

JewishTimes

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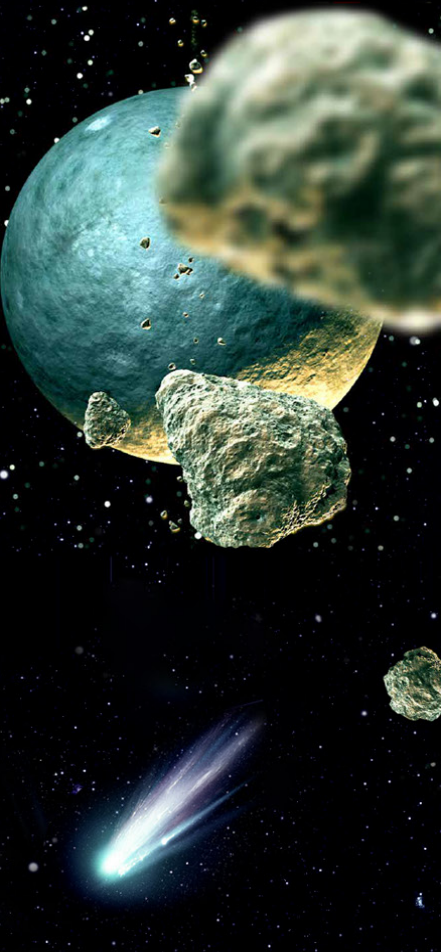
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God says His permanent nature is associated with descendants of monotheists.

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Proving Sinai: Circular Reasoning?

READER: I was intrigued by Rabbi Chait's article proving the validity of the Torah based on mass revelation. In trying to understand the proof of Rabbi Chait, I was confused on a few points. Firstly, how do we know that 600,000 people saw the event? The logic for that fact seems circular- we trust the document as a

historical fact because so many people witnessed an event in it, yet the very proof in how we know so many people saw the event, is from the document itself! Is it possible that Moses claimed 600,000 people saw an event and exaggerated the number? (Not that the claim is completely false). Secondly, I am

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troubled by the fact that the revelation is in no way a "clear" representation of God. At best it resembles a volcano, or some sort of primitive speaker system. Is it possible that Moses was able to induce a volcano, or use echo to put on an impressive display that the people believed was God? Thirdly, (and most basically) if this is such an undeniable fact, why does most of the world not accept the revelation as fact? Thanks for your time, ES

RABBI: Let us define "circular reasoning": a person claims his diploma as authentic and offers his diploma as proof. Here, the "proof" is equal to the object he attempts to prove. This is circular reasoning. To validate his diploma, external support is required, such as records at the institution of his claimed attendance, or similar external proof. Validation must be external to that which one desires to validate. For example, if one tells airport security to accept his word that he is who he says he is, that would be circular as well. A passport proves an identity. The passport is external to the person, and is a valid proof. What about history? How can we prove it? If one wishes to use a book as proof, it would appear this too is circular reasoning. However, there is one major difference: the verification of any historical account is the oral transmission, not the book. Provided the account is universally identical, accepted by masses, and describes intelligible phenomena, the story must be true. There is no possible means by which a universally identical history would be orally transmitted and arrive in our hands today, had these factors not been present at the time of that event at hand. For example, one could not successfully convince others of explosions on the George Washington Bridge at rush hour, unless they actually occurred. Too many witnesses would deny a fabrication, and no one but the perpetrator would promote the fallacy. The story would never succeed, and certainly, not be recorded in history. History derives its validation from unanimous oral transmission. This is why Revelation at Sinai is not circular reasoning: its universal acceptance of a single history is its proof. It is not accepted based on a textbook. We thereby know that those Jews all descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they were



enslaved for 210 years in Egypt wherein they witness 10 amazing plagues, we know God split the Reed Sea when pursued by the Egyptian army, we know that 600,000 (men above 20 – approx. 2 million total) attended Sinai 3335 years ago and they witnessed intelligence emanating from a fiery mountain, we are told of all the lineage, we are told of their travels both before, and afterwards. This unanimous single history combined with the absence of any other Jewish history tells us this event took place, with no doubt.

Your second question is how do we know that it was God who was responsible for the event. The story records that the people heard the "sound of words" emanating from the fire. Well, what causes intelligent sounds, i.e., words? We know that on Earth, man alone speaks. But man cannot coexist in fire, let alone, speak intelligent words. Therefore, what caused

these words cannot be a biological organism, as such a creature would perish, and certainly, the creature would be seen. But the story also records that "...no form did you see, only a voice." This too forms part of the unanimous transmission.

