

JewishTimes

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When is God Found?

Sealing our Fate

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Now through Yom
Kippur we pray, repent
from our flaws and
give to those in need.
God sees, and removes
our evil decree.

the Worst Crime & Greatest Mitzvah

CHARITY

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What is the opportune scenario for reaching God? Is there one?



| TRUST IN GOD |

Our reality must be God's words, not our calculations. God promises to return one's charity. We don't know how, but His promise is a guarantee.

What we must know, is that God's word surpasses our calculation that giving diminishes our wealth.

PERFECTION

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

“Be Most Careful with this Mitzvah”

Leading up to Rosh Hashanna, we reflect on self-improvement. Maimonides discusses a core mitzvah:

We are obligated to be careful with regard to the mitzvah of charity to a greater extent than all [other] positive commandments,

because charity is an identifying mark for a righteous person, a descendant of Abraham, our patriarch, as [Gen. 18:19] states: “Abraham is beloved, because he commands his children in charity.” The throne of Israel will not be established, nor will the true faith stand except through

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charity, as [Isaiah 54:14] states: "You shall be established through righteousness." And Israel will be redeemed solely through charity, as [ibid. 1:27] states: "Zion will be redeemed through judgment and those who return to her through charity." (Gifts to the Poor 10:1)

How do we understand charity's level of importance, while the Rabbis said, "Whomever denies idolatry is as if he kept the entire Torah, and whomever accepts idolatry is as if he rejects the entire Torah?" Idolatry, then, seems to define the core of Judaism, not charity.

"Charity is an identifying mark for a righteous person"

What is the greatness of charity, Abraham's finest character as identified by God? In charity, one recognizes another person as equal to himself: "He deserves what I have." One does not view oneself greater than any other person. That is some level, considering how many people are out for fame and recognition. The lack of ego is also God's praise for Moses: "And the man Moses was exceedingly more humble than all men on the face of the Earth" (Num. 12:3). Having seen more wisdom than others, Moses understood the greatest disparity between man and God. Based on this extreme contrast, Moses viewed himself as nothing compared to God. King David said "I am a worm," Abraham said "I am dust and ashes," and Moses said "I am nothing." As Rabbi Israel Chait taught, King David felt he was lowly but still an animate being (worm). Abraham was on a higher level and looked at himself as inanimate, but still as matter (dust). And Moses being in the highest level viewed himself as nothing. The greatest level of perfection is the person who leaves his emotions and follows intelligence and truth, following God, as dictated by reality. He abandons the strong emotion of ego and recognizes God's will extends to all people. The perfect person follows God's will, as God's will is reality, while man's will is selfish fantasy and self aggrandizement. This is the world in which most people live: the fantasy of the self reigning supreme over all others. Haman was so disturbed that—although everybody else bowed down to him—one person (Mordechai) didn't, and this destroyed his world. And Haman is not alone because he has the same faculties



you and I have. We each have the possibility of following ego to this severe degree. But the path of Torah will keep a person in awe of the creator, and slowly remove him, year-by-year, from a self-centered life, towards the happiest life of becoming enamored by the continued brilliance he uncovers through Torah study. The greatest minds like kings David and Solomon could not get enough of God's brilliance, and wrote volumes on the wisdom they perceived. They were not the focus of their lives, God was. And Einstein instructed those of his university not to make a shrine of his office when he died, but to give it to the next person in line. Einstein's awe of the Creator placed his self importance in proper perspective.

Charity is the flip side of idolatry. Maimonides states this openly: "Anyone who turns his eyes away from [giving] charity is described as being rebellious like someone who worships false gods" (Gifts to the Poor 10:3). Whereas in idolatry the objective is the self—one desires to be favored by the deity (Rabbi Israel Chait)—charity is abandoning self-interests and helping others, as God desires happiness for all people.

God's creation of human beings is the greatest expression of God's kindness. He cares that a being should exist that can attain a most fulfilling existence through realizing His wisdom. God is charitable to the greatest degree in His act of creating mankind. And we are to follow God and mimic this kindness through our charity. We act like God when we are charitable as He is.

