

We're Still Here

RABBI REUVEN MANN

A Great Voice

RABBI ELIE FEDER PHD

LETTERS

Reincarnation
Providence
Emotions
MidEast

REVELATION TO JEWS

PROOF OF GOD & HIS WILL FOR ALL MANKIND

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

True
Goodness
is What?

IMAGE

2 million Jews at Sinai
hearing intelligence
from amidst the fire

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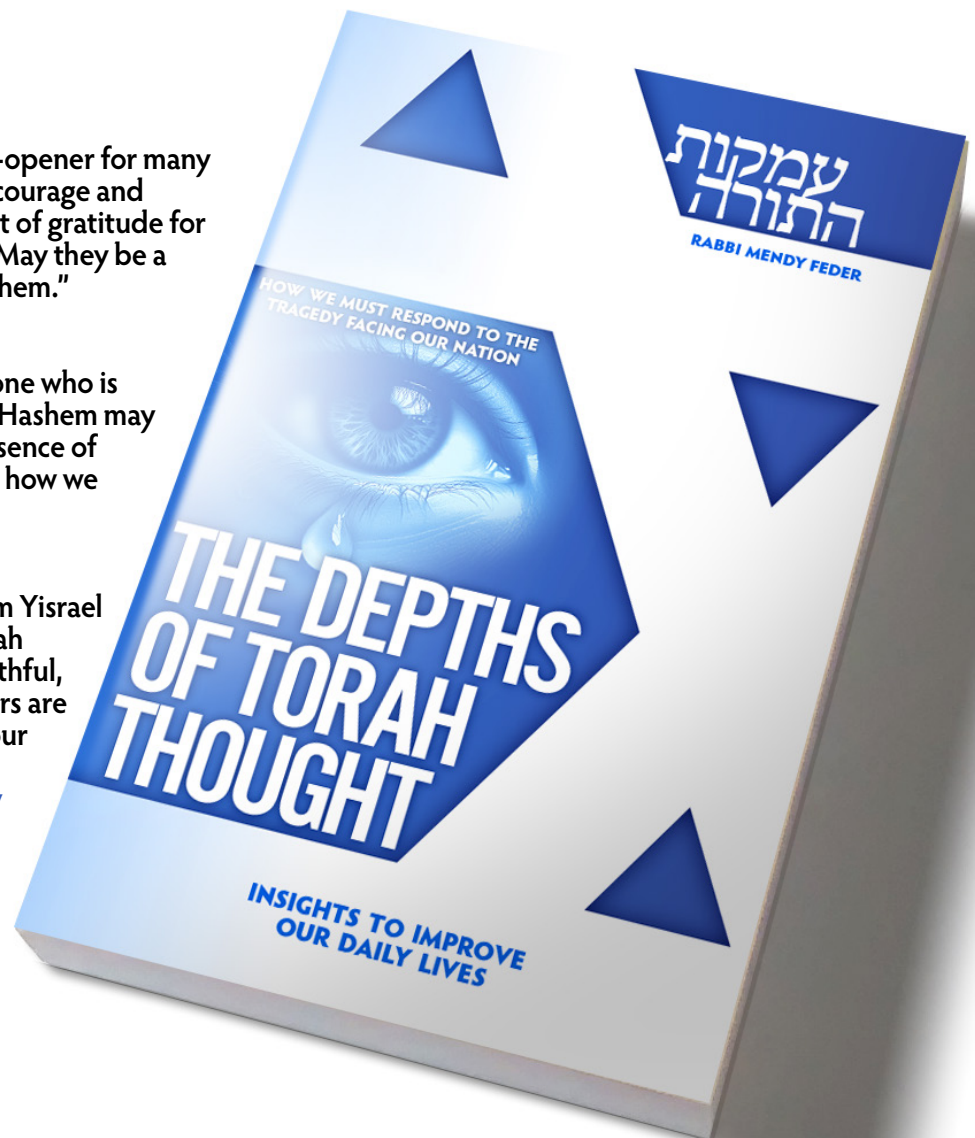
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3 Letters

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
Many topics addressed

6 God's Will

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
Moses directs us to 2 fundamentals

8 Fundamentals

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
Primary truths behind everything

10 Still Here

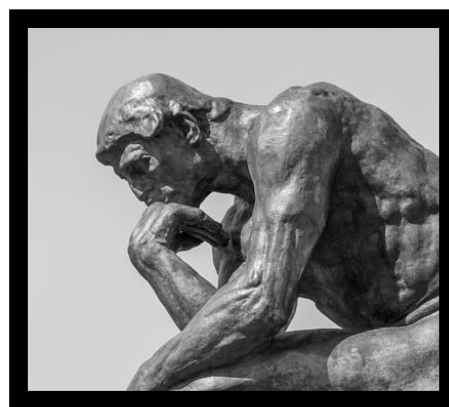
RABBI REUVEN MANN
The Jewish people

13 Great Sound

RABBI ELIE FEDER PHD
The meaning behind "Lo Yasaf"

15 Goodness

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM
What is of true value?