I will quote a few sources to show how clearly the people understood this: In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses recalls that event: (4:12) "And God spoke to you from inside the fire, a voice of words did you hear, and no form did you see, only a voice", (4:16) "And be exceedingly careful regarding your souls, for you did not see any form the day God spoke to you in Horeb from inside the fire", (4:33) "Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from inside the fire, and survived, as you have?" (4:36) "From the heavens He made heard His voice to train you, and on Earth He showed you His great fire, and His words you heard from inside the fire", (5:4) "Face to face, God spoke with you on the mountain from inside the fire", (5:19) "These matters God spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain from inside the fire...", (5:21) "...and you said 'and His voice we heard from inside the fire!'", (5:23) "For who of all flesh has heard the voice of the living God speaking from inside the fire, and survived, as us?", (9:10) "And God gave to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and upon them, as all the words that God spoke with you on the mountain from inside the fire on the day of the assembly."

The One who created the laws governing fire, i.e., the Creator, must be responsible for this event, and he alone possesses the ability to talk unaffected from amidst flames. Your final question was why, if so evidently true, does most of the world not accept this event. But isn't the reverse in fact what we see? Even other religions have held onto our Torah containing this event, unedited. Although they sin by adding onto God's words, they are bound by historical proof, and do not alter this account, or others. Their promulgation of our Torah evidences the undeniable nature of the events contained in the Torah.

Sinai, and all events in the Torah have successfully been transmitted, as they actually happened. This reality should be so amazing to our minds. We should be excited to discover what ideas the Creator of the universe desires to impart to us in the rest of His Torah. ■

“Upon finishing speaking with him on Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the two tablets of the treaty, stone tablets written with **the finger of God.**” (Exod. 31:18).

What is GOD?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Onkelos translates “finger of God” literally. That’s simply astonishing. Maimonides agrees:

[Onkelos held] the [finger] was an instrument created by God, 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 [that only this feat required an instrument]? (Maimonides: “Guide for the Perplexed,” book I chap lxvi)

God has no physicality; He has no fingers. Therefore, Onkelos’ literal translation requires an explanation. Maimonides understands Onkelos’ literal translation of “finger of God” as referring to “instrument,” meaning that God created the writing on tablets through an instrument. But even that, Maimonides finds difficult, for why should this miracle of the tablets’ writing be any more difficult

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

than other miracles, thereby requiring an instrument, as opposed to God simply “willing” it to be, just as He willed the universe to be? “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” indicates God can will anything to occur, without requiring an instrument! However, Onkelos does not say “instrument” but uses the word “finger.” So we don’t have to resort to Maimonides’ explanation.

Onkelos might have retained Torah’s “finger of God” literally for another meaning. Perhaps he means that these tablets are unique among all other physical phenomena: they embody an optimal degree of design, where nature literally formed words, the 10 commands. “Fingers” are man’s best tools for precision activity, specifically writing. Natural law cannot produce such fine-tuned phenomenon like a stone bearing sentences or clouds forming words, or even letters. Natural design includes a level of chaos: rising smoke does not follow a fixed path, no two trees have the exact same branch structure, height or width, ink splashed on a wall has no design nor forms any image. Therefore, legible script naturally formed within sapphire tablets is as astonishing as cutting open a tree, and instead of seeing rings inside the trunk, text is found.

The tablets’ high degree of precision natural law not found elsewhere throughout the universe, earns a term “the finger of God.” Thus, Onkelos is not saying that God needed an instrument. Onkelos means that God’s use of “finger of God” euphemistically conveys this miracle’s unparalleled nature, deserving that phrase. This explanation resolves Maimonides’ question on Onkelos. And those tablets must have been astonishing. Imagine pouring water on the ground and the puddle forms a sentence. The tablets’ writing made the same impression.

But the obvious question is this: What demanded this aberration in nature, namely, naturally-formed text? What is God’s underlying message?

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that the first tablets with this amazing script allowed man to study God as “God of creation.” God naturally formed both tablets, and their writing. The second set of tablets Moses hewed artificially from the quarry, and only subsequently, God engraved the commands on them. The second set did not offer a study of God as “God of creation,” but as “God the giver of Torah.” How do the first tablets teach “God of creation,” and the second tablets teach “God as the giver of Torah?”

The reason why only the first tablets enabled man to view God as creator was precisely due to the amazing script appearing internally in the sapphire bricks: “Thereupon Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the treaty, tablets written on both their sides: from this side and that side they were written” (Exod. 32:15). From any angle, the viewer could see the insides of the translucent sapphire bricks bearing the commands. He would immediately grasp that the creator of sapphire—and the entire physical universe—has a will for man: these commands. That is “knowing God as creator”: knowing His role as creator of Earth is integrally tied to His will for man. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



Knowing who the creator is demands knowledge of His will for man. If one is ignorant of God's will for man, one's idea of God is wrong. Thus, to "know the creator" means to know the creator and His will. What is His will?

The first tablets teach the most fundamental principle: creation was made by the will of the first Being...His "will" is undeniably expressed through His commands inside the sapphire. The universe is not merely a "shadow" or an accidental result of God's existence. No, the universe is God's planned will for man. More than all else in the universe, natural formed commands share this lesson in such a clear and unambiguous manner. So vital is this to our understanding of who God is, that Talmud teaches when God created Adam, He gave him a command. This means that creation included the message that Earth's purpose—a planet for man—exists for man to perceive God and subjugate himself to Him. Our definition of God must be that not only is He the creator, but that He created in order that His wisdom embedded in the creation be appreciated. He did not create a simplified world, but a world full of intricate science and marvels at every corner. Merely knowing that God is solely responsible for all creation is not a sufficient understanding of God: we must also know His will. And His will is expressed in the first tablets.

