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HURDLES TO WISDOM: EGO & WORK

"Torah is not in the heavens or across the sea" (Deut. 30:12,13). Maimonides explains this proverbially: Torah wisdom is not found in egoistical men (high heavens) or in men focused on work (sea travelers). Arrogance prevents one from accepting error—he can't learn—and business limits study time.

Maimonides teaches as does Pirkei Avos: "Minimize work and indulge in Torah study."

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Making Errors: Angels vs. Jews

TOVA: Why were angels rebuked, but the Jews were not?

Rabbi Yochanan said, "What is the meaning of that which is written: 'And the one [Egypt's army] did not come near the other [Israel] all the night'? (Exod 14:20) When God drowned with the Egyptians in the Reed Sea, the ministering angels

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wanted to sing, for the angels would sing songs to each other, as it states, “And they called out to each other” (Isaiah 6:3), but the Holy One, Blessed be He said, “The work of My hands [Egyptians] are drowning at sea, and you wish to sing?” This indicates that God does not rejoice over the downfall of the wicked. (Megillah 10b)

RABBI: God’s will is that all mankind recognize Him. This is God’s purpose in creating man. But when man sins—although not God’s preference—man requires punishment, or death. In this case, song is inappropriate, so God silenced the angels. Nonetheless, the Jews rejoiced in song when God drowned the Egyptians, and God did not silence them. Why then did God rebuke the angels but not the Jews when singing praise for the death of the Egyptians?

The Jews were praising God for their salvation; thanks was mandatory. However, the angels did not experience salvation, and must operate without that sentiment. Therefore, singing was inappropriate. For even the Jews would agree with God’s sentiment that when man does not follow God, and is punished, it is a loss. But the Jews’ personal salvation demanded thanks to God. And this does not contradict the impropriety of song when sinners suffer. One matter concerns those saved, and another matter concerns those punished. The Jews must sing in thanks for their lives. But angels have no cause for thanks, and should operate where song is inappropriate. That was God’s message to the angels. But how could angels make an “error?” In fact, this dialogue between God and the angels never occurred. The rabbis scripted this allegory to teach this lesson: angels assist good people; allegorically they sided with Israel and wished to sing. Angels cannot err, they are not human and have no instincts to derail rational actions. Angels act perfectly in line with God’s will. But this allegory reveals that their scope of function is limited. As messengers of God to help good people, they do not possess the “larger picture” that only God possesses, that being of ultimate mercy. Desiring to sing at Egypt’s demise, and God rebuking them, teaches that angels don’t share God’s full perspective. ■

Planets Have Souls

DANI: Based on God’s severe response, “I will set My face against him”, stated only regarding idolatry and blood-eating, you said these 2 are the worst crimes: both assume the existence of a powerful being other than God. Blood eating assumes demons enjoyed the blood with man and could help man, and idolatry says God isn’t the only god. But superstitions don’t make this list, because when one believes in bad luck for example, it’s similar to believing in “laws,” and not that a “being” besides God exists. The greatest crime is assuming God is not the exclusive cause of the universe. In such a case, man’s idea of God is completely wrong. His life is purposeless. My question: Maimonides said the planets have souls. Why isn’t this too on his list of the worst crimes, as a belief in a will other than God?

RABBI: Idolatry and demon belief suggest beings exist possessing control over all matters, and thereby they can help man and man worships or services them. But this is not what a soul in a planet suggests. Planetary souls merely generate the planet’s rotation, and nothing more. Their limited scope of function is like a person’s limited scope, and the belief in either planetary souls or human souls is not a belief in powers that can help us. Both are limited. ■

“Pursue Justice, Justice” (Why twice?)

HOWIE: “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that your God is giving you” (Deut. 16:20). Why is the word “justice” repeated?

RABBI: The rabbis comment:

Moses speaks to the disputants. Moses repeats the word justice to indicate that one should pursue justice whether one gains or loses. Or the word is repeated to indicate that one should pursue justice as long as one exists; or the word is repeated for emphasis. (Ibn Ezra)

The reason for the repetition is to indicate that the judges should judge the people with righteous judgment, and you must also pursue justice constantly by going from your place to the place of the great Sages: “after Rabban Yochanan ben Zaccai to Jabneh; after Rabbi [Yehudah Hanasi] to Beth Shearim.” (Ramban)

Doctors’ Flaws

WILLIE: Are doctors evil?

