

JewishTimes

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Answer: If one denies [or rejects] his senses, he must then also deny having seen that author's words.”

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Q&As

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by a student

“Nothing Compares to You”

STUDENT: Why is the concluding statement “Nothing Compares to You” found only in connection with the Shofaros prayers?

RABBI CHAIT: Exodus 15:3 records Moses' description of God as “a man of war,” but not that God is a man, as Rashi says, (Ibid.) it is similar to “the man of Naomi,” the man related to Naomi. [God too is related to war.]

Shir Hakavod (the poem recited on Shabbos after musaf) says:

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I shall allegorize You, I will describe You, though I don't know You. They allegorized You, but not according to Your reality, and they portrayed You according to Your deeds. You are one, containing all the allegories. They saw You as old and as young. And the hair of Your head was [both] hoary and jet black.

On the phrase, “and they portrayed You according to Your deeds,” Eitz Yosef comments: “They gave You a nickname of a warrior. Also, a roaring lion, a bereaved bear, a leopard...the mightiest of animals.”

Isaiah 40:18 says, “To what will you equate Me, and to what form will you arrange to Me?”

All these sources teach that God permitted man to have an idea of His presence. It is only in God's revelation of His presence—Shofaros—that such visions take place. This explains why the phrase “Nothing Compares to You” is said only in connection with Shofaros, the prayer discussing God's revelation. Such visions are concessions to man. [Isaiah's words “To what will you equate Me?” intend to clarify that such physical descriptions of God are only metaphors.]

When we say, “God is merciful; Ail Rachum,” we don't mean God has emotions. But Torah says this to offer man a concept that God exists. Malchiyos and Zichronos—the 2 prayers discussing God's omnipotence and omniscience—are not where God relates to man, as is true regarding Shofaros, which is God's particular providence (hashgacha pratyos) of relating to man. Shofar/providence is the substratum, without which there is no Malchiyos or Zichronos, God's kingship over and His remembrance of man.

[Thus, “Nothing Compares to You” counters any literal misunderstandings of the visions man has of God during revelation, as on Mt. Sinai and at the Reed Sea. But as Malchiyos or Zichronos are not revelations, there is no need to counter anything.] ■

Yom Kippur & Affliction

RABBI CHAIT: Yom Kippur concerns eating the day before the fast. We learn, “One who eats the day before is considered as having fasted for 2 days,” something commendable. Judaism doesn't have the concept of affliction, which other religions value. Suffering on Yom Kippur is not the goal, rather, it is the removal from the instinctual life that Judaism values. By eating the day before, we make the fast easier; it provides the necessary strength to endure the fast in order to focus on the perfections achieved through the 5 privations and the prayers. But to pain the body, Judaism does not endorse. ■



Whom God Doesn't Punish

RABBI CHAIT: Talmud Rosh Hashanah 17a says, “One who forgoes his character has his sins overlooked.” This refers to a person who doesn't set boundaries for his friend's behavior. His friend overstepped certain boundaries of friendship and disturbed him, but he remained silent and accepted it. He recognized that his personal boundaries (likes/dislikes) are not real; only God's boundaries are real. [So he didn't act to defend himself.]

With “overlooking his sins,” the Talmud means he is not taken to task. This perfected person breaks down the human desire to “take for himself” (follow his desires), precisely what we recite during Neila, “That we forgo the oppressiveness of our hands.”

Since this person is traveling on a path towards perfection, he is not deterred by receiving punishments for his sins, which could derail his new, proper path and ruin his progress. He is traveling a path to approach God, so his course is not interrupted. This is done so he might break down the human desire for a life of physicality, which stems from the need for others not to violate his boundaries. ■

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Wondering if You'll Live-out the Year? Do this and Find Out

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

JESSIE: “R. Ami says, ‘If you want to know if you’re going to live through the year, light a lamp during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur, in a house where there’s no wind. If it continues to burn, you will complete your year’ (Horayos 12a).”

Can you provide a rational explanation so it’s not superstition [a fallacy, which is also forbidden]?

RABBI: The gemara says further, “And when you study, study adjacent to a river of water; just as the water flows, your studies will flow.” This cannot be causative outside of natural law, as nothing exists other than nature. It must mean that certain physical stimuli engender specific positive attitudes, as the Rabbis teach that a depressed person should walk in the park, as natural beauty calms one’s nature. Similarly, flowing water engenders a “steady stream” or continuity in one’s emotional state. This can apply to painting as well, not just Torah study. The uninterrupted flow naturally permeates one’s emotions. It is interesting, but this is God’s design of man: our emotions are affected in a like kind to the stimuli.