Those first tablets embody creation, and human directives, thereby teaching they are inseparable, as is our understanding of God. When asked who God is, our response must be, "God is the sole creator Who intends intelligent beings to recognize Him."

(The second tablets merely had commands etched up on them, which does not teach this lesson.)

In conclusion, as the case of Adam conveys, there was never a stage of human existence bereft of God's commands. And Earth's purpose is for man to study God. Torah commences with creation and Sabbath, which the rabbis teach was the goal of creation: physical creation presents man with God's wisdom in every corner of the universe. The goal of Sabbath is man's withdrawal from physical activity redirected towards contemplation on the Creator. That means physical creation has a goal of intellectual activity...acceptance of God.

Again, God is not simply the creator: "I am your God who took you out of Egypt...in order to be your God" stated throughout Torah. God created so that intelligent beings recognize Him.

"For I am God, I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be" (Malachi 3:6). Here, God says His permanent nature is associated with the descendants of monotheists.

What is God?

"God is the sole creator Who intends intelligent beings to recognize Him." ■



3

Weeks

TRAGEDIES



RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Transcribed by a student

Maimonides discusses the luchos. He refers to Onkelos' literal understanding of the "finger of God": "Upon finishing speaking with him on Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the two tablets (luchos) of the treaty, stone tablets inscribed through the finger of God" (Exod. 31:18). Maimonides questions Unkelos:

[Onkelos held] the [finger] was an instrument created by God, 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? [that only here was an instrument required] (Guide, book I chap lxvi)

What is the significance of the use or no use of an instrument? The second luchos were created by an instrument as God told Moshe

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

“Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered” (Exod. 34:1). So unlike the first set, the second set were created through an instrument. But the first set were made through a natural act of creation (Avos 5:6). Apparently, the first set that were Maaseh Bereishis meant something. It meant that the nation of Israel could accept upon themselves God and Torah (mikabale malchus shamayim) through the study of creation. It was a broad acceptance through seeing His creation.

Originally the Jews were to accept God through Maaseh Bereishis. But due to the sin of the Gold Calf they were no longer fit for that. They were then reduced to accepting God as the one who gave man Torah, no longer able to accept God through Maaseh Bereishis. It was an inferior acceptance. Moses broke the first tablets indicating the loss of accepting God as creator.

That's why Maimonides these insists that the first luchos were Maaseh Bereishis. The second luchos were an acceptance of God as an instructor, but not as the creator.

Now the Jews would be recognizing God is the giver of Torah, but ultimately they were to recognize God through the creation. This is why the fragments of the first set were placed in the ark, to convey that the ultimate objective is seeing God as creator.

The luchos were placed in the ark, and the ark was in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. What is the essence of temple/tabernacle? Ramban says the main part of temple is the place for the resting of God's Shechinah, which is the ark: “And I will meet you there from on top of the kaporess (the ark's cover)” (Exod. 25:22). This is the primary place of temple's sanctity.

This explains something else, a significant point: Yalkut Shimoni says when Moshe received the command to create the temple, Moshe was confused. He didn't understand the command. Why? Because he said the same thing King Solomon said:

“The heavens and the heavens of heavens cannot contain you, certainly [not] this temple!” (Kings 1, 8:27). God replied to Moshe: “It is not as you think. I will speak to you from between the two cherubs on top of the ark. I will contract (mitzamtzame) My shechina. Do you think that I will occupy space? That's impossible.” The temple cannot contain God, as the rabbis say, “God is the place of the world and the world is not His place” (Pesikta Rabbati 21:1).

What is meant by, “My shechina will be between the two cherubs?” Samuel II 6:2 says:

Then David and all the troops that were with him set out from Baalim of Judah to bring up from there the Ark of God to which the Name was attached, the Name Lord of Hosts Enthroned on the Cherubim.

Rashi says, “The Ark is called a name, and what is the name? The name of Adonoy of Hosts was upon it.” The ark was involved in the name. Because the “name of God Lord of hosts dwelling over the cherubs” is on it. That's how the ark is involved with the name. Chronicles has an identical quote as above. This means that there is a name of God in the temple that is not in a written form. But it is produced by the phenomena of the “dwelling” of the shechina between the two cherubs. [That “dwelling” is] the phenomenon of the prophecy that Moshe received from between the two cherubs, that place is called “the name of God.” That place has kedushas hashame. It is not that God is dwelling there, but it is the name, the shame Hashem. That's Ramban's meaning.