DISSIMILAR TO EVERYTHING

When attempting to understand truths, often we are trapped by cherished or false beliefs, or the respect of superiors, which inhibits reason, honest inquiry and rejection of fallacy. There is a hierarchy of accepting opinions: the authoritative view being God's words. All ideas contradicting Torah, Prophets or Writings are false. Therefore, notions like man is "part" of God, God exists "in" the world, or "part" of God is in us, are all false, as they violate God's words, "To what can you compare to Me, that I should be similar?" (Isaiah 40:25) Here, God rejects any similarity to anything. Thus, God does not partake of location or parts, rejecting these claims. We don't know what God is. Moses didn't know either. But we can know God is the first cause, He created space and the universe, so He is unrelated to location or physicality.

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Emotions & Torah Study

ALEX: Regarding emotions, what are your thoughts on Jewish educators adding emotion to the religious experience, whether it be Carlebach Kabbalat Shabbat, tisches with singing, kumzitzs with singing, chazanut on yom kippur, musical melaveh malkah? Are these distractions from focusing our emotions on wisdom? (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

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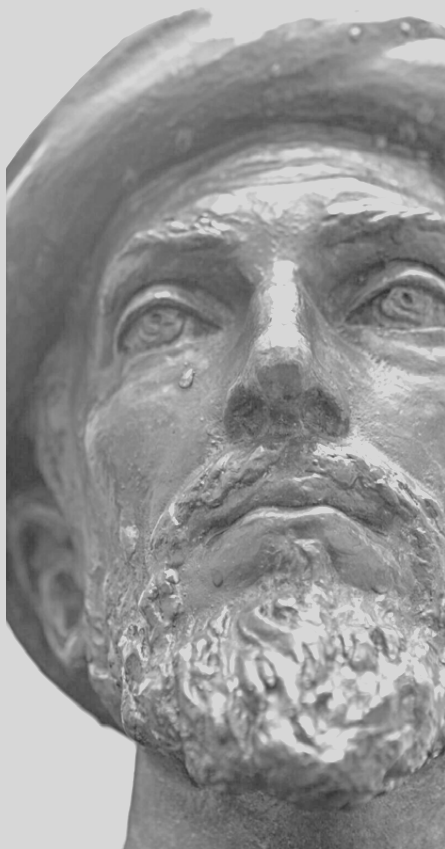
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RABBI: In class or shiur settings, if students are focused without music/song, I would not introduce it. Exciting the emotions distracts from the intellectual process. However, Rabbi Israel Chait explained that before Rabba taught the rabbis, he made a joke (Pesachim 117a). This opened the hearts of the rabbis towards Torah. Humor is effective. But a rebbe must conduct himself where he maintains utmost respect for Torah through. He may not be lightheaded or casual with students. We also see that song is a natural expression as the Jews sang at the shores of the Reed Sea after God triumphed over the Egyptian army; not one soldier remained alive. The priestly service was accompanied by song and music. And Torah is read in a tone in shul (synagogue). There is a time and place for emotions, but at all times, our objective is not the emotion, but that it enhances one's attachment to mitzvos and Torah. Emotions are a means, not an ends. ■

God's Providence for Torah Students

ALEX: In today's economy and high cost of living following an orthodox lifestyle (tuition, kosher foods, etc.) how can one follow the ethic of "Maximizing Torah study and minimizing work?" (Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:9)

RABBI: Jeremiah asked the Jews why they were not involved in Torah study. They responded that they would not be able to make a livelihood if they put time into study. Jeremiah then took out the canister of the manna and explained that God can help them too, as He provided for the Jews in the desert feeding them manna. Maimonides too speaks of God's providence over certain individuals, but he specifies their high level of sacrificing typical monetary considerations, and wholly following a life of Torah study and establishing God's name in the world. In his Laws of Shmitta and the Jubilee 13:13



Maimonides writes:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God, to serve Him and minister to Him, and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many calculations which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. God will be His portion and heritage forever and God will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared, "God is the lot of my portion; You are my cup, You support my lot" (Psalms 16:5).

Rabbi Israel Chait explained "ministering to God" refers to establishing God's name in the world, as Aleinu says, "To establish the world under God's kingship." This refers to every mitzvah one does to establish God's will, like observing Shabbos, and public

acts like building a synagogue or a yeshiva. Abraham "calling out in God's name" to teach the world of monotheism fulfilled ministering to God. Why must one's perfection include ministering to God? It demonstrates care for society, a higher level than mere personal perfection.