A flickering flame is akin to something alive; we describe people who passed as “extinguished.” The gemara saying that this metaphor reinforces a certain attitude during the time when we are judged for life. The person who desires life takes a measure of concern to assure the flame will not be in a windy area; thereby, reflecting his true concern to act properly during the 10 days of repentance. That is, if one takes this measure to ensure the flame remains alight, it reflects his already existing concern for life, and he must be acting properly already. But it’s a reflection, not a causative phenomenon. One who lives properly will enjoy life another year even without this flame. So this is actually different than the stream, which does engender an attitude naturally.

Thus, these phenomena can either be causative (stream), or act as a barometer (flame). Perhaps also a flame is used as it keeps one mindful of his concern, day and night. ■

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PRAYERS

What Earns Us More Life

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

To benefit at all from our lives, we must understand our Creator's intent, starting with understanding His purpose in our very existence. As Rosh Hashanna is when God determines "who lives and who dies," we are now amidst an opportune season to examine Torah and the holiday prayers to gain insight into those criteria that directly impact God's Judgment Day, and our verdict.

The prayers speak of God's "writing" and "sealing" our judgment, which take place on Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur respectively. But the prayers also include certain fundamentals for us to consider. The Men of the Great Assembly^[1] who formulated these prayers intended to grant us life by carefully recording truths that will elevate understanding of God. As Rabbi Ruben Gober stated, this in turn entitles us to be "remembered" on Rosh Hashanna, the "Day of Remembrance." Realizing these fundamentals, and following them in action, we can use the Rosh Hashanna prayers to transform ourselves to a person worthy of life. Therefore, it is advisable to pray in the language you understand, and review the prayers prior to this special day. It is also vital to pray with a minyan, so our worth in God's eyes is not solely dependent on our own deeds, but as a member of the Jewish nation. Maimonides taught, "Whomever prays with a minyan has his prayers heard regularly." Before analyzing the brief words of the New Year prayer, let's review the context in which they are intentionally placed.

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The Ata Kadosh prayer is recited three times daily all year. Ata Kadosh means, “You (God) are distinct.” “Holy” (kadosh) refers to that which is unique. We know nothing about what God is, only what He is not, and what He has performed. Even Moses did not know God’s positive essence. We admit to God’s unknowable nature with the words “Ata Kadosh.” Rabbi Israel Chait taught that this admission is necessary, and is the culmination of the preceding two prayers where we first refer to God as “God of our fathers” a familiar term. We then discuss His planned resurrection of the dead, no longer citing the familiar personalities of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but “mankind” in general. This progression from the patriarchs to the resurrection of man, intends to mature us from relating to God as a “personal” God. We culminate in Ata Kadosh, admitting we know nothing about God. This progression moves man away from viewing God as “my personal God” and viewing God objectively: for an objective view of God is more accurate, and prayer intends to perfect our ideas about God. While it is true that God guided the patriarchs, and us, specific beneficiaries do not define what God is. It is more accurate to say God helps others too (resurrection), and it is even more accurate to say He is removed from all we know, “Ata Kadosh.” Even without creation and mankind, God reserves His unique position. His greatness is independent of Creation; His capacity precedes His acts, although we cannot speak of time regarding God. His goodness for man does not make Him better. Although it was an act of great kindness to create man, this does not define God, for He is far greater, with no words that could embody that greatness. So we must not end with praising God for assisting the patriarchs, or resurrection, but we must culminate in praise

independent of those ideas. King David too ends his Psalms, calling on musical instruments to praise God, demonstrating that words cannot behold God’s true greatness. Mere sounds without words convey this amazing point, as Rabbi Chait taught.

It is crucial that we grasp one more point: praise of God is for us alone, as we cannot affect God at all, as if He possessed human qualities and enjoyed hearing our praises. All we do is solely for us, and cannot be “for God.” God’s commands are to benefit us; this is an act of great kindness. By understanding that God gains nothing from mankind, we agree that the brilliant men who formulated the prayers intended mankind to derive truths and increase our enjoyment in this life by adhering to truth and reality, and abandoning fantasy, the root of many conflicts.

Now that we understand that the Ata Kadosh prayer addresses knowledge of God, this directs us to seek greater knowledge of God offered through the Rosh Hashanna additions: truths about God that we do not yet know, or that time and distractions have obscured over the past year. We now have context. Let’s now examine the New Year’s few but potent additions to Ata Kadosh and discover its penetrating messages.

“And so too, Hashem our God, place Your fear on all of Your works, and dread on all that You created, and all Your works will fear you, and all Your creations will bow to You. And they will all band together as one group to fulfill Your will with a complete heart. As we know, Hashem our God, that dominion is Yours; might is in Your hand and strength is in Your right hand and Your awesome fame is on all that You created.”