This means the same as the midrash where God replies to Moshe: “Shall I contract My shechina? Not like you think that it is inside the tabernacle, but in an even smaller place, in between the two cherubs.” God told Moshe, “There I will meet with you, and I will speak to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark” (Exod. 25:22). “Contracting” of His

Shechinah means that God appears to us through tabernacle and temple as the source of Torah. That is a contraction, tzimtzum. We have the right to relate to God as the one who dwells over the cherubs. Normally there's no reality to God “dwelling over the cherubs.” But since the Jews can't relate to God through Maaseh Bereishis—creation—God said, “I will be known as the source of Torah.” It's enough for a person to relate to God as the source of Torah, even though we cannot deny that God is the “place of the world”—Creator. That's the sanctity of temple, kedushas mikdash, the source of Torah.

There is a difference between the two sets of tablets. Through understanding God through his Torah—the second tablets—one will eventually understand God through the creation—the first tablets. This is why the fragments of the first tablets are placed along side the second tablets in the ark.

We started out asking why the breaking of the first tablets did not form grounds to establish a fast day. Breaking the tablets would be grounds, but only if it meant that man no longer realized God through creation.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork” (Psalms 19:2). Regarding Abraham, Torah says *“Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the God of the world”* (Gen. 21:33). Abraham taught people about God through the creation. Therefore, the breaking of the first tablets which remove man from knowledge of God via creation did not generate a fast. This is because there was still a way back to that knowledge of God through creation. That pathway back was the “name of God that dwelled above the cherubs” (knowledge of God through Torah). But once the temple was destroyed, then the vehicle of knowledge God was completely obliterated, and a fast day was established. That was the ultimate loss of the first tablets. ■

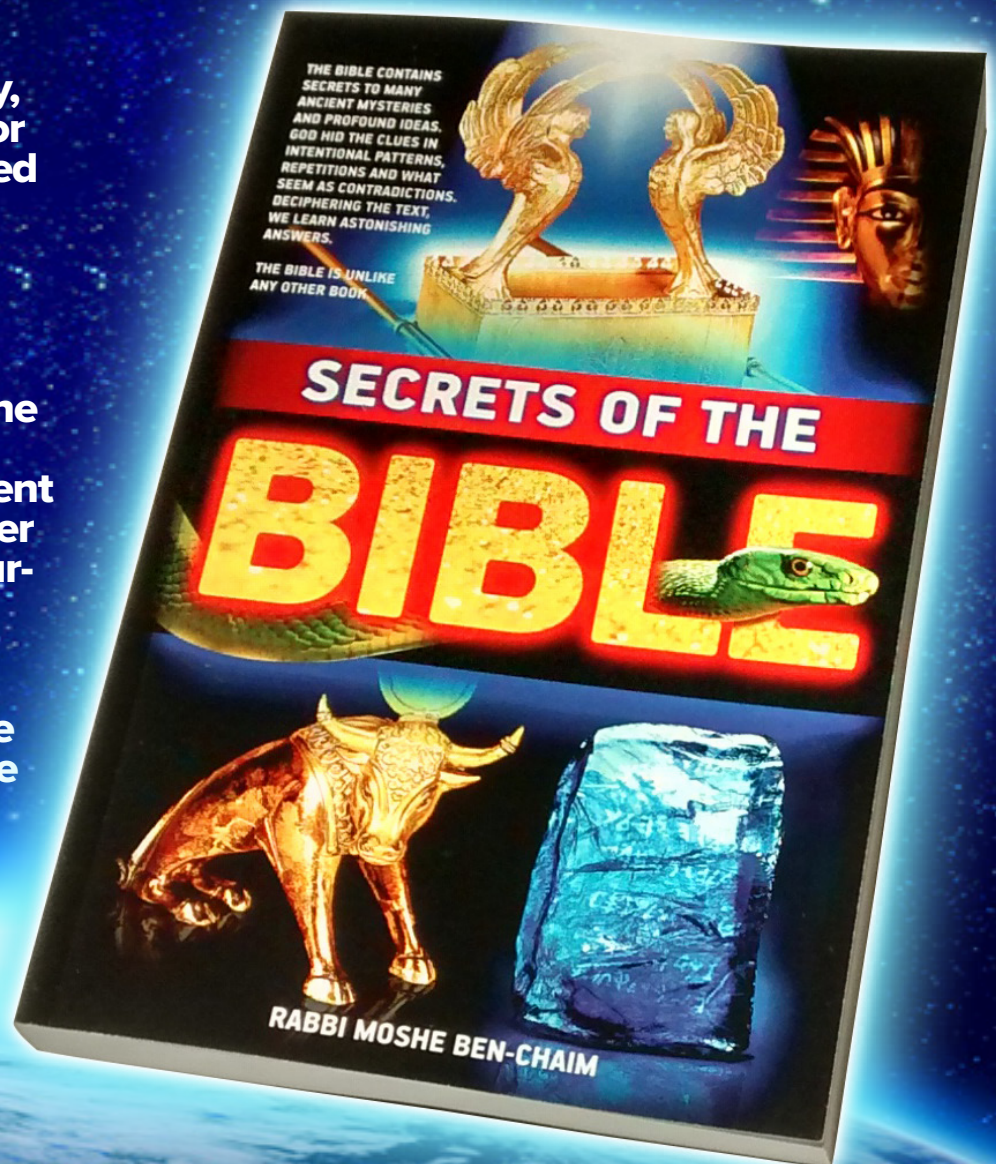
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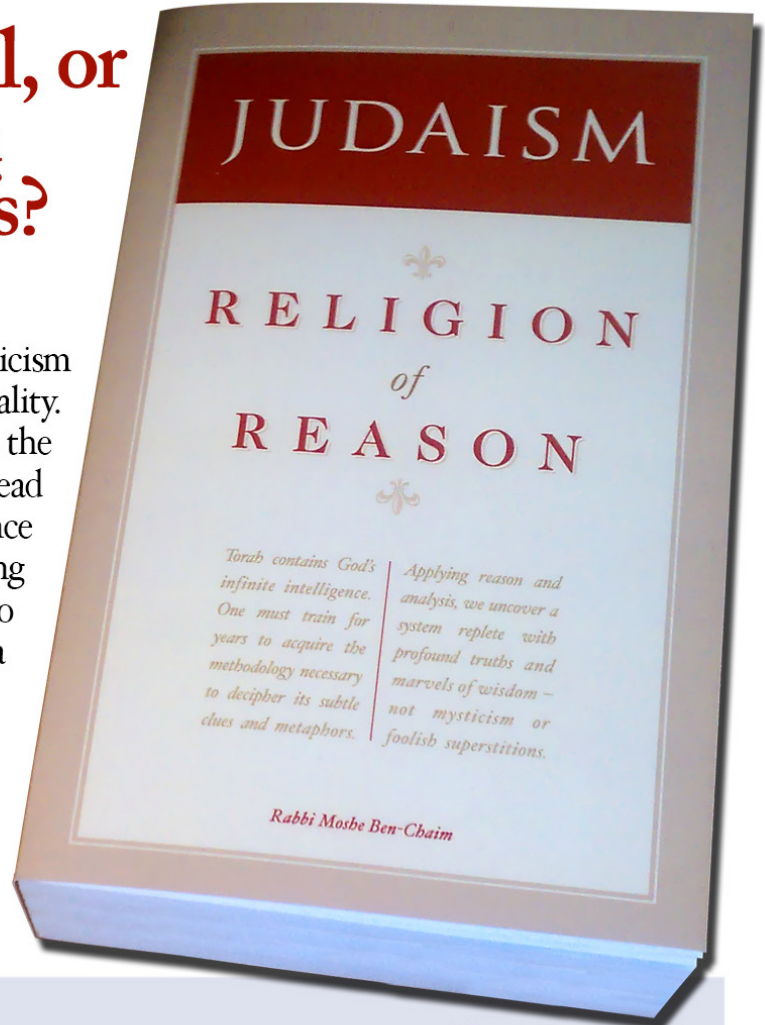
Book Reviews