Maimonides' lesson is that when one engages in the highest mitzvah—Torah study—and does so based on this perspective, he earns a unique providence that provides him sufficient needs so he need not veer from Torah study. But you see, this person separates himself from people's typical monetary calculations: he forfeits security, excess and luxury, he forfeits peer approval, and greatly minimizes his work so he can dedicate his days and nights to Torah study. He forfeits impressive business positions, the fancy home, the new car, the finest clothes, and instead, works little so as to learn more. As this is God's goal for man—"he is sanctified as holy of holies"—God assists such a person. Our prayers also state this: "Those who know Your name trust You, for You do not abandon those who turn to You, O Lord" (Psalms 9:11).

Departing from all others and forfeiting such security takes a certain strength of character. But a person should have trust in God to this degree. Knowing God's limitless capabilities, one can share King David's sentiment, "God is the lot of my portion; You are my cup, You support my lot" (Psalms 16:5). To this person, what is truly real and of meaning is Torah and not financial or social success. ■

Which Book Best Addresses the MidEast Conflict?

RAWAN OSMAN: Which book do you think is a must read to understand the Middle East conflict better? (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

RABBI: Bible. Once grasping that Bible's Revelation at Sinai 3336 years ago is the only mass-witnessed event of God revealing His will, we arrive at proof of Bible's remaining contents: based on God, not biased human writers. Bible includes God's gift of Israel to Abraham's descendants from Isaac. It defines who they are today. It ends the conflict of Israel's true owners.

To understand anti-Semitism, our great sages asked why Mt. Sinai is called "Sinai." Sinai is the location God gave His Bible to 2.5 million Jews, a Biblical history accepted by the world. The sages say that Sinai in Hebrew means "hatred." Their meaning is that anti-Semitism originated when God selected the only monotheists—Jews—to receive, safeguard and teach His Biblical will to mankind. Anti-Semitism is sibling rivalry. But instead of other nations hating the Jew based on jealousy and nothing else, world nations should be interested in learning God's Bible, the only book bearing mass witnesses of divine origin. Without mass witnesses to any claim, the claim is bereft of verification. No others make such claim to mass witnesses. It is therefore wise that all men and women wishing to learn God's will for their existence, should study God's Biblical words applicable to all mankind.

JILL S: If one bases their position primarily on the Bible, the other side would reasonably base their position primarily on the Koran. Which, based on regional and factional interpretation thereof, would not be a helpful strategy.

RABBI: That's precisely why I cited the historical truth that no other religion claims mass witnesses of divine revelation. Judaism alone claims this, and its world acceptance verifies revelation, just like all true historical claims are verified. Other religions and cultures demand blind faith, as their claims to divine origin are not witnessed, and thereby are not proven. ■

Reincarnation

DANIEL: I read your response to the Tamar Yonah's radio show. I'd like to respond because I was surprised you reject reincarnation. God clearly stated that His ways are not our ways: "My thoughts they are not your thoughts, and nor are your ways Mine; so says the Lord" (Isaiah 55).

Also, you quoted Rav Saadia Gaon, who rejected reincarnation. But he had no access to the Secrets of the Torah, Kabbalah. And I wonder why you did not acknowledge the Kitvei HaArizal, the Zohar or other Mekubalim Rabbis Ashkenazim and Sepharadim. The are two pivotal works on Reincarnation: Sha'ar HaGilgulim and Gilgulei Neshamot L'Rabbi Menachem Azarya of Fano.

Also a source in Tanach: "Yes, this is how God intervenes two or three times with a man to bring him back from the grave to be lit with the light of life" (Iyov 33:29-30).

The Torah and God is way beyond our understanding. We are not limited to our intellectual faculties alone, which is but a single of the many ways of learning, knowing and gathering wisdom and knowledge. I find that the dangers of learning Kabbalah are not a concern. For the true Kabbalah is not acquired from reading nor being exposed to an idea, and unless taught by an knower of the secrets, one will never learn.

All the Best and Shalom,
—Daniel.