RABBI: Kiddushin 82a sheds light:

“Most sailors are pious” [since the great danger of the seas instills in them the fear of Heaven.] “The best of doctors goes to Gehenom” [Rashi: They do not fear disease. They eat the food of the healthy, and they do not act humbly before God. Sometimes they kill, and sometimes they are able to heal a poor person. but do not do so.] “Even the fittest of butchers is a partner of Amalek” [Rashi: Meat which could possibly be not kosher they sell to others because they don’t want to lose money].

The message: professions carry dangers. ■ (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Work and Learning

Rabbi Nehorai says: "I set aside all the trades in the world, and I teach my son only Torah, as a person partakes of its reward in this world and the principal reward remains for him in the World-to-Come, which is not true of other professions, whose rewards are only in this world. Furthermore, if a person comes to be ill, or old, or undergoes suffering, and is unable to be involved in his trade, behold, he dies in hunger. But with regard to the Torah it is not so, since one can study it under all circumstances. Rather, it preserves him from all evil and sin in his youth, and provides him with a future and hope in his old age.

With regard to his youth, what does it say about a Torah scholar? 'But they that hope in God shall renew their strength, as eagles grow new plumes: they shall run and not grow weary, they shall march and not grow faint' (Isaiah 40:31). With regard to his old age, what does it say? 'They in old age they still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness'" (Psalms 92:15). (Kiddushin 82a)

RABBI: How can we explain the distinction of benefits between younger and older people? When young, man still seeks to accomplish and to progress. But he grows weary. Why? It's because as these pursuits are not God's intent for human happiness; man does not find pleasure and satisfaction in them. He is wearied from seeking satisfaction from matters that inherently cannot provide it. he grows frustrated.

But if man follows a life of Torah, "He shall run and not grow weary, he shall march and not grow faint." Torah is perfectly designed to satisfy all man's intense energies. The pursuit of wisdom has no end, and with each new insight, man is satisfied and also excited, and journeys on further to open up new areas to his mind. It is this endless pursuit that fully satisfies man. On the contrary, physical pursuits cannot endure long enough to satisfy man's abundant energies, and they also inflict pain when indulged too long. And the pursuit of psychological satisfaction is so short-lived, man again quickly meets with frustration.

Even when old, King David says Torah affords man satisfaction, "They in old age, they still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness." Producing fruit refers to the creative process of uncovering new wisdom, and being full of sap and freshness means their minds have not waned. Older people no longer seek accomplishment. They have exposed worldly pursuits as dissatisfying, and have grown more attached to wisdom, so physical weariness is not discussed. Older men perfected by Torah seek knowledge, not accomplishment. ■

God and Jews: Eternal Bond

ODUPA: How do you understand the idea of an unbreakable covenant between God and the Jewish people?

RABBI: God's eternal covenant with Israel is a testament to the patriarchs' perfections. Without Torah, using their minds alone, the patriarchs recognized and taught the truth of monotheism, the fallacy of idolatry and other assumed powers, and morality. In God's desire that all mankind benefit from the patriarchs' values, He included their role model lives in His Bible—Torah—which also includes His laws for typical man who could not arrive at the patriarchs' perfections without those laws. God chose the patriarchs' descendants to be His emissaries to mankind and teach His Bible to the world. God's will does not change, therefore His covenant does not change. He eternally endorses the patriarch's values by eternal providence over their Jewish descendants with an unbreakable covenant.

ODUPA: What can we learn from the "rejection of rejection" concept, regarding how we treat others, particularly those who are different from us?

RABBI: I am unfamiliar with "rejection of rejection." But Torah supports human equality.

ODUPA: How can we best keep our commitment to our faith and heritage, even when it is challenging?

RABBI: Performing what is true and good is unaffected by unfortunate circumstances. Becoming poor, sick or afflicted does not diminish the great joy and benefit in Torah study and performing mitzvahs. One experiencing poor circumstances should reflect on his actions, and perfect his ways and pray, so God can assist him. One must trust in God, as His providence over the patriarchs in all areas of their lives is a lesson for how He relates to all mankind. As He assisted those great individuals, He does not change and will act the same for anyone following their perfections. ■

Torah Complies with our Nature

ALEX: You write: "The highest level is where a person loves his Torah study; he does not view it as an obligation." However, aren't we supposed to view serving Hashem as

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LETTERS

fulfilling His will—an “obligation?” One serving God from pure love joins fulfilling God’s will and seeing it as a pleasurable activity, but not eliminating “obligation.”

RABBI: Recognizing the “obligation” to study Torah does not obscure the enjoyment. But he does not act as one under duress, as suggested by the term “obligation.” This is my meaning. He is fully desirous to meet the obligation to learn Torah, so there is no conflict or sense of pressure.