There is only one creation in which fear and dread of God exists; that is man. All other creations are bereft of intelligence, and thus, all things except man lack fear or dread of God. Nothing else “knows” God so as to fear Him. This prayer, then, attempts to awaken man to the reality we find difficult to accept. Our egocentric predisposition wishes to deny dependence, and our mortality. These Ata Kadosh additions play a primary role on Rosh Hashanna, the day of Remembrance. For as we said: if we are to be remembered before God, we must attain a level of existence where we live as the Creator intended. Otherwise, our lives are meaningless to Him and He can terminate our existence. Our sole objective is to use our intelligence and arrive at an acute awareness and awe of the Creator, via Torah study and the study of nature. So the Sages who formulated this prayer highlighted this very need, that we become fully aware of what God means.

But they saw that man’s ego attachment makes it impossible to initiate an immediate and complete transition from egocentric life, to full subordination to this reality, that we are created and dependent beings. Therefore, they designed this prayer in two steps: 1) that as God’s “works” we first “fear” God; 2) that we “dread” God. We can’t suddenly accept we were made from nothing; this is too drastic a change in our composure. The Sages realized this, and initially referred to us as God’s “works,” still maintaining some dignity, but dependent in some measure. And they also only asked we “fear” God. Then, they said we should advance one more step, and identify ourselves truthfully, as “created from nothing.” Also, this must be accompanied by a “dread.” Dread refers to life, that is, we feel doubtful concerning our tenuous existence. This can occur only when we accept that we once did not exist, that we only exist now due to His continued will, and that God can take our life at any moment. If we see this as true, then we have arrived at the optimum state of truth, and we accept God as the King and ruler over all, including our very lives.

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This idea is then followed by man's responses: fearing and bowing to God, respective to those two stages we just mentioned. Man lives not theoretically, but if he accepts something as true, this is naturally expressed in action; i.e., fearing and bowing. This is required as a barometer of our true convictions. Similarly, one cannot be charitable in theory alone. One must give his wealth to be considered truly charitable.

Next, we pray to "band together as one group to fulfill Your will with a complete heart." This teaches that God's will is for a society, not individuals. We become perfected only when we accept others as equals. This is fundamental: God's will extends to all members of the human race, explaining why the word "all" is repeated many times, as in "place Your fear on all of Your works." Living in groups, we are forced to accept God's desire for people besides ourselves. This is part of the grand design, and a crucial element in our perfection. We now understand the term "fulfill Your will with a complete heart." A "complete heart" is a necessary statement when there is a risk that we won't be complete, but divisive. And this only occurs in a society, where one strives to maintain significance over others. This is most predominant. Who doesn't sense some envy when a peer strikes it rich, receives some award, or builds the most grandiose home? As we are to live in societies, we must be aware of divisiveness towards others, and work to eliminate it, "fulfilling Your will with a complete heart." We must treat others as we desire to be treated.

"As we know, Hashem our God, that dominion is Yours..."

The next lesson is to correct an error. When we discuss such truths, this might imply these truths are not so obvious, and this reflects poorly in our minds regarding God's fame. Rav Hai Gaon taught that the first statement in the Ten Commandments—"I am God"—could not be a command. For this would imply that God's existence is not obvious, and requires a command. Here too, we say, "As we know, Hashem our God, that dominion is Yours." We state that this knowledge is known, and "Your awesome fame is on all that You created." God's existence is an inescapable and undeniable truth. We cannot treat it as a newly found concept, for this degrades God's fame and wisdom that is most evident.



"And so also, God, give fame to the Jews..."

But God is not concerned for the Jew alone who recites these prayers. He created all mankind. Therefore the following section of this prayer asks God to promote the fame of the Jew for the sake of all other people, that they too may come to learn these truths. We ask God to give us hope. This means that he fulfills His promises to those who follow Him. For this validates the Torah, and enables hope for all others. Eloquent speech is also sought, as speech is the vehicle to teach others. And we refer to the Messiah as this is God's validation of Torah to the highest degree, that He delivers His ultimate promise for mankind...an era where all nations will abandon their falsehoods and impostor gods, and will accept Torah.

"And so also, let the righteous people see and rejoice...and let all evil vanish like smoke"

Following this section, we describe the righteous people who will exult and sing. This is done, as man requires an example that human perfection is attainable. Talmud teaches that in Abraham's days, his peers doubted his perfection, as they required justification for their own sins. "Abraham isn't so great" they said. "He might have followed God up to this point, but he would not sacrifice his son, if God asked." His peers degraded Abraham, for had Abraham been perfect in all areas; they would not be able to justify their own lustful lives. The Talmud scripts a discussion where God "pleads" with Abraham to fulfill one last test, to sacrifice Isaac. God

doesn't plead, but pleading means it was essential for mankind that a perfected individual fully adhere to God's word. Such an example of complete devotion to God is required to teach man that Torah is attainable. Thus, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. We now understand why this Torah section is a theme of these awesome days.