RABBI: Rabbis writings or Kabbala are not Divine works. The only words of God are Torah, Prophets and Writings. But all else which are man made, including Kabbala, are all subject to error. Man is fallible. Loyalty to kabbalists, or reputation is not the search for truth. Certainly when two Kabbalistic rabbis oppose each other, they both cannot be correct. Your approach of loyalty to reputations will make you accept contradictory views. Even Aaron argued on Moses, and Aaron was correct. Moses too was fallible. Your explanation of Iyov is a complete distortion of God's words. Iyov discusses how God punishes man with sickness,

giving man 2-3 chances so that he repents and escapes death:

He is reproved by pains on his bed, and the trembling in his bones is constant. He detests food; fine food [is repulsive] to him. His flesh wastes away till it cannot be seen, and his bones are rubbed away till they are invisible. He comes close to the Pit, his life [verges] on death. He redeemed him from passing into the pit; he will enjoy the light. Truly, God does all these things two or three times to a man, to bring him back from the pit, that he may bask in the light of life.

This discusses sparing a penitent man from death, from the pit. The verse clearly says that God saves him from going to the grave and God gives him three chances.

Metzudas Dovid too explains so clearly (Iyov 33:28) that God saves one "from the grave" and "from death" a few times. Not that God reincarnates man, which is a complete distortion of the text.

To quote God's words, "No eye has seen it, O God, but You" (Isaiah 64:3). The rabbis explain this as follows: "None of the prophets prophesied except regarding the Messianic era, but the World to Come, 'no eye saw it'" (Berachos 34a). This means that what occurs after earthly life is known by God alone, and reincarnation is an after-death matter. Furthermore, it is not found in Torah. What Torah discusses is the death of righteous people and prophets, and never reincarnation. And regarding there Baales Ove who ostensibly raised Samuel from the dead, see Radak who explains this as Saul's psychological delusion.

Finally, you also say, "We are not limited to our intellectual faculties alone, which is but a single of the many ways of learning, knowing and gathering wisdom and knowledge." Torah disagrees: "Be wise and know Me" (Jer. 9:23). Wisdom is attained through intelligence. There's no alternative. God does not say there are "kabbalistic secrets" or other paths to knowledge. That's mere fantasy and contradicts God. ■

REVELATION TO JEWS

PROOF OF GOD & HIS WILL FOR ALL MANKIND

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

“When you please investigate prior eras that came before you, ever since God created humankind on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? Has any people heard the voice of God speaking out of a fire, as you have, and survived? Or has God ventured to go and take one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and awesome power, as your God Hashem did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? It has been clearly demonstrated to you that Hashem alone is God; there is none else. From the heavens [God] let you hear the divine voice to discipline you; on earth [God] let you see the great divine fire; and from amidst that fire you heard God’s words. And having loved your ancestors, [God] chose their heirs after them; [God] personally—in great, divine might—led you out of Egypt, to drive from your path nations greater and more populous than you, to take you into their land and assign it to you as a heritage, as is still the case. Know therefore this day and keep in mind that Hashem alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. Observe God’s laws and commandments, which I enjoin upon you this day, that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may long remain in the land that your God Hashem is assigning to you for all time. (Deut. 4:32-40)”

Moses isolates 2 matters: God’s single revelation to mankind at Mount Sinai, and God’s favoring, selection and deliverance of the Jews from Egypt and His gift of Israel to us. As fire kills all biological life, millions hearing intelligence emanate from a fiery mountain proved beyond doubt that God exists, and what His will is for mankind. He gave only 1 religion, as there is only 1 man. Revelation at Sinai is proven like all historical events: mass attendees witnessed and transmit a single history of those attendees, at that place and date. Never again did God reveal Himself, or alter His Bible, Torah. There is no alternate historical record of the Jews at that time and place. If this event did not take place, we would certainly have an alternate story. The absence of such a story contributes to the proof of Revelation at Sinai.

Thus, God shared His will with monotheists, and He raised Israel’s status among the nations. Moses repeats these 2 matters in these verses. He tells us this is due to God’s love of the patriarchs who discovered God without Torah, and taught mankind to emulate God’s values of charity and justice (Gen. 18:19). To those who recognize reality—monotheism—and teach it, God shared His Torah and appointed them as a beacon to humanity so all mankind will be so impressed with Jews, to the point of saying about us, “Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people” (Deut. 4:6).

God’s will is that mankind recognizes His brilliant true laws and ideas, and gave Israel the task of embodying those principles and teaching the world. We are hated throughout time due to jealousy of this truth. And we will boldly continue teaching Torah undaunted as is God’s will, while man will either sustain their jealousy and anti-Semitism, or hopefully realize the truth and follow God. The Jews recognize all people are equal and we will sustain Torah study and practice so all who desire may learn and follow God. ■