ALEX: You write: “Judaism is perfectly conforms with human nature.” But what about statements of the Rambam that one requires withdrawal from lusts to perfect the soul. One has to fight against the bodily desires.

RABBI: At life’s start, man is still following his emotions until he studies Torah, accepts its ideals and follows them. This transition from emotions to intellect can be a struggle, so in this sense you are right. Judaism conforms to man once he travels on the path of perfection. Once man sees the truth and the value of intellectual and moral perfection, Torah completely complies with this perfected person’s nature. But of course, if man is corrupt, and fails to follow Torah, he will find conflict with everything Torah asks. ■



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?

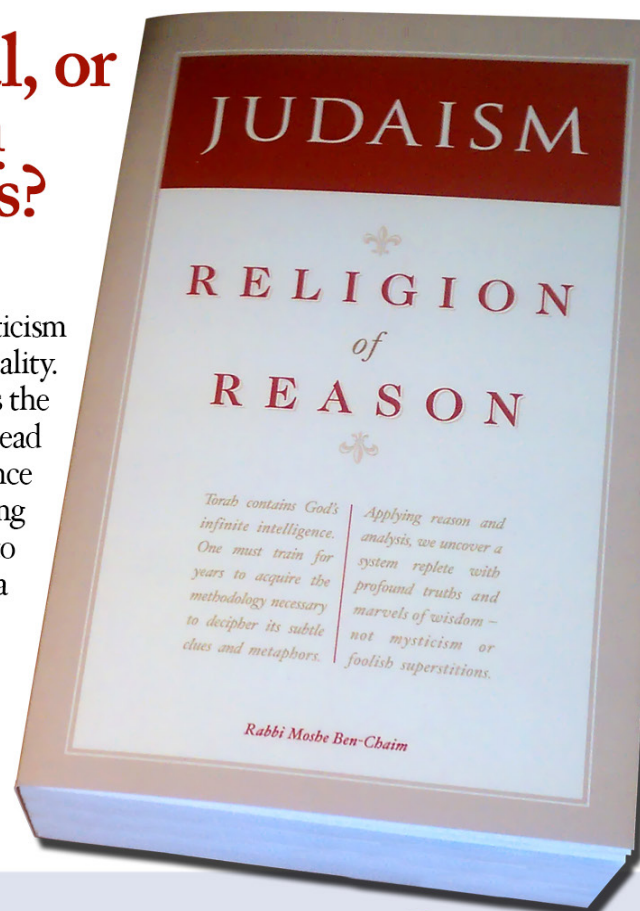
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Superstition	God isn't everywhere
Astrology	How God teaches man
Praying to the dead	The meaning of life
Reincarnation	Does idolatry work?
Bashert	Angels
Why the good suffer	The secret of the Ark
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MOSES VS. AARON

THE GREATER TEACHER

Rabbi Israel Chait — Written by a student

These are the children of Aaron and Moses, on the day that God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai (Num. 3:1).

As Moses' children are not mentioned, Rashi explains why Aaron's sons fill the capacity of Moses' "children":

Whomever teaches his friend's son Torah, it is considered as if he bore his friend's son.

The very next Rashi says:

Aaron's offspring were rendered as his (Moses') own, since Moses taught them what he learned from God's mouth.

These two Rashis seem redundant. What is the unique message of each one?

Psalms 27:10 says:

Though my father and mother abandoned me, the LORD will take me in.

Rashi comments:

At the time of intercourse, the parents' intent was for their own pleasure. Once they completed their pleasure, he turned his face to You and she turned her face to You.

Why should we honor parents? Rashi says parents gratified their instinctual urges, and that's why a child exists. As parents intended to satisfy themselves, why should this demand honor from the child? They did not intend their intercourse to benefit a child, but only to satisfy their desires. This is the meaning of "my parents abandoned me": although not yet existing during intercourse, the child is "as if" abandoned, since during intercourse, the parents paid no attention to the child-to-be, but only to their instinctual gratification. Rashi then says, "The Holy Blessed One protected the drop [semen] and created the embryo." The embryo's life is due to God. Thus, honoring parents—honoring that institution that generates life—must target honoring God, who is the true cause. That is why the

command to honor parents is placed in the first of the two tablets, which address man's relationship with God. One might think honoring parents belongs on the second tablet that addresses interpersonal laws. But God—not parents—is the focus of the honor given to parents.

As honoring parents targets honoring God, one who teaches Torah to his friend's son plays the true "parental" role: he causes the son to honor God in a far greater measure than the biological parent. The teacher fills the truer parental capacity that biological parents intend to fill: to imbue the son with honor for God. This is the meaning of the first Rashi: "Whomever teaches his friend's son Torah, it is considered as if he bore his son."