The concept of the righteous people "singing" conveys their conviction. When one believes in the greatness of another person or group, he cheers or sings as an expression of his convictions becoming realized. For this reason, the Jews sang praises to God their savior upon the shores of the Reed Sea.

This section concludes with the vanishing of sin, since we see righteous people living without sin, we hope and pray this empowers all others to follow their lead.

"And You God, reign alone...in Jerusalem"

Next, we pray that God reigns alone. We ask this, as man's insecurities do not let up; he fabricates imagined powers and forces to protect and provide for him. Man is superstitious; his emotions overpower him, despite the absolute absence of any evidence for assumed powers. Those of you who still believe in segulas, that the Western Wall assists your prayers, amulets, red bendels, or any assumed power other than God, must focus on these words: "God reigns alone." Although abstract and never seen, God is real, while assumed powers are false and therefore are prohibited. This prayer asks man to live intelligently and accept God alone as the

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feel; feet, but do not walk; they do not make a peep from their throat. The who fashioned these gods are just like them; all those that trust in them. (Psalms 115)

All other religions are bereft of any defense for their beliefs. Only in Torah and Jewish history is there clear evidence of God. This must resonate with you.

God's judgment of every person on Rosh Hashanna forces us to accept the reality that He is the only God. Rabbi Chait taught that we always praise God's "name" alone, and never praise Him. This is because we cannot know what He truly is. All we know is His name. But this too, is our admission of how far above man is the Creator.

Summary

We must appreciate the efforts of these Sages who drafted our prayers. This prayer alone reflects the tremendous wisdom and benefits they desired to share with all generations. They sought to offer each one of us the best lot in life. How many days and weeks they must have spent weighing each word, ensuring no important concept was overlooked. Realizing this, we might now approach all other prayers with the sense that great wisdom waits to be discovered.

I hope this analysis inspires you to treat all prayers with a renewed respect, and even awe. And if we are awed by men, how much more must we be awed by God, in front of Whom we stand in dread as He inscribes our fate.

May we all use the brief hours in shul this Rosh Hashanna to arrive at a clear understanding of our status as created things, but primarily, God's position as Creator and the only power in the universe. With this realization, may God will us to enjoy another year of health, happiness and success in all areas.

A happy New Year to all. ■

sole source of power for Whom we have evidence and Torah's testimony, abandoning all other beliefs that offer no evidence.

In this prayer, why do we ask God to reign on the Temple Mount, on the land of Israel and in Jerusalem? First of all, this validates God's promise of Israel to Abraham, and thereby validates the Torah. Secondly, it denies all other religions as true, as God reigns only in Israel. All other assumed gods are thereby exposed as false. It is for this reason that this prayer concludes with the statement "there is no other God besides You." God and His unity are inextricably bound together. "God" means the "One" Who made the entire universe. He made it alone. All else, by definition, are creations. There is but one Creator.

"You are unique and Your name is awesome"

Finally, we mention that God is one, by citing the verse, "Master of legions will be lofty in judgment." How does judgment convey God's exclusive reign as they only power in the universe?