Furthermore, Maimonides teaches that no one will suffer loss or any negativity through charity to the poor:

A person will never become impoverished from giving charity. No harm nor damage will ever be caused because of charity, as [ibid. 32:17] states: "And the deed of charity is peace." Everyone who is merciful evokes mercy from others, as [Deuteronomy 13:18] states: "And He shall grant you mercy and shower mercy upon you and multiply you." (Gifts to the Poor 10:2)

Moses told the Jews that charity earns one God's blessings:

Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land. (Deut. 15:10,11)

Maimonides teaches:

It is a positive commandment to give charity to the poor among the Jewish people, according to what is appropriate for the poor person if this is within the financial capacity of the donor, as [Deut. 15:8] states: "You shall certainly open your hand to him." [Lev. 25:35] states: "You shall support him, a stranger and a resident and they shall live with you," and [ibid.:36] states: "And your brother shall live with you." (Gifts to the Poor 7:1)

Anyone who sees a poor person asking and turns his eyes away from him and does not give him charity transgresses a negative commandment, as [Deuteronomy 15:7] states: "Do not harden your heart or close your hand against your brother, the poor person." (Gifts to the Poor 7:2)

The most desirable way of performing the mitzvah is to give one fifth of one's financial resources. Giving one tenth is an ordinary measure. (Gifts to the Poor 7:5) ■

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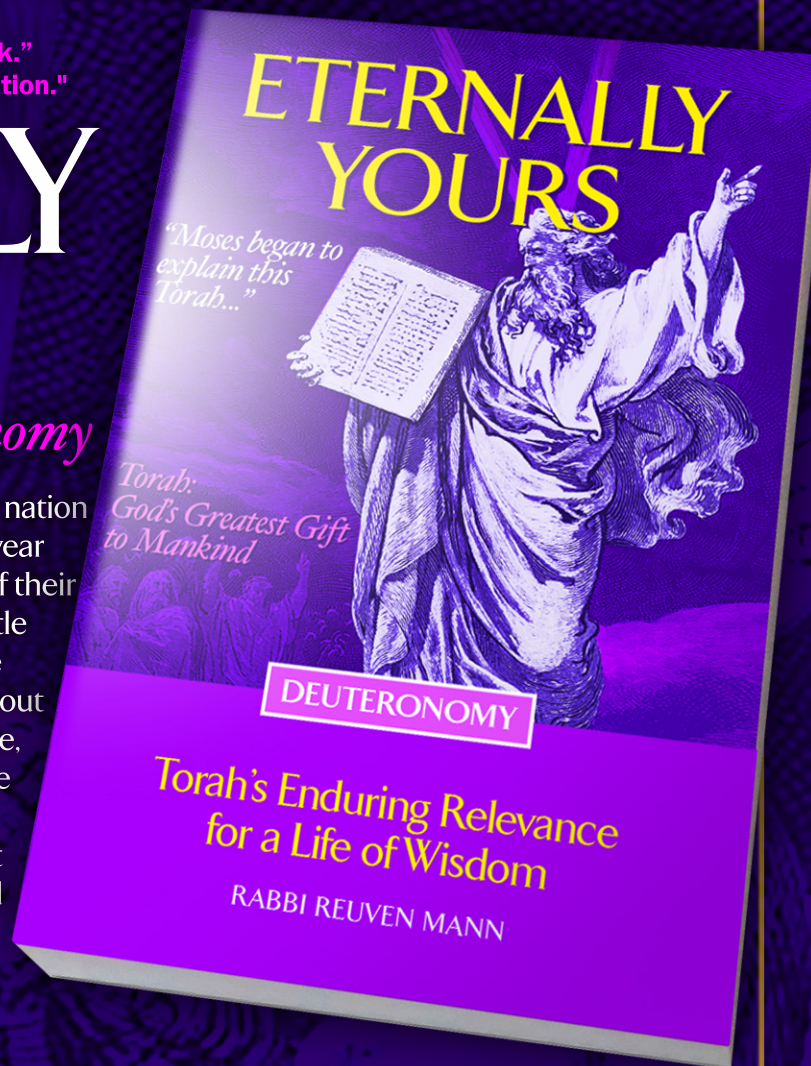
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CHARITY

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Transcribed by a student

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

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

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

God's very first words to Abraham regarding the founding of the nation concerns tzedaka: the institution that is Judaism's very essence and core.

And Rabbi Chiyya bar Rav of Difti taught, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha says:

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

Why is an uncharitable person considered an idolater? He's a metaphysician, he believes in God, he has knowledge! You would not think such a person is on par with an idolater.

Maimonides explains why this is so at the end of his Guide (book III, chap. liv):

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

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

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

Maimonides says, [God says], “as I am, so should you be” [mah Ani, af atah]. This means that if a person perceives God’s character [middos Hashem], his own charitable acts should be a natural result. One should give tzedaka because God gives tzedaka. One understands that this is the underlying system of the universe and the scheme of creation. Once a person understands that, his meager possessions are worthless. That is why tzedaka is the mark of an individual’s level of perfection. If one possesses all other perfections but not tzedaka, it is worthless. He is a fraud because he may have intellectual knowledge, and he might be a great scholar and rav, but it’s all worthless, because without giving tzedaka the person does not believe in what he is saying. His emotions don’t follow his mind. Tzedaka is the barometer of perfection.