The second Rashi says:

Aaron's offspring were rendered as Moses' own, since Moses taught them what he learned from God's mouth.

This second Rashi must teach something new; Rashi isn't redundant. Moses' education of Aaron's sons elevated them in manner that eclipsed Aaron's education. When a person thinks, he relates to God. Moses imbued Aaron's sons with a level of thought higher than what Aaron taught them. While Aaron provided the necessary foundation for his son's knowledge of God, Moses elevated them to a higher degree. It is proper to say that the sons' degree of knowledge of God is due to Moses, in a manner unrelated to Aaron's education. It was Moses alone who brought Aaron's sons to the higher level of knowledge of God they now attained. In this manner, Aaron's sons were now rendered as solely Moses' sons. The second Rashi says, "they were rendered as his own," unlike the first Rashi that says, "Moses bore them." Rashi is precise.

As Moses taught Torah to Aaron's sons, he shared with Aaron the role as a parent. That's the first Rashi. But as Moses' education surpassed Aaron's education of his sons, Moses now functioned as the "sole provider" of that elevated knowledge of God. In this capacity, Aaron's sons were no longer his, but solely Moses' own creation. Aaron played no role in the higher level his sons attained due to Moses' education. ■



Individualism Gone Wild

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Individualism Gone Wild

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The fourth Book of the Torah which we begin reading this week contains setbacks and tragedies which make it the saddest of the Five Books of Moses. However, it starts on a high note as Moshe gathers the people to take a national census. The commentators deliberate as to the purpose of this count. On the surface level, it is undertaken because the Jews are about to embark on a new phase of their history. A year has passed since the Exodus from Egypt. The main accomplishments were the national gathering on Mt. Sinai for the Revelation of the Torah and the construction of the Mishkan, (Tabernacle) dwelling place of the Divine Presence. Having completed their Wilderness tasks, the Jews now had to embark on the next phase of their odyssey, the invasion and conquest of Eretz Canaan, (Land of Canaan) which Hashem had promised to the Avot (Patriarchs).

The census united the People and prepared them for the ensuing adventure. It demonstrated that every person had merit not only as a part of the collective but as an individual who was important in his own right. Judaism is unique and rejects the notion that it is only the society that is significant and that the value of the individual is merely insofar as he furthers the goals of the group.

The individual has great importance, quite aside from his membership in the organization. Thus, we see that Hashem related to Avraham because he discovered the existence of G-d and the proper way to serve Him. Notably, our tradition teaches that "He who saves a single life is as one who has saved the entire world" (Sanhedrin 4:5). We should also take note that in the time of the great Flood, the world was saved from

utter destruction because of the righteousness of a single individual, Noach.

The great Biblical commentator, Ramban (Nachmanides), maintains that the census required that each individual come before Moshe and Aharon and announce his name. In explaining this procedure, Ramban (BaMidbar 1:45) says,

...he who comes before the father of the prophets [Moshe], and his brother [Aharon] the holy one of the Eternal and becomes known to them by name, receives thereby a merit and life, because he has come in the council of the people and in the register of the house of Israel, and he receives a part in the merits of the community by being included in their numbers. Similarly, each of the people receive a special merit through being counted by number before Moses and Aaron, for they will set their eyes upon them for good, and intercede on their behalf for mercy, [just as it is said], "The Eternal, the G-d of your fathers, make you a thousand times so many more as ye are, and He will not reduce your numbers, and the shekels shall be a redemption for your souls."

It seems clear from this commentary that the importance of each individual is not nullified by the group but is enhanced by obtaining a direct encounter with their two great leaders. Societies that operate by an officially approved "party line" and "cancel" individuals who display a mind of their own, stagnate and do not reach their full potential. It is important to unlock the creativity of talented people, whose ideas are unique and do not conform with the accepted way of thinking. They should be heard, to determine whether their ideas have merit. They should not be treated as pariahs for having the audacity to think for themselves. The Rambam (Laws of Idolatry 1:2-3) describes Avraham as one who was raised in Idol Worship, but from an early

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Individualism Gone Wild

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age used his mind by day and night to challenge and analyze the religious principles he had been imbued with. Thus, the freedom to think is vital to the well-being and ultimate redemption of mankind.

The Jewish people have been at the forefront of scientific breakthroughs and technological innovations because of their great tolerance and respect for dissenters from the politically correct viewpoint. This has been the case even in theological matters. The study of Talmud is replete with debates and disagreements between students and scholars from all generations past and present.