Throughout history, there was only one

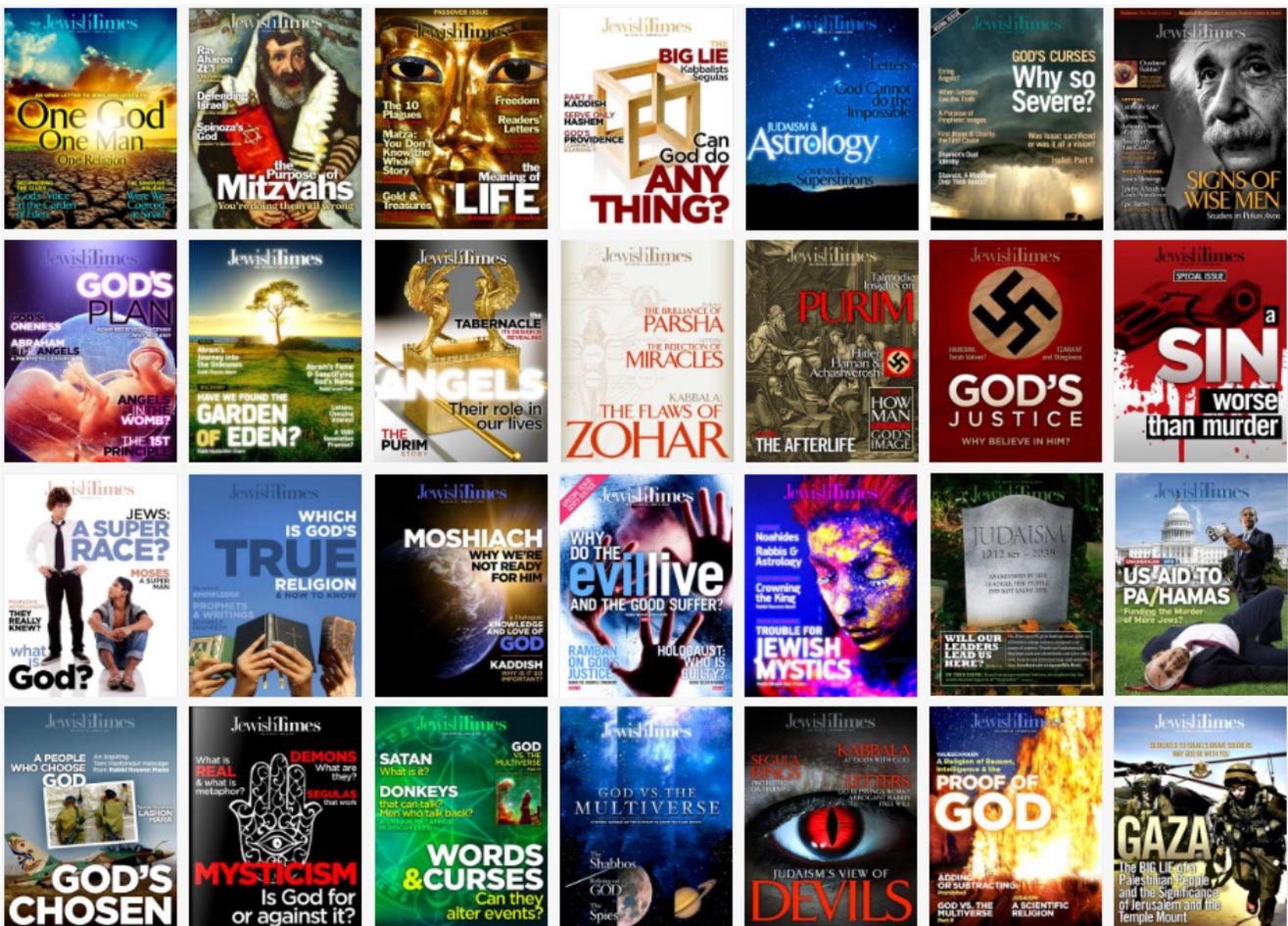
God who responded to his people's cries. God protects the righteous Jews. He performed miraculous victories over our enemies. Both testify to the only true living God. Egypt's idols were defenseless during the Plague of the Firstborn, where God destroyed their idols. Their stone gods could not protect them and all others from any plague. God's judgment teaches His omniscience and omnipotence. He knows who is righteous and who sins. He rewards and punishes each member of mankind. History attests to this, so much so, that Islam and Christianity could not deny the entire Torah. Therefore they cannibalized Judaism, and transformed it as it pleased their agendas. No other nation claims miracles were witnessed, that their gods acted as gods. No evidence exists defending alien gods as possessing any power, or even life. They are all inanimate stone and metal statues:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have a mouth but do not speak; they have eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear; they have a nose but do not smell. Hands, but they do not

[1] The Men of the Great Assembly or Anshei Knesset HaGedolah, also known as the Great Synagogue was an assembly of 120 scribes, sages, and prophets, in the period from the end of the prophets since the early Second Temple period to the early Hellenistic period.

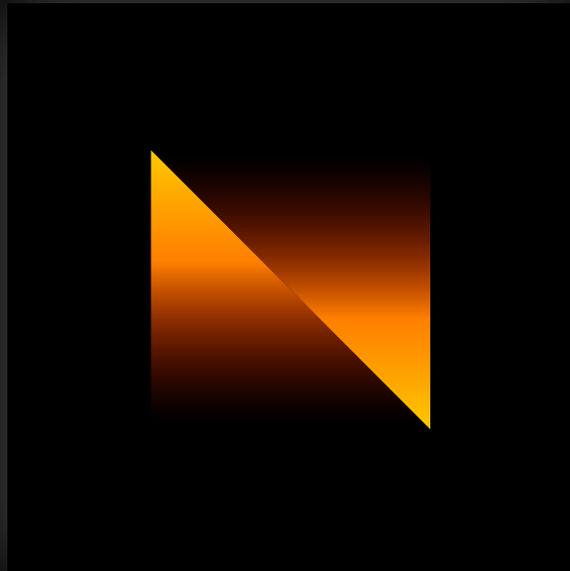
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CONDÉ NAST



Worse than Punishment

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Ki Tavo, contains the section known as the Tochecha (Rebuke). This is one of the most disturbing and seemingly incomprehensible chapters of the Torah. It lays out in excruciating detail the punishments that will befall the Jews if they should abandon the Torah and thereby repudiate the Covenant that Hashem has made with them.