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

That refers to metaphysical knowledge. Judaism’s metaphysician is not limited to the intellect, but to metaphysics regarding God and how He relates to the world. Judaism’s metaphysician will follow the principle of imitating God—“as I am, so shall you be”—and he will give tzedaka because he is in line with God’s will to be charitable. But if one’s idea of God is corrupt [as he does not give tzedaka] he is akin to an idolater, for the definition of idolatry is harboring a wrong notion about God. If one’s idea of God is correct, he would have to copy God; it is a natural result. Maimonides says, “The perfected individual emulates God and acts towards the creatures as God

does.” Meaning, just as God does not act out of selfishness [as God is bereft of all emotions] and God’s actions are purely in terms of His wisdom, so too an individual must remove himself from his emotion of selfishness and operate on a broader perspective of sustaining the species, acting out of kindness for others apart from himself [his own emotional desires] and apart from his own interests. But as long as one is tied to his self-interests like selfishness, self-recognition, and money, he is not functioning in a way similar to God but on an instinctual plane. Whereas God is completely removed from any instinctual activity.

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

How are we holy like God? This is achieved by acting without any instinct, acting purely objectively. When operating under this framework of kindness, one performs a different type of kindness. This is why the mishnah discussing the 4 traits of man commences with the discussion of man’s possessions, for this is the area of perfection: tzedaka is the barometer of perfection. In fact, the only mitzvah where God says one can test Him is tzedaka: “Please test Me in this” said the Lord of Hosts. “I will surely open the storehouses of heaven and empty out for you a blessing that is more than sufficient” (Malachi 3:10).

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

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

Who is the chassid, the pious individual? The gemara says that Yoav ben Tzaruya had no concept of possession. They say his home was “in the desert.” But would such a prominent person live in the desert? In actuality it means that his home was “like” a desert, where anyone could just walk in. [Yoav ben Tzaruya did not act like an owner regarding his home, but it was as publicly accessible as the desert.] This is the very nucleus of Judaism. The chassid views other creatures just like God views them, but in a human manner. He views others with total objectivity and understands that they must operate with the institution of

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possession, since they cannot survive otherwise. That is, people must have an outlet for their egocentricity [which is expressed in ownership]. The chassid's personality is "what's mine is yours and what's yours is yours." He is above that concept [of ownership]. He gives tzedaka like God. His possessions are not "his" in his eyes. (One must reciprocate good done for him and be charitable and perform kindness first, to those who showed him kindness.) The gemara says that if one does not give tzedaka, God takes that money from him. He may not even know how God does this. But despite this [God taking it from him] it is still considered as if he gave tzedaka. This is because through losing his possessions and his realization that his loss was due to his failure to give tzedaka, it is considered tzedaka because the person broke his emotion [his attachment to money, through recognizing his flaw]. Very few people give 10% tzedaka; it is a difficult mitzvah. I know only a handful of people who fulfill the mitzvah. And it is unrelated to one's financial status. If one does not give tzedaka when he is poor, he will not give when he is rich, and vice versa. It [generous character] is a personality trait, a perception. Maimonides says that no one becomes poor by giving tzedaka. A person will say, "If I had \$10 million, I would give \$1 million to tzedaka." But he says this now only because the money is presently not his. But the moment it is his, he can't give it away.

The gemara says that tzedaka is performed with one's money, but kindness is greater since it is performed with one's money and one's body [actions]. Any person who gives tzedaka because of the true reason must be on the highest level. This perfection is related to knowledge of God. God is the creator of the entire universe and what He gives is pure kindness and not to satisfy any emotion [as He has no emotions]. Abraham gave Malchitzedek tzedaka, for he was a priest to God: "And King Malchitzedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him, saying, 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand.'" And [Abram] gave him a tenth of everything. (Gen. 14:18-20) Malchitzedek had a yeshiva where he taught true ideas. That was Yeshivas Shem V'Ever.