However, the question arises, can the divergent views of non-conformist thinkers ever go too far and become a thorn in our side?

The Talmudic recording, (Rosh HaShanah 25a) of an incident between Raban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua, is instructive. The story takes place when the Jewish court declared the new month based on the testimony of witnesses who claimed they had seen the new moon. It once transpired that a dispute arose about the reliability of certain witnesses. Rabbi Yehoshua announced his agreement with those who rejected the purported witnesses. However, Raban Gamliel the chief judge (Nasi) of the High Court, found reason to accept the questionable testifiers, and he declared the month of Tishrei on the basis of their sighting. Thus, according to Rabbi Yehoshua, Yom Kippur which falls on the tenth of Tishrei, would come out a day after the Yom Kippur of Raban Gamliel. However, there was a problem. Was it feasible that the followers of Raban Gamliel would observe the Day of

Atonement on one day, while those who favored Rabbi Yehoshua would do so on a different day? This was deemed to be a serious threat to the religious unity of the Jewish nation and a major breach of the Halachic System. To prevent this, Raban Gamliel ordered Rabbi Yehoshua to appear before him on the day that he himself calculated as Yom Kippur, carrying his walking stick and money (activities prohibited on the holy day). In effect, he would thus publicly disavow his own well-considered Halachic position. Rabbi Yehoshua was a monumental Torah scholar with great spiritual integrity. The idea of desecrating Yom Kippur would be an unthinkable offense he would never undertake unless there was no choice. But on the day which he himself regarded as Yom Kippur, he presented himself before Raban Gamliel with his money and walking stick. He determined that there was something more important than his particular Halachic reasoning. That is the maintenance of the Torah System, which governs the lives of all Jews.

To preserve Judaism and the Jewish People, there must be a mechanism to determine the Halachic principles that all Jews will live by. Therefore, religious authority is vested in certain key institutions, which have the final say in all matters of religious behavior. Judaism encourages the most intense intellectual disputes between great Halachic minds, who are all dedicated to establishing the most precise and accurate religious practice. But they must keep their egos out of it and relinquish their beautifully formulated and compelling theories in the face of the governing authority. Thus, the greatest Torah scholar must accede to the decisions of the High Court, even if on an intellectual level he is convinced that they are mistaken. This very principle is incorporated in the Mitzvah known as Zakein Mamrei (The Rebellious Elder). This refers to a great Torah scholar who disagrees with a verdict of the Great Sanhedrin, Judaism's highest legal body. If he persists in teaching his view in the classroom but clearly states that one cannot follow his position in practice, no harm will befall him. But if he urges people to act

according to his dissenting opinion or if he himself does so, he is liable to the death penalty. This is because he destroys the viability of the Halachic System and the unity of the Jewish People by causing divisions based on different ways of practicing Judaism. This lesson has great relevance to our lives today. Israel is a robust democracy where individuals are encouraged to state their thoughts and opinions, no matter how at odds with the official outlook. Individualism is a wonderful thing, but only if there is an underlying commitment to the preservation of the state which renders this possible. Our greatest Torah scholars have been able to argue their positions vociferously while respecting the importance of sustaining the prevailing authoritative institutions. They had the wisdom and discipline to know when to engage, and when they needed to back off.

In recent years, we have witnessed what may be characterized as "Individualism Gone Wild". Various ideological groups are not content with merely exercising their legitimate right of free-speech. They have broken the laws, taken over highways, and trampled on the rights of others, thereby endangering the social fabric that binds us together. They should be asked, "Are you prepared to sacrifice the well-being of our nation in pursuit of your personal partisan positions? Are you saying that the tranquility of the society which preserves the freedoms and rights of all must be swept aside because of the desires of certain individuals?"

It is vitally important that the virtue of Rabbi Yehoshua—who yielded his Halachic understanding of a vital Mitzvah, to preserve the authority of the High Court and the unity of the Jewish People—be affirmed and championed. As we approach the Holiday when we reenact the Kabbalat HaTorah (Acceptance of the Torah) and while our soldiers are bravely defending the nation in a brutal war on multiple fronts, let us reaffirm the virtue of national unity in both the religious and political spheres.