Book Reviews

Rabbi Reuven Mann — *Rabbi of Young Israel of Phoenix*

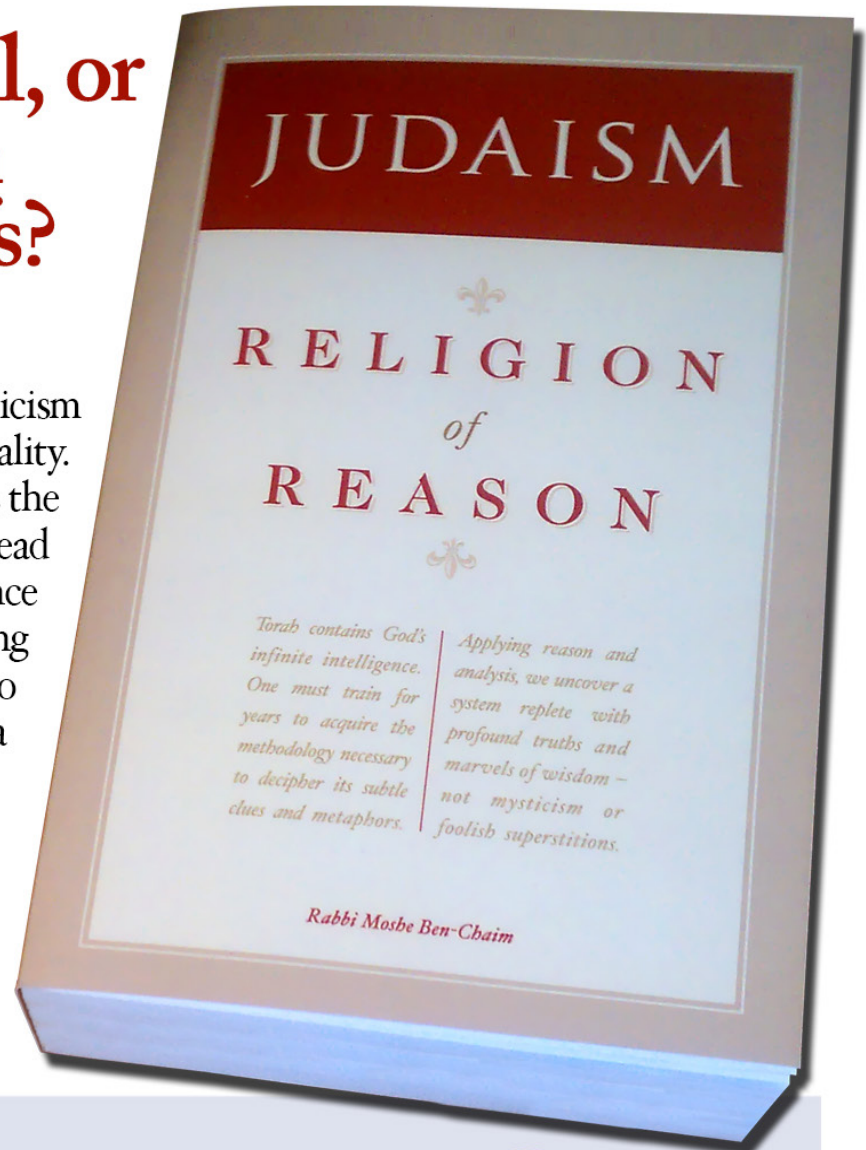
Rabbi Steven Weil — *CEO, Friends of the IDF*

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Rabbis' blessings
Can God do Anything?
Superstition
Astrology
Praying to the dead
Reincarnation
Bashert
Why the good suffer
Is God running my life?
Segulas & amulets
Shadim – “demons”
Reward and punishment

Afflictions
Ayin harah – “Evil eye”
The age of the universe
God isn't everywhere
How God teaches man
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Maimonides' Torah Fundamentals

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Maimonides opens his Mishneh Torah with the most fundamental truths:

The fundamental of all fundamentals and the pillar of wisdoms is to know that there is a first existence. And He brought into being all existences. All the beings of the heavens, Earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being (Torah Fundamentals 1:1).

What's the difference between "fundamental" of all fundamentals, and "pillar" of all wisdoms? And to what other fundamentals does Maimonides refer?

As our great Jewish leader Maimonides wrote about this topic, it is obligatory for every human to patiently and carefully grasp his message. This obligation is compounded by the fact that Maimonides commenced his masterpiece with this lesson.

Maimonides mentions "fundamentals" before he mentions "pillars of wisdom" because fundamentals are more essential. This means that wisdoms or sciences fall below fundamentals, as all sciences are built on fundamentals. I'll explain.

Fundamentals exist physically, and more so, metaphysically.

Physical fundamentals are substance (matter), form (shape, size), quality (weight, temperature, density), quantity, relation (location, dependence), essence, and accident. These are the rubrics of the entire physical world.