Rabbi Reuven Mann — *Rabbi of Young Israel of Phoenix*
Rabbi Steven Weil — *CEO, Friends of the IDF*

Judaism: mystical, or rational based on reason and proofs?

by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Jews have succumbed to mysticism and pop-kabbala, in place of rationality. Ten years in the making, the author cites the Rabbis, unveiling the fallacy of widespread beliefs. He focuses on Torah's brilliance and method of decryption; unraveling metaphors and interpreting texts to reveal hidden gems. Readers will enjoy a long overdue, rational exposé of cultural beliefs, and a unique look at Torah's deep insights.



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Can God do Anything?
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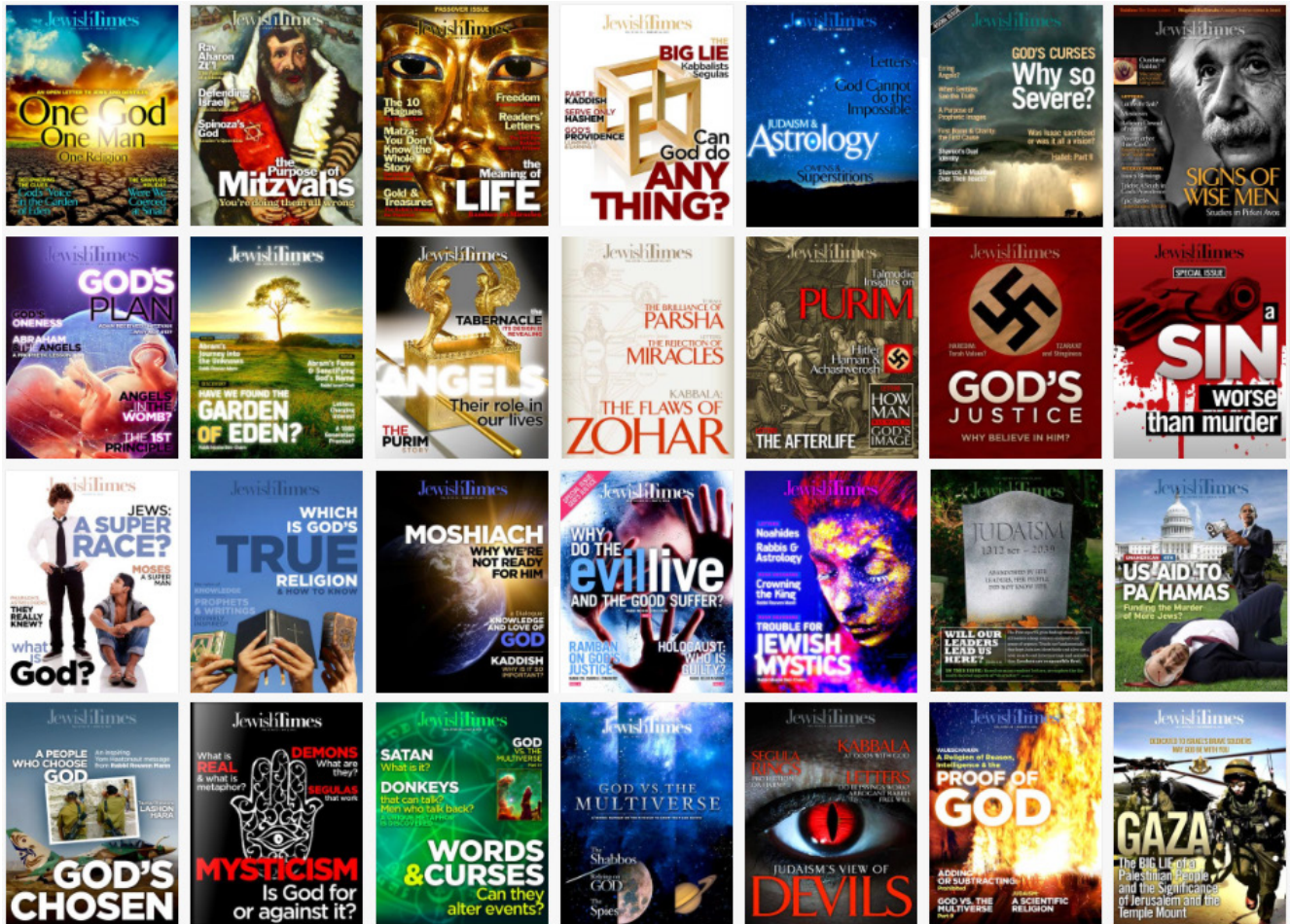
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The age of the universe
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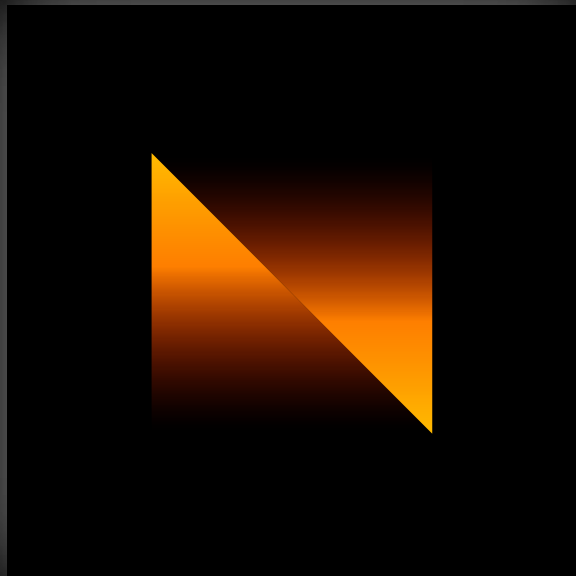
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CONDÉ NAST



Moses' Legacy

Rabbi Reuven Mann

Parshat Devarim initiates the fifth and final Book of the Torah, Deuteronomy (known in Hebrew as Devarim). It is unique and different from the other Books of the Torah, in that they are written in the third person while here, Moses addresses the Jews primarily in the first person. Moses spoke these words as his career and life were coming to an end. In effect, they constitute his farewell addresses to the Jewish People. As such, they are unique in the annals of similar orations by departing leaders. That is because they are completely devoted to the moral and intellectual needs of the people. Moses does not indulge any personal motivations that leaders might have as they depart from the scene. He is focused exclusively on

transmitting words of enlightenment and inspiration to the Jews. His primary concern is the perpetuation of the Torah way of life after his departure. The most consequential virtue of Moses was his supreme humbleness. He had no desire for personal glory, and had argued with God vigorously to be excused from assuming the leadership of the Jewish People. He, in fact, protested so much that God displayed anger and Moses was, thus, coerced into assuming the position that Hashem had earmarked for him. Moses' tenure as leader was extremely bumpy. True, there were exalted moments, such as the gathering of the entire Nation at Mount Sinai for the Divine Revelation. The national collaboration in donating the materials

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

and craftsmanship necessary to the successful construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was another glorious experience. However, there were numerous moments of despair. On two separate occasions, Moses was confronted with a great calamity which threatened the continued existence of the nation: the sins of the Golden Calf and of the Spies, which brought forth Divine wrath and a threat to annihilate the Jews and start a new nation out of Moses.