Shabbat Shalom VeChag Shavuot Sameiach. ■

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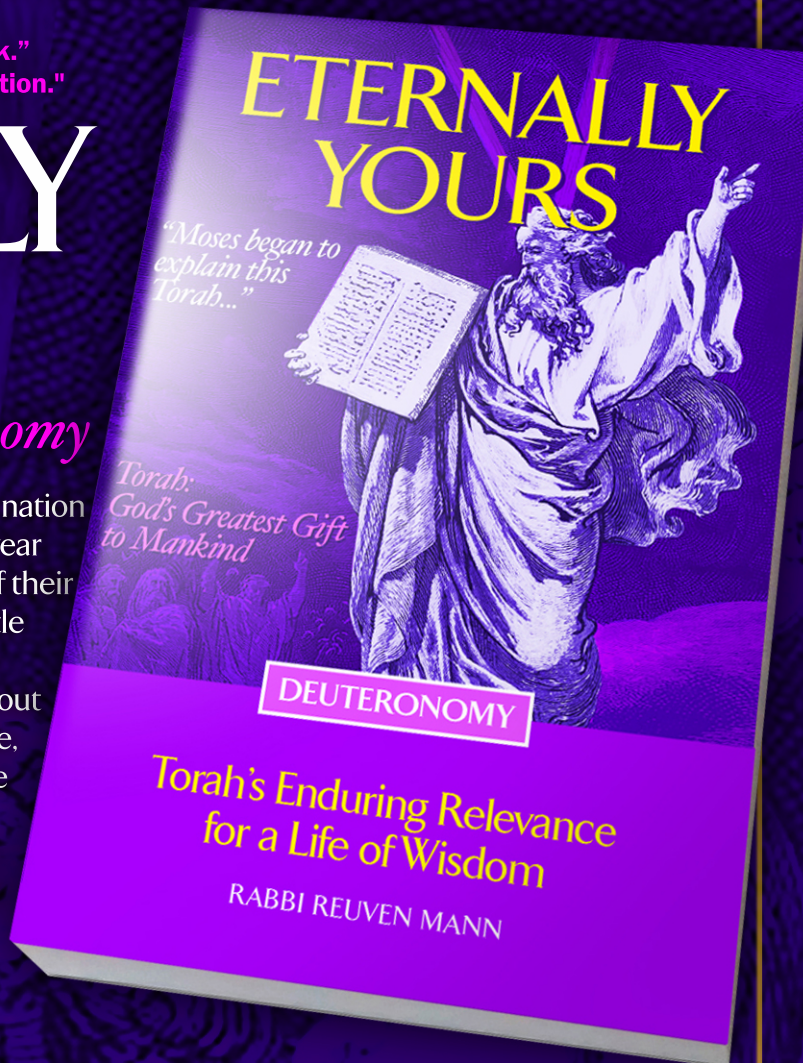
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SIN BEGETS WORSE SIN

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



God first mentions His blessings for those following Torah. Then He mentions His curses for violaton: “And if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant” (Lev. 26:15). Notice the verse describes a sinful “progression,” upon which Rashi elaborates:

Thus you have here seven sins the first of which brings the second in its train and so on to the seventh. And these are: he has not studied and therefore has not practiced the commandments; consequently he despises others who do practice them, he then hates the Sages, prevents others from practicing, denies the Divine origin of the commandments, and finally denies the existence of God. (Ibid.).

What is this progression? And if the sinner ultimately denies God, why does he have to go through six previous stages? Just skip the six previous stages and deny God immediately!

What is the state of mind of a sinner? What causes sin?

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It is one's preference to follow his emotions, upon which Torah imposes restraints, which is uncomfortable at first. We start life with only emotions, with no intelligent capacity to appreciate what is good. So many refuse to learn Torah, and thereby, fail to practice. Why does such a sinner then despise practicing Jews? They have not harmed the sinner. Why do they become the sinner's target?

This is because a person operates with a self image. As Rabbi Israel Chait taught, there is a phenomena called the "Reality Principle," which means that a person cannot knowingly harm himself. Even when a crook robs, he must justify it: "My family is hungry." He cannot perpetrate an act knowing it is truly wrong. Man distorts wrongdoing to make it acceptable. The sinner too must justify his failure to uphold Torah. But there is a phenomena that makes it impossible for this justification: he sees others upholding Torah. Now, the sinner's self image is threatened: "Torah can be followed by

others, and I am failing" he thinks to himself.

Throughout the day, a typical person strives to maintain a pristine self image. Our egos can go unchecked, and we can blindly follow only that which paints a perfect picture of ourselves. Pity the person who cuts us off in traffic, or says a slightly off-color word to us. Of course, a righteous person does not follow the ego at all. But a person who has not worked on his perfection, is led by his ego.