The Jews are a unique People unlike any other. They have been separated from the family of nations to be the special "inheritance of Hashem." Their mission is to be the emissaries of the Creator to lead the world to a proper recognition and service of Hashem.

To facilitate this, Hashem entrusted the Jews with His Torah. They were obliged to guard, study and fulfill the commandments and thereby elevate themselves to an exalted spiritual level. They would thus become a "light unto the nations" who would seek to emulate their moral and ethical behavior.

The practical fate of the Jews is not dependent only on the laws of nature. Rather it is intricately connected to their observance of Hashem's laws. Thus they will be bountifully rewarded for their sincere observance of the Mitzvot. And they will be seriously punished for disobedience to the dictates of Hashem.

Thus it is not surprising that Moshe, in his final address to his People, sets forth for them the afflictions that will come upon them for rejection of the commandments. What is difficult to comprehend is the extent of the punishments that Moshe warns us against. Indeed they seem to be "cruel and unusual" far exceeding any wrongdoings the Jews may have committed.

For we know that G-d only punishes with love. As the Rabbis assert, "The one whom Hashem loves does He

rebuke." This clearly implies that when Hashem punishes someone it is for the sake of causing him to improve his ways. It therefore follows that the afflictions are "measure for measure" i.e. geared to and in accordance with the transgressions that brought them about. They are carefully calibrated setbacks which cause the recipient to reflect upon his wrongdoings and correct them.

Accordingly, it would not make sense that the blows should be so massive as to overwhelm the sinner and render him helpless. A good illustration can be found in the story of King David who erred in conducting an illegitimate census of the nation. In doing this he brought down on the People a Divine punishment.

King David was given a choice of three punishments, famine, military defeat or a plague. David regarded all three as severe but chose a plague because, "let me fall into the Hands of Hashem for his mercies are great but let me not fall into the hands of man." Subsequently G-d took mercy on the people and halted the angel of destruction.

Yet that sense of mercy does not shine forth in the Tochecha. It seems to go on and on and get worse and worse. Indeed we are warned, "Then Hashem will make thy suffering and the suffering of thy children extraordinary, great and lasting sufferings, and dire and lingering illnesses. Moreover every illness and every plague which is not written in this book Hashem will bring up upon you until you are destroyed." Why is it that in the case of King David the punishment is diminished but in the Parsha before us it seems to be amplified and magnified?

Perhaps this can be explained on the assumption of two distinct types of situation. In the case of King David there was no desire on behalf of the People to break away entirely from the Covenant. There was a particular