Characteristically, Moses refused this great honor. He had become so committed to the Jewish People he had led forth out of Egypt that Moses asked God to “erase me from the Book that you have written” (Exodus, 32:32) if He were to terminate the existence of the Jewish Nation.

Moses’ absolute dedication to the Jewish People can be seen in his final communications to them. In his lengthy address, he concentrated on two areas: elucidation of the mitzvot (commandments) and exhortation to embrace the fundamental beliefs and ideals of Judaism. That dual purpose explains why he spoke in his own words. The original communication of the mitzvot were the exact words of Hashem and were therefore formal and abstract. Yet, however important those teachings were, they did not suffice. The great teacher cannot just repeat the words of others, however perfect they may be. He needs to reformulate and express them in terms that will make the proper impact on the minds and hearts of his audience.

Because of this principle, Moses is depicted here as “elucidating” the words of the Torah. Moses had a grasp and penetrating understanding of the mitzvot that no other teacher ever attained. However, the Book of Devarim is not confined to the restatement of the commandments, alone. It also contains Moses’ formulation of the fundamental doctrines of the Jewish faith, such as God’s unity, omnipotence, and omniscience.

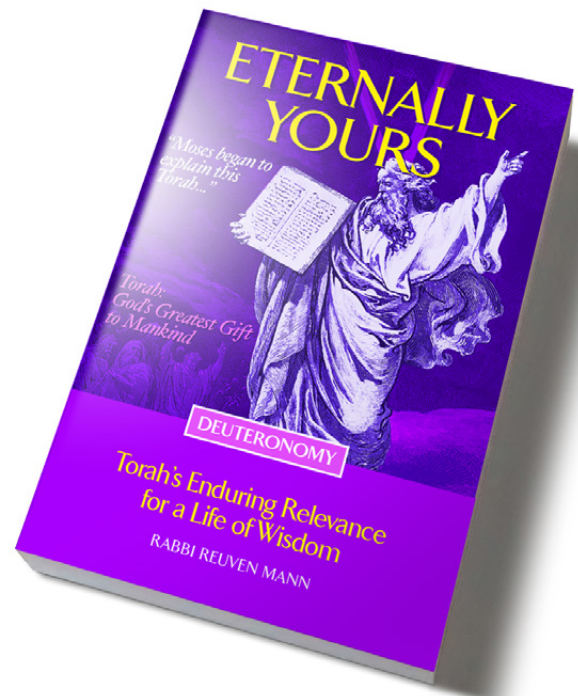
Another important idea communicated by Moses in Devarim is the reason why one is obliged to believe in the Divinity of the Torah. All other religions are based on unsubstantiated faith. It is taken for granted by most religious people that it is virtuous to believe in their religions, even in the absence of any compelling proofs or evidence.

Moses addresses the Jewish people regarding the proper basis of belief in the Torah. He never asks the Jews to have faith. Rather, he calls on them to constantly remember and appreciate the day the entire Nation gathered at Mount Sinai to witness supernatural phenomena and hear a voice from heaven proclaiming the Ten Commandments. This was a one-time event which never occurred before or since, anywhere in the world. Judaism does not require the kind of faith that most people associate with religion. Moses never exhorts the people by saying, “You’ve just got to believe.” Instead, he urges them to use their minds. They should study the full implications of the Torah’s claim that the entire nation was gathered on Mt. Sinai to hear a voice from Heaven proclaim the “Ten Statements” (Aseret Hadibrot). He also exhorts the Jews to intensely study their commandments, as this will lead them to recognize its divine character. He says, “You shall safeguard and perform them, for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear all these decrees and who shall say ‘Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!’” (Deuteronomy 4:6). Moses here makes the claim that if one studies and elucidates the mitzvot in the proper way, its supreme wisdom will become apparent to gentiles as well as Jews.

Moses urged the Jews to recognize the intrinsic ethical and moral superiority of the Jewish religion. He asks them, “For which is a great nation that has a God that is close to it, as is Hashem, our God whenever we call to Him? And which is a great nation that has righteous decrees and ordinances, such as this entire Torah that I place before you this day?” (Deuteronomy 4:7-8).

We can now begin to appreciate the overarching importance of the Book of Devarim. The objective of Judaism is for the Jewish people to perpetuate the Torah and its way of life for all time. But how is that goal to be achieved? Moses devoted an entire Book to showing his people the way. May we attain the proper appreciation and understanding of Torah that is essential to assuring its eternal relevance to the perfection of human life.

Shabbat Shalom. ■



This essay is part of Rabbi Mann's new book on the following page



NEW

Moses: the quintessential man of action. But in Deuteronomy he appears as a great thinker, teacher, elucidator of the Torah entrusted to him. Rabbi Mann expounds upon Moses' final addresses in words so sublime, God included them in the Bible.