Now, when a sinner sees others upholding Torah and he is threatened by the self image of failure, what are his choices? He can either repent, perfect himself and follow Torah...or he despises Torah followers to remove the threat to the sinner. It's his way of saying, "They are wrong and I am right; they are the despicable ones." While still ignorant of Torah, Rabbi Akiva would say, "Give me a talmud chocham (wise Torah student), and I'll bite him like a donkey" (Pesachim 49b).

At each stage of the sinner's corruption, he is confronted with a new reality, and he responds emotionally. As his reality changes, so must his response change. At first, his reality is to follow emotions, so he doesn't learn Torah, and sins. He then despises Torah followers to maintain his ego. Next, why does despising Torah followers spiral down to hating the sages? This is because he realizes that Torah followers are merely "followers;" there are yet leaders directing the common Jews' Torah adherence. The sages' personalities then threaten the sinner. The sinner only confronts Torah followers in his day-to-day life, explaining why he doesn't hate the sages at the outset; he doesn't cross paths with them as he is not in their circles. Furthermore, Torah followers don't make the laws, the sages do. They are an authority that must be dealt with. So the sinner hates them as well. Hating the Torah follower alone insufficiently "shoots only the messenger."

This is all well and good to resolve conflict in the sinner's mind. But then he still witnesses Torah followers performing commands in actuality. His fantasy of them being despicable can't obliterate real actions of mitzvah he witnesses. He is then driven to stop their performance. But he can't, there are too many good Jews doing to many mitzvahs. Since he can't prevent their mitzvahs, he must deny their mitzvahs as inauthentic, and not divine in origin. But this causes a new conflict: he knows God exists and gave the mitzvahs. He finally must deny God's existence to maintain an acceptable self image. This is the progression. ■