The gemara equates both cases—tzedaka and idolatry—as Torah refers to both using the same word "beliya-al." [Hiding one's eyes from giving tzedaka is akin to idolatry.] Rashi explains "beliya-al" as "bli ole"—"without a yoke" [the yoke or burden of mitzvos]. But at first sight, it is difficult to relate the refusal of giving tzedaka to idolatry. Idolatry is a misconception regarding God, and [not giving] tzedaka is a separate matter, a poor character trait. What is the correlation? The answer is related to what we previously discussed: "Understand and know Me, for I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and tzedaka in the world; for these I desire," declares the Lord.

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

How is an idolater "without a yoke?" He sacrifices his children to his god! Ancient primitive idolatry was far more difficult than any Torah command, which involves no pain. How then is the idolater without a yoke? The answer is that "yoke" does not refer to something difficult or painful.

People think that "accepting the yoke of the heavenly kingdom; kabbalas ol malchus shamayim" refers to accepting something very difficult. The goal of the idolater is ultimately to satisfy the self. He may perform the most painful acts, but his purpose is for himself: self-security, self-preservation, or self-enjoyment. He projects a false reality and pains himself [in his idolatrous rites] as he believes he will benefit himself. Torah is not painful, "Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths, peaceful" (Prov. 3:17). We don't submit to a painful system. We submit to the reality of God. We break our motions and subordinate ourselves to God's reality. That is the meaning of yoke. The greatest kabbalas ol malchus shamayim is reading the Shema. If a person would attempt to explain how to accept the yoke of heaven, he would not suggest that it is performed by reading the Shema. He would say it is achieved by accepting upon himself all Torah's prohibitions and difficulties. But in fact, it is achieved by saying, "Listen Israel: God is our God, God is one." "He is our God" means that His providence relates to us. "He is the eternal God, and He is one" refers to the recognition of God's reality, which is a reality outside of our own small world of personal wishes. This is the true acceptance of God. Accepting the reality [existing] outside of oneself is accepting the yoke of heaven, when the purpose is not self-benefit. The acceptance is for the reality itself.

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

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

However, what it means is that if a person perceives God's wisdom, even in terms of creation, if he is on a very high level, what he sees in God's wisdom is a certain objectivity. He sees a truth that is far removed from any kind of human personal trait. Anyone who investigates creation arrives at this conclusion. It is difficult to discuss because such an appreciation is based on personal experience and from the

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process of investigation. One's delving into God's wisdom leaves him with a sense of a Being who is far above man's small outlook. It is a grand objective sense about God. Some great natural investigators have expressed this, among them is Albert Einstein, but also others. From studying God, one's appreciation of Him, is, in a sense, an appreciation of how removed God is from our smallmindedness and our constant preoccupation with ourselves. From seeing Torah's wisdom, one certainly gains this sense. But even from studying creation one sees this.

Now, what prevents a person from being a baal chessed—a kind person—Avos 5:10 says pertains to how one relates to his possessions. The breaking of the feeling of ownership is perfection, for the chassid embodies this: "What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours." And again, as we say in the Neilah prayer, "That we might abandon the oppression of our hands." This is perfection, and this is accomplished if one perceives enough of God's wisdom. Such a person will see how small is the sense of "mine." He comes under a different way of thinking: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8). We can't understand God's kindness. How then is there a principle to emulate Him, "Ma hu, af atah?" Moshe and Job did not understand God's kindness. [How do we copy that which we don't understand?] But this much we understand: God's kindness is furthest removed from the sense of "mine." That much we can perceive.

Judaism maintains an interesting thesis: understanding God's wisdom enlightens us to also understand His kindness. "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: "God, God, the Almighty [is] merciful and gracious, long-suffering, with abundant kindness and truth, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin" (Exod. 34:6,7). These traits of God are the greatest knowledge [they were God's response to Moshe's request to understand God's honor]. But what was the great wisdom that Moshe saw in the cleft of the rock (Exod. 33:22)? Of course, the verse cannot explain it to us. A person can only understand this according to his level of understanding and his depth of thought. Moshe Rabbeinu understood this in the greatest way. But it means that Moshe Rabbeinu was able to see to the greatest degree possible, the relationship between God's kindness and His wisdom. And Moshe saw how God's kindness fits into the realm of the same Being who also displays infinite wisdom. Moshe was not able to understand it by himself [independent of God's words]. I once gave the analogy of the watch. A person who does not understand the relationship between the ticking sound and the watch hands' movement can understand this relationship by seeing the watch's interior mechanisms. But that person will not be able to produce the watch from scratch [for although he now sees the cause of the ticking and the movements, he remains ignorant of the machine's ingenuity]. He cannot produce the watch from on his own; that is a different kind of understanding, an understanding from the beginning [of the inventor], which God referred to as "but My face you will not see" (Exod. 33:23). Even Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand God that way. "You will see My back" (Ibid.) means that Moshe could understand the relationship between God's kindness and His wisdom. Moshe could see this relationship, but not from the beginning [he didn't have God's knowledge]. Moshe could [only] see the relationship between the ticking of the watch and the hands' motion.

