says, "If you should say that since desire, honor and the like are harmful and remove a person from the world I will totally separate from them and go completely to the opposite side and not eat meat, nor marry, nor live in a pleasant dwelling nor wear pleasant clothing but only sackcloth and harsh wool and the like as the idolatrous priests; this too is an evil path and it is prohibited to follow it. One who goes in this path is called a sinner, for it says about the nazir, "and he shall atone for having

sinned against his soul". The Rabbis said, "if the nazir who only abstained from wine requires an atonement, how much more so one who denies himself every pleasure...? Thus the Rabbis said, "is it not enough what the Torah prohibited, that you prohibit more things to yourself?"

It is clear from the Rambam that the ideal of asceticism as a religious service is connected to idolatry. Most religions are rooted in the idea that instinctual indulgence is inherently evil and that G-d desires us to be in a state of privation. This view is contrary to the way of Torah. For Hashem designed man to be a creature of body and soul. In order to fulfill his spiritual mission he must take care of his bodily needs. Deprivation of basic needs puts him in a state of pain and impedes his ability to serve G-d. It is therefore a mitzvah to keep one's physical affairs in order and thus acquire the peace of mind necessary for the proper observance of Torah and mitzvot. It is extremely important to guard one's health as illness and disease are the greatest obstacles to vibrant religious growth. Let us all resolve to pay more attention to proper nutrition and suitable exercise in order to increase our vitality and well being. The person who guards his health and satisfies his bodily and emotional needs in moderation with the intention of becoming thereby a better servant of Hashem is living on the highest level. ■

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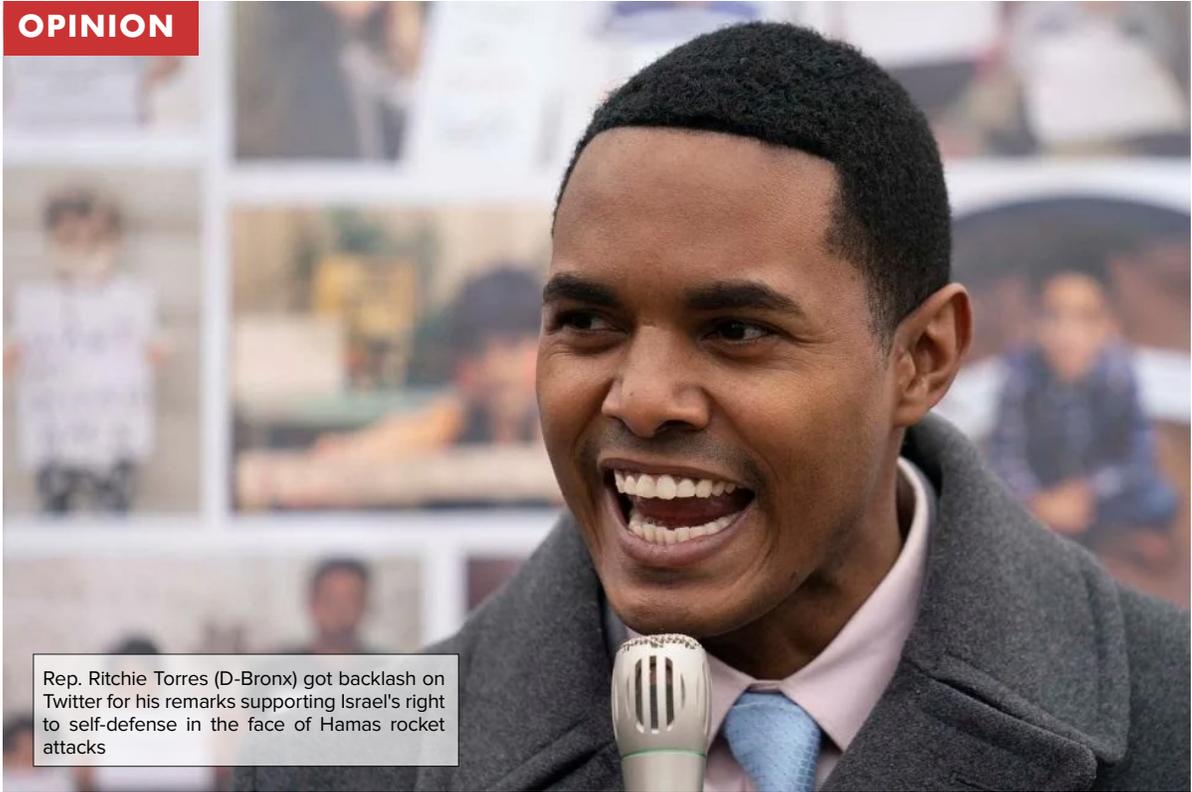
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OPINION



Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-Bronx) got backlash on Twitter for his remarks supporting Israel's right to self-defense in the face of Hamas rocket attacks

Rep. Ritchie Torres: “Here’s why I’m supporting Israel — despite the Twitter mob”

By Ritchie Torres

“What is under siege is the truth itself. Circulating on social media is a vicious lie— a lie that deceptively reframes the terrorism of Hamas as self-defense and deceptively reframes the self-defense of Israel as terrorism. Increasingly, we seem to live in an Orwellian universe where the truth no longer matters.”

As Israel faced Arab riots and endless rocket attacks from Gaza this week, progressive Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-The Bronx) voiced his commitment to the Jewish state’s safety and sovereignty at a Zoom event sponsored by the UJA — triggering a harsh backlash for doing so. His comments appear below:

“Israel is under siege not only from relentless rocket fire at the hands of Hamas but also from an endless propaganda war that has taken on a new intensity here in the United States and elsewhere.

I am here to affirm that, as a member of Congress — one who intends to be here for a long time — I have an unwavering commitment to both the sovereignty and security of Israel as a Jewish state. With sovereignty and security comes the inherent right of self-defense, a right that every state, including our own, takes for granted. Why should Israel be an exception to the rule? Why should Israel be held to a deadly double standard in a moment of terror?

It is unreasonable to expect a nation state to be the passive target of hundreds of rockets and then forfeit the right to defend itself amid a constant stream of terror. No right-minded person would impose that kind of self-destructive burden on any other country.

What is under siege is not only Israel. What is under siege is the truth itself. Circulating on social media is a

vicious lie — a lie that deceptively reframes the terrorism of Hamas as self-defense and deceptively reframes the self-defense of Israel as terrorism. Increasingly, we seem to live in an Orwellian universe where the truth no longer matters.

Now is not the time to be silent. All of us, especially those holding elected office, have to be visible and vocal — fearless and forceful — in standing up for our greatest friend in the Middle East.

Support for Israel, especially in moments like these, is not for the faint-hearted. The moment I sent out a statement denouncing the terrorism of Hamas, I was swiftly demonized by extremists as a white supremacist, as a supporter of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocide. Although these comments cause great pain to my loved ones, I remain as determined as ever to speak out. And if I can speak out, then anyone can. And everyone must.

We cannot allow ourselves to be silenced by an overbearing Twitter mob, dominated by the extremes of American politics. If we, in elected office, are not willing to say and do what is right, then we are unworthy of the office we hold.

I am here to state, in clearest possible terms, that I stand with Israel, because doing so, quite simply, is the right thing to do.” ■

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