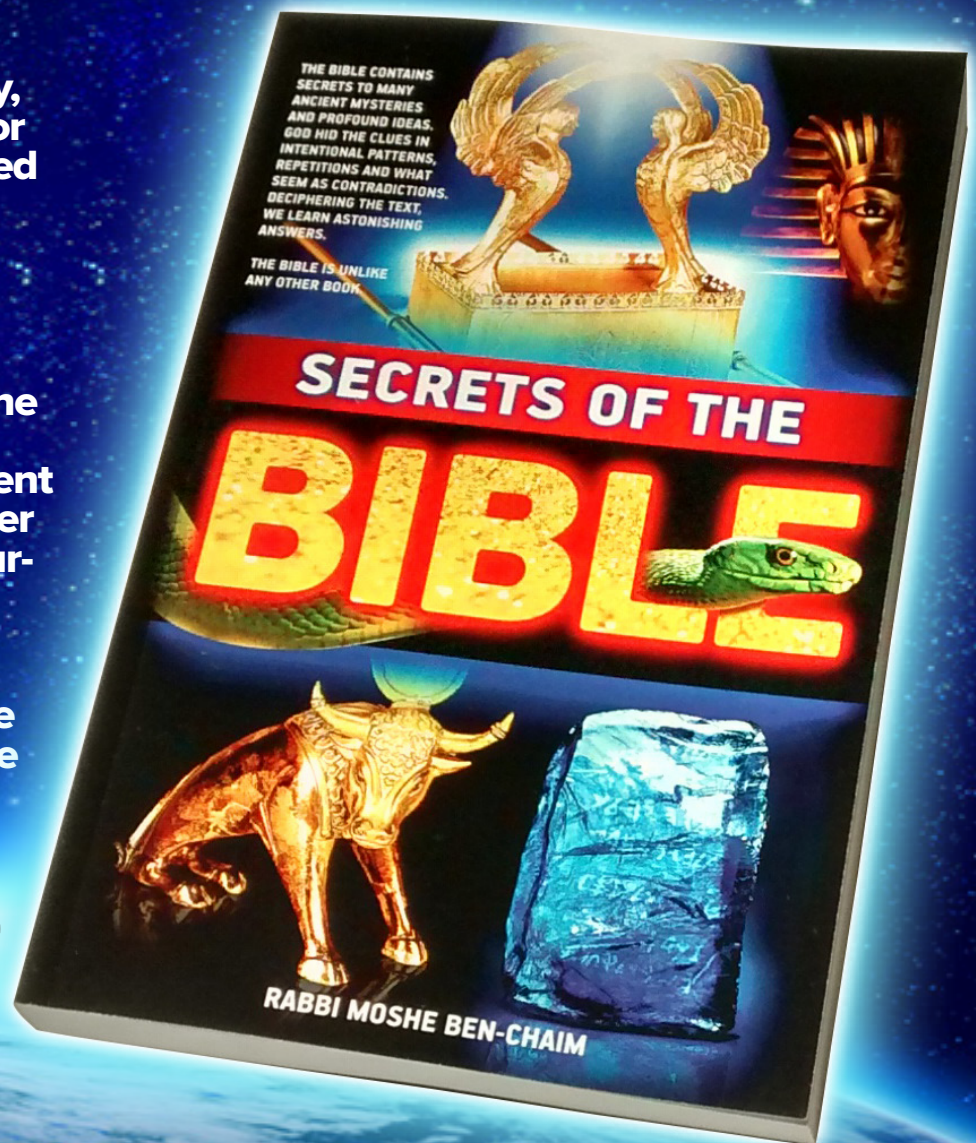
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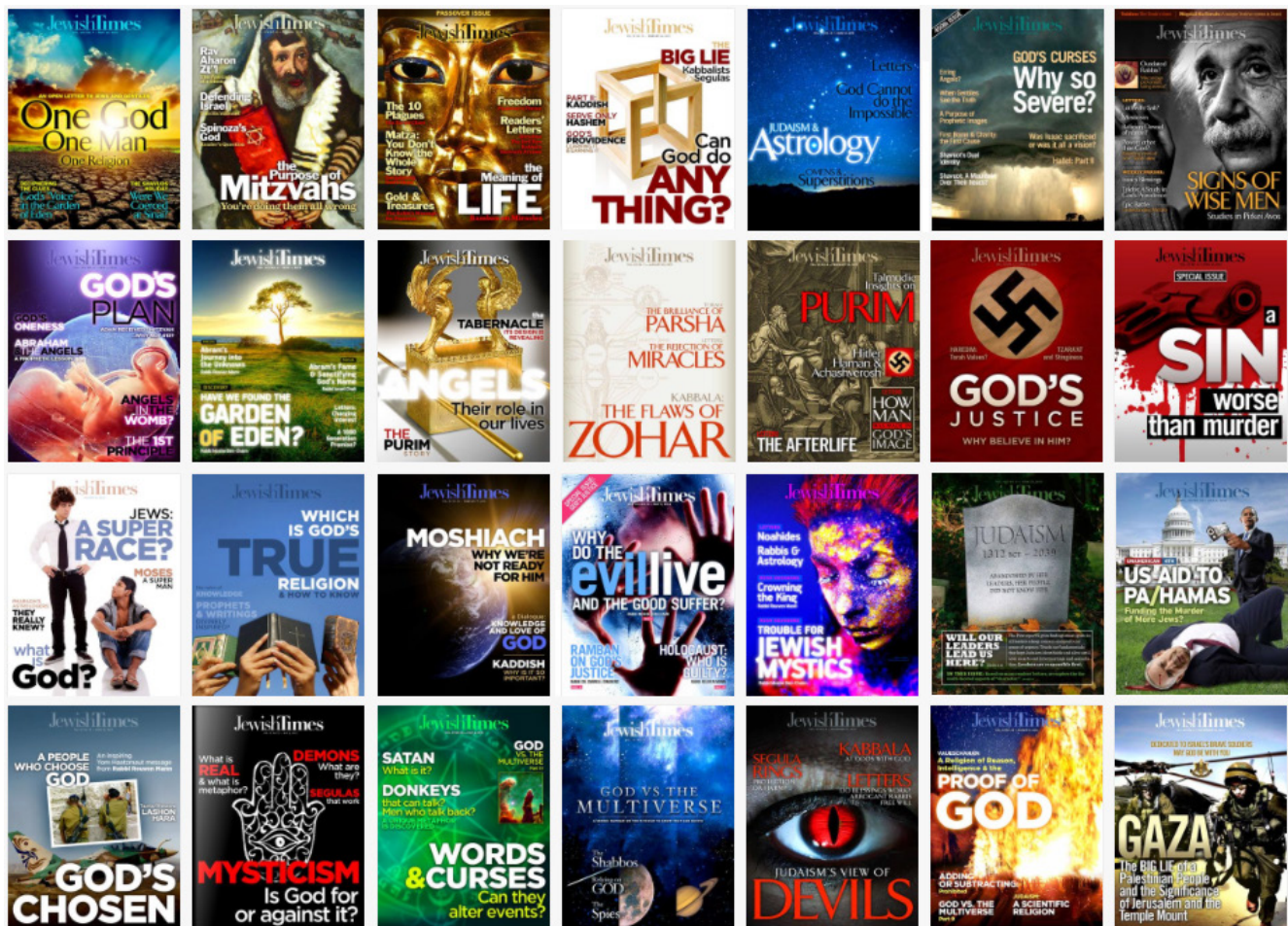
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