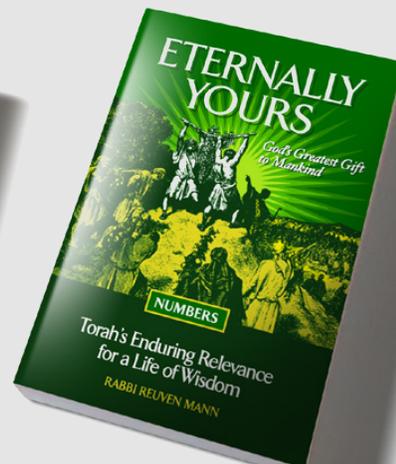
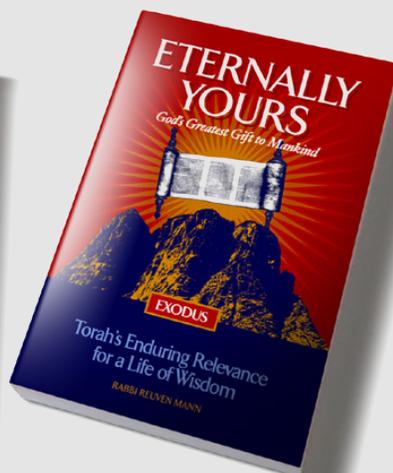
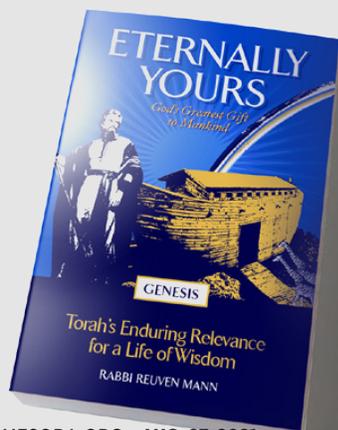
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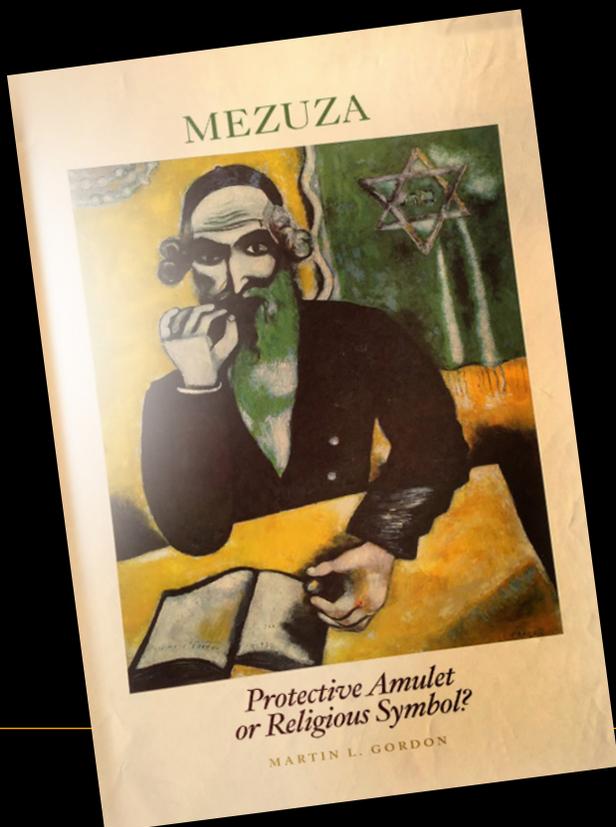
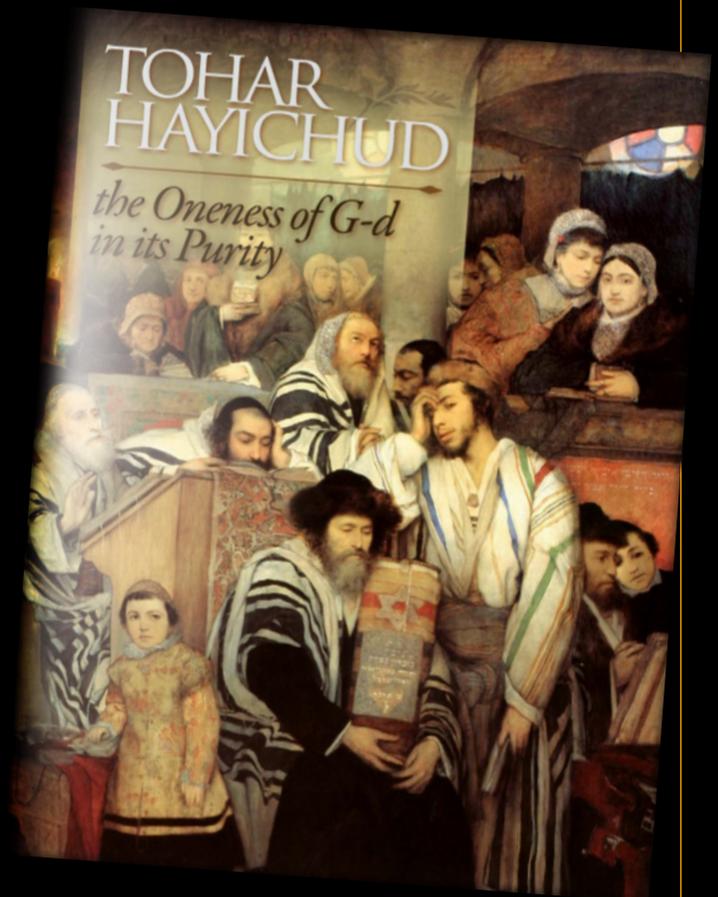


2 MUST READS THIS SUMMER

Tohar Hayihud is a masterpiece of intelligent Torah thought. The Rabbi cites authentic Torah sources, Rishonim and great minds who, over the centuries, have rejected Kabbala's claims as contrary to Torah.

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Mezuzah: Protective Amulet or Religious Symbol? addresses the popular belief in segulahs and protective devices. Martin L. Gordon refers to Torah and reason as the authorities on true Jewish concepts.

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“Look from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our fathers” (Deut 26:15).

One of Judaism's 13 principles is Reward and Punishment: God's blessings in response to our Torah adherence and His corrective measures for our disobedience. Nothing more is needed to earn reward than to live properly. Therefore, we wonder why in Deuteronomy 26:15, Moses tells the Jews that after bringing their first fruits and tithes that they should ask God to "look from heaven and bless the Jews and the land." Fulfilling the first fruit offerings and tithes alone should earn the Jews reward, without verbalizing this request for God's blessings. But there's a danger one faces after working the ground for a number of years. A person follows natural law to produce crops. This extended engagement in natural agricultural activities poses the threat of one forgetting about from where his sustenance truly emanates. One might be misled that the harvested bounty is a purely natural phenomenon. Therefore Moses tells the Jews that after this extended involvement in planting and reaping year after year that the Jews should not trust in the land, but in God who "resides in heaven." This is why in this verse, "heaven" is contrasted to "land." In a single verse contrasting heaven to earth, Moses made the Jews compare natural law with God's providence, their true source of sustenance. We conclude that this request is not for the purpose of receiving reward, that we earn by our upright actions. This request is a precautionary measure against the pitfall of viewing everything as natural, without God's providence. ■

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- Pharaoh's Lying Astrologers
- Managing Setbacks
- Astrology
- Bashert

FUNDAMENTALS

- Proof of God from Sinai
- Who/What is God?
- How Judaism Differs
- Mesopotamia's 13 Principles
- Rules for Accepting Truths
- What is the Big Bang?
- What is the Bible?
- What is the Afterlife?