But there exists something more grand: wisdom and laws, which correlate to a "plan" and a "guide" respectively. God employed His wisdom in planning the world, and then He formed laws to guide the world. God's wisdom preceded the world, and laws do not exist "inside" the tree or human body, but exist separate and prior to all entities. The law that apple trees produce only apples is not found "inside" each apple tree. For if it did, the tree's governing laws did not exist before the tree was made. Thereby, the tree would not be created to create only apples. For the law did not precede the tree. Thus, the law precedes the tree. Furthermore, only one law is needed to guide all apple trees. Similarly, we don't say there are trillions of individual laws of gravity controlling each molecule. That's not intuitive or efficient of such wise Creator. Rather, gravity is a single laws effecting everything. Now that's more pleasant to the mind.

Physical creations come into being only after their designs have been determined in abstract wisdom, just as a blueprint in the architect's mind precedes his building. That mental blueprint is quite real, although intangible. But this is relegated to the physical only. What are the fundamentals in this abstract realm of wisdom? Cause and effect is behind everything, as is intelligent design. When we say the "fundamental of fundamentals," we refer to that which is the substratum of all else: be it physics, justice or morality, we must assess a hierarchy of what is most essential, if we wish to know truths, and also what is best for our lives.

Fundamental of all Fundamentals

What determines what is most important? It is the first fundamental which gives value and meaning to all else, and that is God: the First Cause. That is, we must understand God's will, as He defines what is most important, what is creation's purpose.

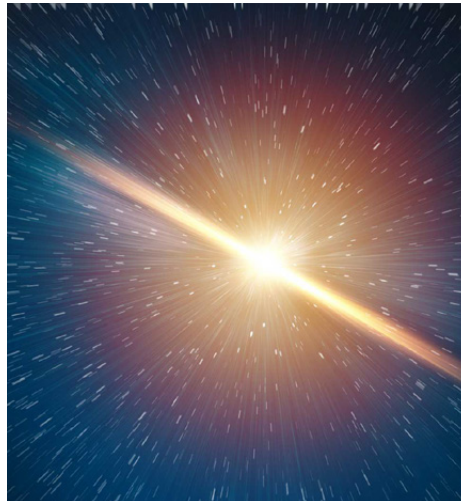
But before discussing creation, we must discuss God. God, being the first cause also sheds light onto our understanding of God. As the cause of all else including the cause of physicality, He does not have physical properties such as division or parts. Therefore, God is

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

one, although not equatable to any “one” that we know. There are not two causes for creation in the world, only He alone. God does not exist within the spatial confines of His created universe, as some believe that He “fills” the universe spatially. As God created space, He exists without space...without location. Similarly, ideas are not here or there but they exist. We don't say the idea of addition or justice is on that chair or in this box. Ideas exist without location; without any physical property. God too exists without location. Therefore, God is not “in” the world, nor are people existing “within” God. Some believe that there is no creation that is bereft of His spirit “inside” of it. These are all fantasies. God existed prior to the universe, and thus, He exists separate from the universe. Therefore, God being the first cause dictates these other fundamentals just mentioned. God being the first cause is the fundamental of all other fundamentals concerning God. God also does not exist in time, as He created it.

The Universe is not without Design

God's amazing marvels and choreographed systems are unnecessary for Him. Even without their creations, He is aware of His amazing abilities and His potential creations. Therefore, creation must be for observers: angels and for man. We know of no other beings possessing intelligence. The universe is a laboratory for angels and man to admire God's wisdom and investigate greater truths. Creation bears intricate design. The study of creation requires hierarchical categorization. For example, cause and effect is a most primary feature as it relates to how and why something exists. This is primary, as existence is the most primary feature of everything. All of the qualities and accidents of all creations first depend on the “existence” of that very thing. Existence underlies all other qualities. As the most primary feature, we must inquire as to the purpose of the existence of each and every creation. Understanding creations' purpose educates us on man's relationship to this creation, how to engage it or use it, conveying what God's will is for



both the creation and man. Without knowing God gave existence to everything—the fundamental of all fundamentals—all fundamentals are bereft of their true meaning. In other words, without knowing God's existence, we may not suggest any design or purpose to creation. We are ignorant of a planner and His plan. We must then assume the accidental occurrence of the universe. But then we are confronted with the disturbance of such precise design without a designer. But by accepting God as the sole cause, we can investigate the design of everything: substance, form and governing laws, which unveil the purposes of creations. We find God's will. For God created varying creations for a reason. Thus, the unique design of each creation reveals God's will for its use by man. We must give equal importance to studying the human design and all of man's faculties and traits. King Solomon did so, and shared it in his book Koheles. And the Rabbis did so, and shared it in their work Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avos). Most primarily we have Torah with its positive and negative commands and depictions of the patriarchs' and matriarchs' values as our primary guide to truths, morality and justice.