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ETERNALLY YOURS

Rabbi Reuven Mann – Deuteronomy

Devarim contains Moses' final communications to the nation he had led out of Egypt and guided through the forty-year ordeal in the Wilderness. The Jews were on the brink of their entry into the land which they would conquer and settle without him, their great leader. Moses' final talks to the Jews reveals his true greatness. He is not concerned about his own place in history; his only objective is to facilitate, to the best of his ability, the success of the nation in the land. He thus exhorts them to study, understand and fully implement the Torah which constitutes the surest guarantee of their longevity and well-being in the Land that God gave them so they would become a "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation." This book focuses on those lessons.

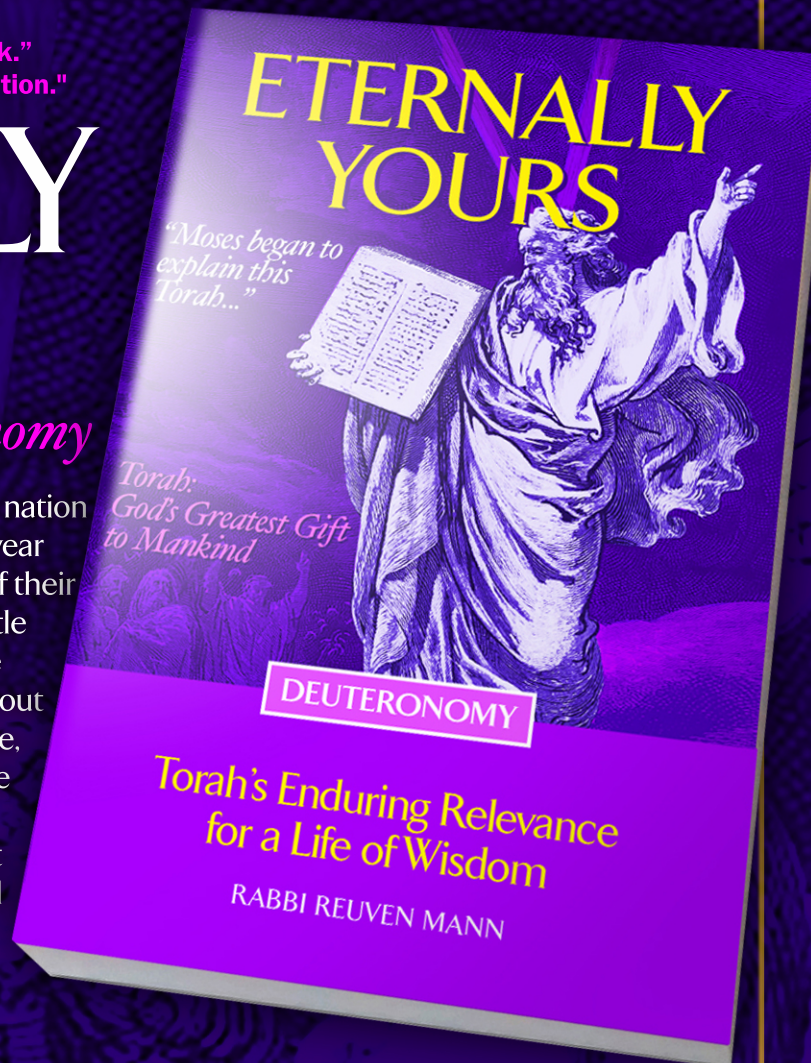
Rabbi Mann explores these timeless lessons in this, the final installment of his Eternally Yours series. In over 50 essays, he addresses intriguing philosophical, psychological, theological and intellectual questions about the Torah in a style that is uniquely accessible to all. Rabbi Mann shows that the Torah truly is "God's Greatest Gift to Mankind."

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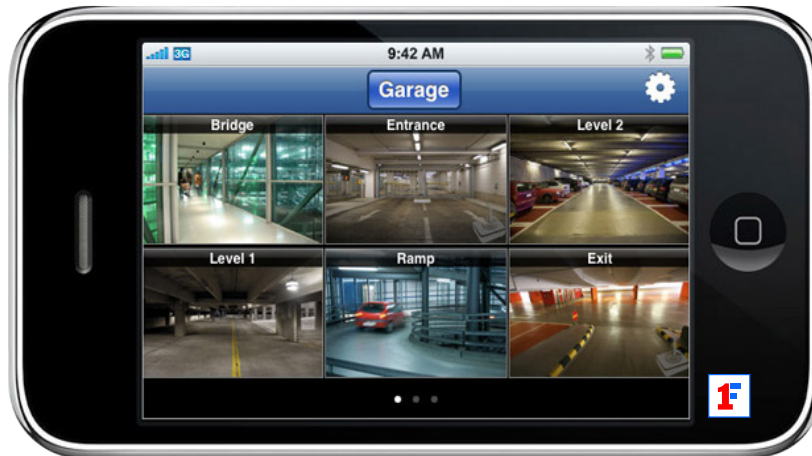
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