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

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

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

It is the unique principle of Judaism that God's wisdom is intricately tied with God's kindness. An imperfection regarding man's kindness in emulating God is also an imperfection insofar as his knowledge of God. That is the gemara in Kesuvos about bliya-al. The source of one's abstention to give tzedaka is idolatrous. The person has no knowledge of God and he doesn't understand God's kindness. Therefore, he cannot emulate God. It is an exact analogy. The idolater can never conceive of kindness in any real way. He is devoid of any sense of objective kindness. And the Jew is enjoined to perform kindness, not just on an emotional level, but kindness on the level of emulating God where the sense of "mine" does not register anymore. That is the verse of "be wise and understand Me for I am God who performs kindness, justice and tzedaka in the land." Knowledge of God is related to kindness. Abraham perceived that unification between wisdom of God and God's kindness. That was his greatness. Why did Abraham adhere to kindness over other perfections? It is because kindness is an intrinsic concept that is tied to knowledge of God.

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

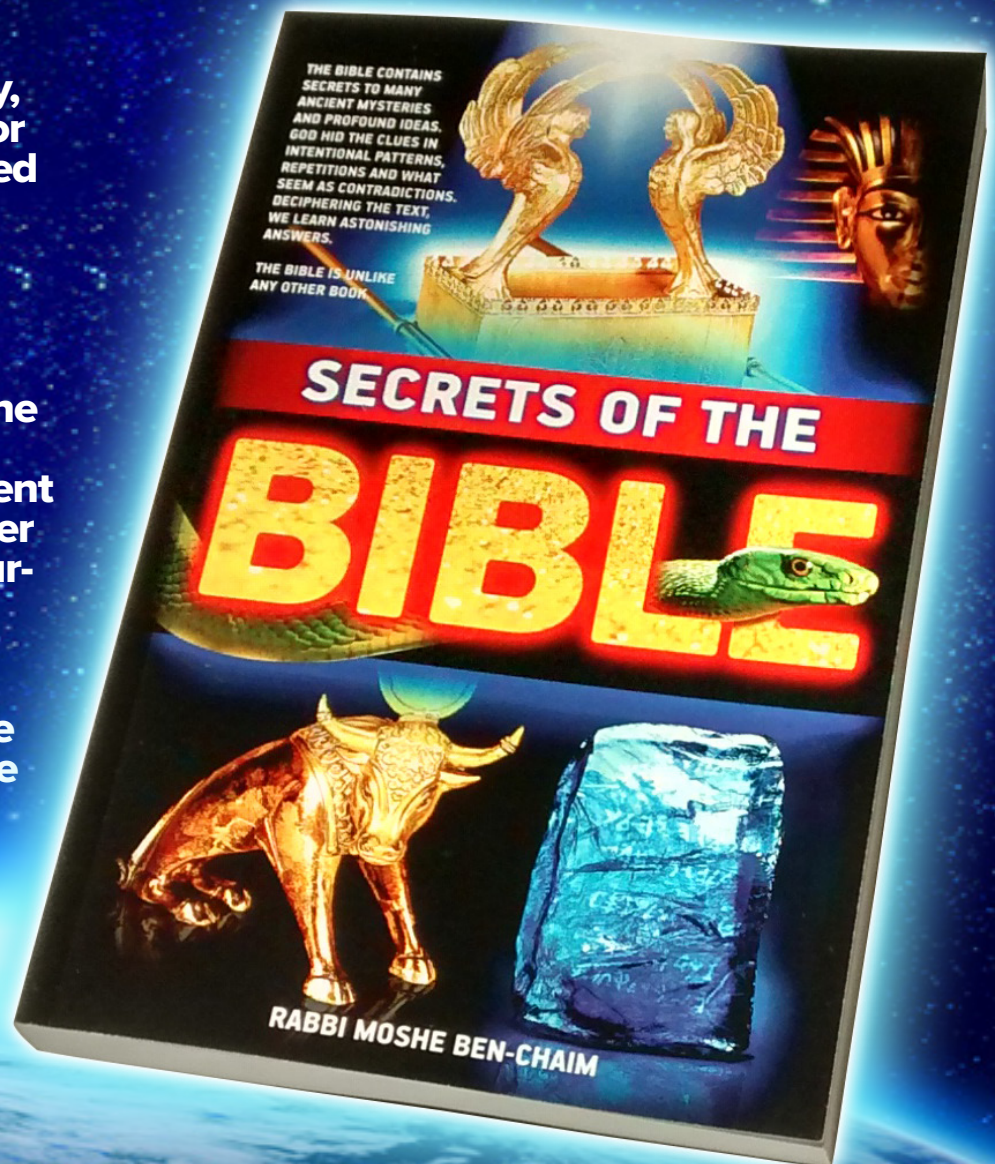
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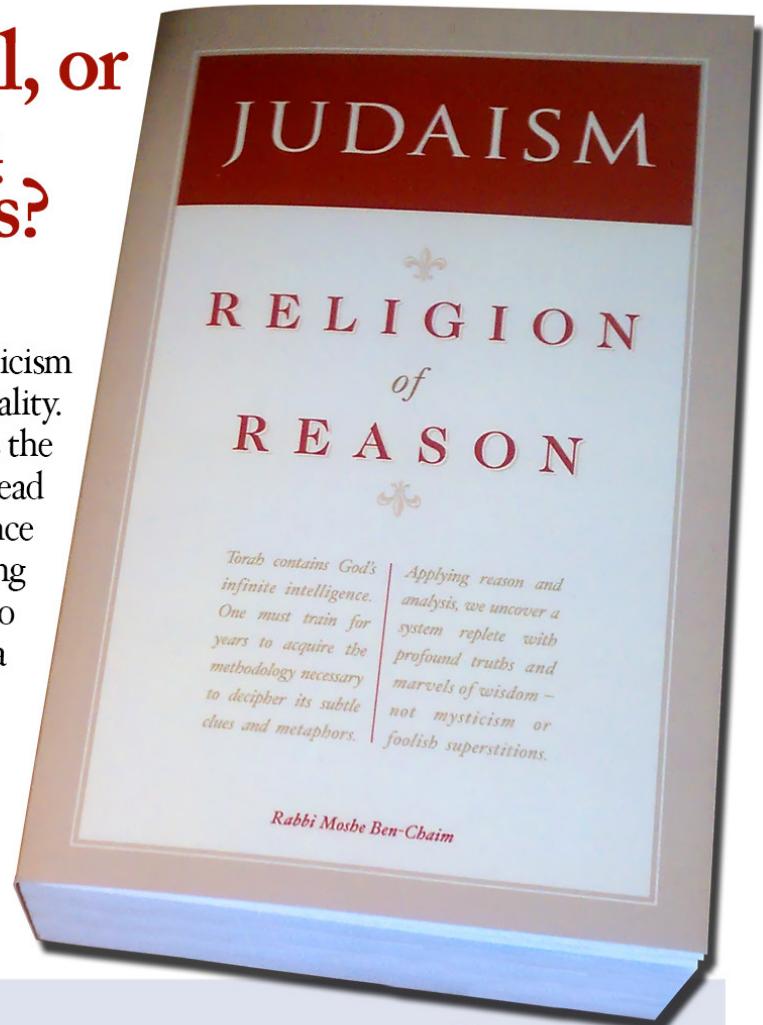
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Judaism: mystical, or rational based on reason and proofs?