The Universe Operates by Reason

This is another equally vital fundamental: extreme wisdom is found in every corner of the universe. Why is this so? We cannot explain wisdom by viewing the universe as an accidental occurrence. Here too Maimonides' primary fundamental of God's existence explains why

there is wisdom everywhere: His creations reflect His wisdom. What are the categories of evident wise design? Everything in the universe is composed of substance, form and governing laws. For civilizations to exist, land could not be soft to support populations and structures, so God created Earth as hard substances. For water to reach distant dry lands, God formed it to flow, and flowing is a natural law or property. Here we have examples of God's design of substance, form and natural laws, which reveal God's will for man to live suitably to his nature. Thus, man's need for stable ground to build shelters, and his thirst, are accommodated by God's natural design. Again, knowledge of a Designer is required to understand knowledge of creation. God also designed man with the affect that the perception of creation's brilliance provides happiness. And God designed man with the intense energy to fuel his pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge operates through certain functions and categories, such as equation. We observe multiple existences and through our innate faculty to make comparisons, we differentiate existences, we identify friends from enemies, food from inedible things, and so on. We didn't have to learn to compare; that's an innate function of the mind. Comparison also applies to all knowledge, like matters of justice. By comparing and distinguishing greed from charity, we can judge proper morality. We deduce that as God implanted in us the capacity to compare, induce and deduce, that He wants us to discover His intended lessons and live by them. Again we see that God's existence is necessary as the fundamental of all other truths.

Pillar of all Wisdom

This takes us to Maimonides' second statement: the knowledge of a first cause is a “pillar of wisdom.” For without knowing God caused all, we dismiss an “authoritative” determination of morality. Only the creator of all life can determine in which cases life is precious, and in which cases life should be terminated. There is far more to discuss. ■



We Are Still Here!

RABBI REUVEN MANN

On Tisha BeAv, which we have just observed, we recounted all the historical sufferings of the Jewish people. To those of us who were born and raised in America, all of this is foreign to our experience. In the long history of the Exile, no Jewish community has had it as good as we have. America is a noble country that absolutely respects and preserves the rights of all its citizens, regardless of race or religion, to live in peace and security. We should never forget or cease being grateful for that. However, the Kinnot (lamentations) we recited should be a reminder that anti-Semitism is not a superficial or ephemeral phenomenon. It is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. The Rabbis say that the hatred of Eisav for Yaakov is a “Halacha”, that is, a part of the natural order. Virtually all of the civilizations with whom we have interacted became enemies at some point. One need look no further than the Jews of Germany. At one time, they were fully integrated and assimilated into the culture and society. We know where that story ended. This invariably leads to the question: Can it happen here? It doesn’t seem or feel like it can, but our historical experience rules out the feasibility of confidently maintaining that it cannot. In considering our history, one gets the impression that we have always been a small and weak people in comparison with the mighty nations that oppressed us. However, we should ask: Where are they now? All the great empires that arose to destroy us have been relegated to the dustbins of history, never to be heard from again.

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And we, the despised people who were dispersed to the ends of the earth and reduced to a state of abject defenselessness, are still here. Not only that, but we are a vibrant nation with achievements in science, medicine, and technology way out of proportion to our numbers. This is in addition to voluminous works on ethics, morality, and Torah interpretation, which have impacted and illuminated the path of all mankind.

Our enemies have misinterpreted the real significance of Jewish suffering. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (the Rav) teaches that a major theme of the Kinnot is Christianity's theological gloating about the plight of the Jewish people. They have always said that we suffer because we have been displaced (by them) as G-d's chosen people.

This idea is expressed in a number of places, particularly in Kinna 20. There we read,

"Incline your ear, my G-d, to the disparagement and ridicule, 'Where is your hope? Your Temple will never be rebuilt!'... Incline your ear, my G-d, to those who claim that [the Temple] is abandoned, forgotten and cast aside, forever will it be desolate."

According to the great Rav, this refers to the Christian claim that G-d broke His Covenant with the Jews and permanently exiled them from the land of Israel. Therefore, they say, the Jews will never be able to return and

rebuild Israel and the Temple.

Much of Christianity posits the doctrine of "supersession," which asserts that Hashem severed His ties with the Jews and made a "new" covenant with the Christians. This idea was central to the historical dispute between the two religions.

We have always maintained that we are eternally Hashem's Chosen People. We have always contended that our exile is temporary and that we would ultimately be restored to our Holy Land.

Most theological debates are of the kind that cannot be resolved by empirical evidence. This one proved to be the exception. The prophecy of the Return has become a reality. The Jews have rebuilt the land of Israel into a vibrant and thriving society.