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" (Eccl. 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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Isaac: The Strongest Patriarch?

Rabbi Leib Moshe Abarbanel



On the second day of Rosh HaShana we read of the Binding of Isaac (Akadias Yitzchak) (Genesis 22). I find Issac the most difficult of the forefathers to understand and identify with. He always seemed to be a stop gap between Avraham and Yaacov. He lived only in the land of Israel and followed the literal path his father traveled. When he arrived at wells his father dug, Isaac found the local people sealed them up. One is amazed by the hatred idolaters have for a monotheist. These wells gave them water. But instead of utilizing them, they sealed them (to reject Abraham's monotheism). Isaac unsealed the wells. During the famine he traveled south to Gerar as his father did. We are not given to see much conflict or insight except for the Akadia.

On top of this, Chazal tell us that Avraham represents chessed (kindness), Isaac represents gevura (strength) and Yaakov represents tiferes (beauty) [Noam Elimelech, Sefer Shemot, Beshalach 3:2].

When I think of strength I would think of Avraham. We are told of his courage in the Medresh and in Torah. The Rambam describes at length Avraham's intellectual strength in searching and seeking the One True Deity (Mishneh Torah, Hil. Avoda Zara 1.2 and 1.3). He stood up to his father, the entire society and ultimately King Nimrod. Avraham never waivers, whom they all ridiculed for believing and preaching of God who did not answer him. Even when Nimrod threatened him with death, Avraham stood firm. He faced the test of the fiery furnace with courage.

Avraham also displayed strength and bravery after the 5 kings kidnapped his nephew Lot (Genesis 14). He gathered his men and those people with whom he made alliances and chased down the 5 kings to rescue his nephew, even risking his own life.

But Issac, where do we find his strength? I would venture to say in Judaism that strength is not just bravery, but the conquest of inner fears: one's

emotions. Ben Zoma states in Ethics of Our Fathers (4:1), "Who is strong? He who subdues his personal inclination, as it is said 'He who is slow to anger is better than the strong man, and a master of passions is better than a conqueror of a city.'" I would like to suggest that personal inclination includes many types of internal struggles such as people who have been wronged in a very grievous manner, and people who suffered betrayal of loved ones or even feel the Almighty betrayed them.

I would like to propose that Issac is the ultimate survivor. In Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's book Abraham's Journey (pages 7-18) he proposes an idea based on the Ramban (Genesis 12.6) and Chazal that the story of our forefathers should be understood on two levels. The first as the men and women themselves: their struggles and successes. The second way to analyze their lives as a blueprint of future events, "מעשה אבות סימן לבנים." The Rav proposes that the binding of Issac was a test for Avraham akin to the Holocaust in the last generation. How would Avraham face and survive genocide of his only son? Without the analysis of the Rav I would not have proposed the following concept. Issac was a survivor of genocide. Add to the event it was his father directed by the Almighty. This would give anyone a challenge to remain faithful. A typical reaction would cause massive doubt in a person's mind.

What type of Deity could allow such an event? Even worse, that the Almighty commanded it? How could such a betrayal be allowed? Why me? But we see Issac did not fall prey to this thinking. He remained steadfast in his dedication to understanding the Creator and his wisdom. He followed in his fathers footsteps both physically and philosophically. Following in his fathers footsteps, Isaac opened the wells and started teaching the Ethical Monotheism of his father. The travels helped Isaac heal. At the end of his travels (Genesis 26:25) it states "[Isaac] built an altar there and called in God's name." Isaac overcame any doubt and continued the teaching of his father.

More potential examples can be found of Issac's great survival ability. When looking at Rashi (Genesis 21:9) he explains the cryptic language in the Torah of "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had born to Avraham making sport (mitzachaik)." What happened between the children? Rashi explains that Ishmael attempted to murder him. Again we see the Gevura of Issac, he did not succumb to victimhood. These types of abuse against a child can cause such havoc in their ability to live normal productive lives. It can destroy a person's relations with the Creator. Issac's survival skills, both physically and metaphysically, may make him the strongest forefather.

Thank God we are not the generation of the Holocaust, but we can still learn from Issac to master our inner doubts and challenges and improve our relationship with the Almighty. ■

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