by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Jews have succumbed to mysticism and pop-kabballa, 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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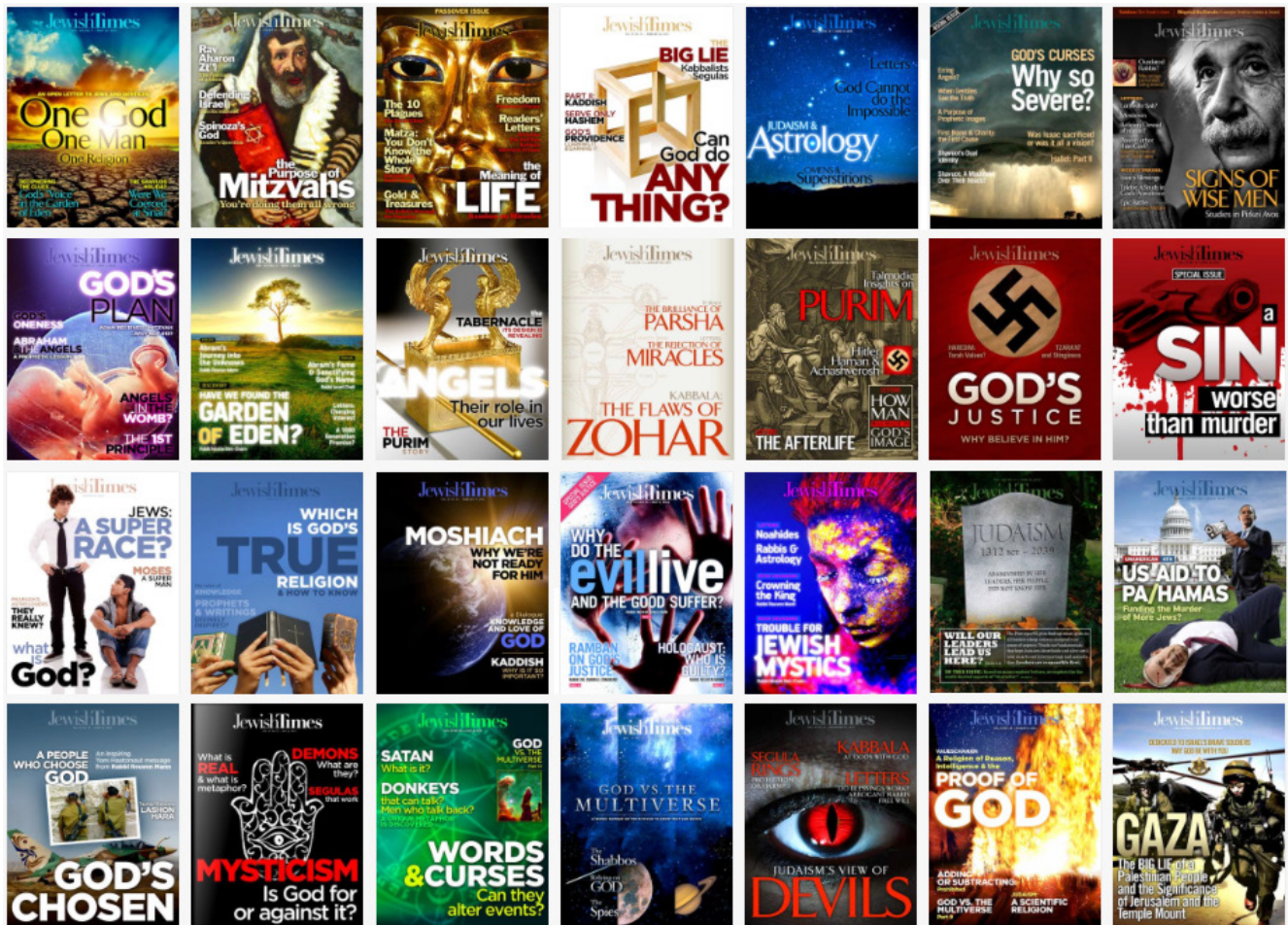
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“Seek out God [in a manner that] He is found; call to Him when He is near” (Isaiah 55:6)

When is God Found?

Sealing our Fate

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This verse commences our Torah reading on fast days. At first glance, it implies that God is not “always” approachable. However, that is impossible, for the Ashray prayer teaches us, “God is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth. The will of those who fear Him He fulfills; and their cries, He hears and saves them.” These two “traits” of God are not conditional on certain times. So if God is readily accessible at all times, what is meant by our verse above?

Radak cites three explanations on “call to Him when He is near.” He first quotes his father: “This means when one seeks out God with his “entire” heart, as it says, “God is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth.” Notice, that verse does not mention any idea of an “entire heart.” Rather, it refers to our need to call Him in “truth.” Radak’s father clearly equates “all one’s heart” and “truth.” Meaning, only when one seeks God earnestly, and exclusively, is he inline with truth. For when one relies on God alone, he agrees with what is true in the universe: God is the only one who can respond. To be clear, this explains “when He is near” to mean, when we call to God and no other. God is close to such a person and performs their will, as this will endorse the truth God wishes spread in the world: God alone answers man. This happens always. But if one does not feel convinced God alone can respond, and he relies on anything else, God will not respond, since that would endorse that falsehood.

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

If we do not value our relationship with God over all else, with our “entire heart,” then we have the wrong view of God. God must play a central role in our lives, for He created our lives, and maintains them. How can anything else take precedence? So the command to love God with all our hearts is simply stating what the facts demand. Shima says this as well: “And you shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 30:6, 4:29) and Selichos repeats this crucial message.

We see from this that it’s not just New Year’s or fast days, but this concept of approaching God with our entire heart is applicable always.

Radak then quotes the Rabbis who explain “Call to Him when He is near” as referring to “before our decree.” This means before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our fate is decided at this time, so we are admonished to seek out God, establish a relationship, and repent, before our decree is written.

And lastly, Radak quotes Yonasan ben Uzziel as referring to prior to death: “For one can only call to God while alive, and not after he dies. For in the grave, there are no actions, knowledge or wisdom.” On this, King Solomon said, “At all times, let your clothes be white [clean]...” (Koheles 9:8). This refers to the need to be without sin at all times (clean garments) since we do not know when God will call us to the next world. So be always ready in case it is now, in order that we are without sin as we enter the Afterlife, to earn the greatest portion and escape punishment.

In fact, there is no argument among these three views. Radak’s father is advising us of what the Torah says in so many places: we can only truly relate to God when our ideas of His omnipotent and omniscient nature are obtained. For if our ideas of God are false, we are not relating to God, but to imagination, and no imaginary thing can help us. So we

must strive to be accurate in our Torah understanding of what God is and what He is not. Then we will realize He alone must be the sole recipient of our prayers. This is what it means to “call to Him when He is near.” God is not physical, so one cannot be “hear” God. “Near” means when we have an accurate understanding of Him, and we express it by calling Him alone. The Rabbis, Rashi, and Yonasan ben Uzziel teach that before our decree, we are wise to act. These views focus on the “gravity” of what is at hand: our eternal lives. They address the absolute nature of God’s decrees, not the “method of approach” described by Radak’s father.

In our verse, Isaiah is addressing this time of year, when our fate will be written. He is concerned for us all, so let us be concerned, and review our ways. Make amends with those you have wronged, ask God’s forgiveness for sins between you and Him and resign never to repeat such actions and earnestly seek an ever-growing understanding of what God is, so your prayers reach the One who can help.

With so many conflicting views today concerning Judaism’s fundamentals, we must follow only to that which our minds see clearly. Anything less, means our mind does not agree with a notion, so what use is it to parrot the words “I agree” when we do not?

In Halacha—Jewish Law—we must follow the Rabbis of old, and of today. But in philosophy, Hashkafa, there is no such thing as a psak, a ruling (Rabbi Chait). We cannot be told by any Rabbi, or anyone, that we believe what we truly do not. God gave us each a mind. Why? He wants each one of us to use it. If you do not use it, but follow the crowd, even the religious crowd, or Rabbis, then you violate God’s will. I mention this, since we are discussing the need to call God “when He is near,” meaning, calling Him accurately. The most fundamental thing you can do, now

before your fate is written, is to first insure you have the right idea of God. Many schools do not teach this. Most adults cannot explain “What is God?” Many pop-Jewish groups talk about sefirot, parts of God inside man, and other inconceivable and dangerous notions. Who is correct? How do we know? Reason, our great rabbis, and Torah will tell you. Moses’ words and all the prophets never spoke of mysticism, or nonsense. Just the opposite is the case: Moses told the Jews not to forget what their eyes saw. He asked no belief whatsoever, but that each Jew accept evidence and reason to determine what is true, and what God is. No prophet ever endorsed amulets, segulas, praying to the dead, or any of today’s popular falsehoods. Moses and the prophets endorsed reason, and abiding by God’s commands, “Do not add or subtract from the Torah.” They added no new practices, and they never ran to others to bless them. They sought God “with their entire heart.” They sought God alone, and nothing else. Go back to the source, to the Torah. If you cannot find it there, don’t follow it. ■



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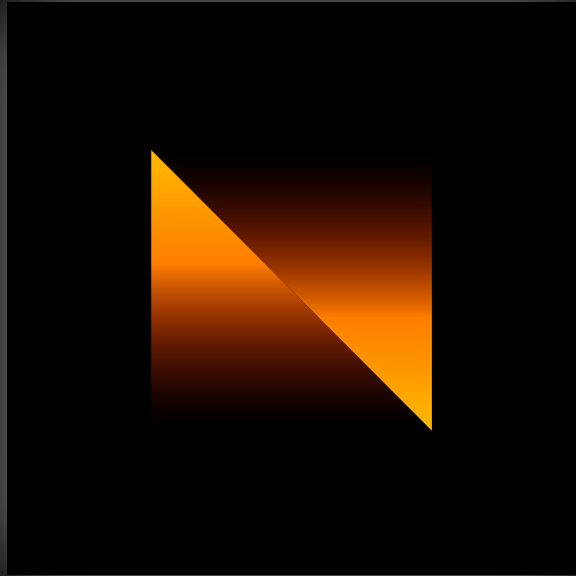


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