The Church took its time and was very reluctant to recognize the State of Israel. Israel's existence constitutes a theological challenge for which it has no answers. Israel is a thorn in the side and an absolute refutation of the claims of those who taunted, "Where is your hope? Your Temple will never be rebuilt!"

Therefore, as we emerge from the day in which we recounted the manifold tragedies of Jewish history, we should not lose sight of this amazing fact: the people who suffered these fatal blows, which would have brought down any other nation, are still here, alive and well.

Why is that? The answer is in this week's Parsha, VaEtchanan. In it, Moshe refers to the Jews as a "great" nation. He says:

"For who is a great nation to whom Hashem is close in all of our calling out to Him? And who is a great nation that has laws and statutes that are righteous and just as this entire Torah that I place before you this day?" (Devarim 4:7-8)"

We are an eternal people because Hashem has associated His Name with us. Only to us did He entrust His Torah of truth so we would implement and preserve it. And only the nation that fulfills the Divine revelation according to the written and oral law can lay claim to being His Chosen People. It is exclusively because of Hashem's closeness to us that we have survived and outlived all our oppressors who sensed our strange uniqueness and sought to destroy it. In this season of Nachamu (consolation), we should be grateful for the Divine Providence that has enabled us to initiate the process of redemption by granting us a foothold in the Land of Israel.

May we be inspired to grow in the ways of Divine wisdom and thereby merit to witness the time when the nations, upon recognizing our enlightened and inspired way of life, will proclaim, "What a wise and discerning nation is this great people. (Devarim 4:6)"

Shabbat Shalom.

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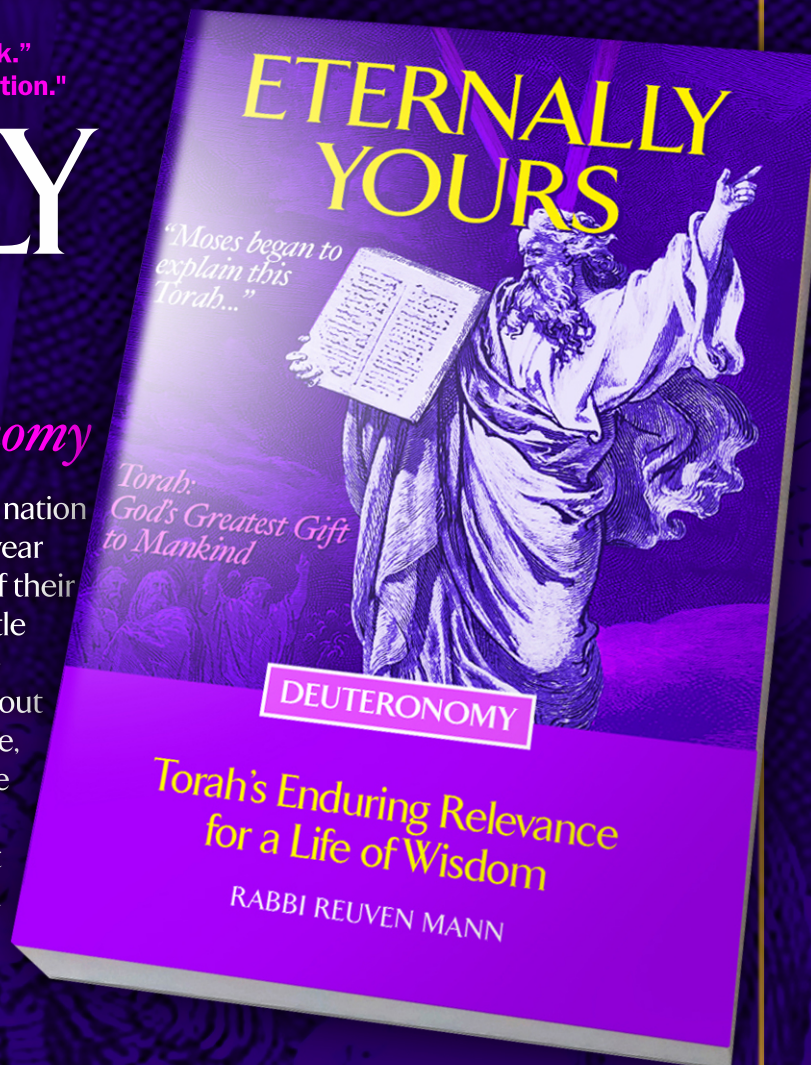
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The Great Sound that did not Yasaf

Rabbi Elie Feder PhD

The event of Matan Torah is the cornerstone of our Torah. The climax of this grand Revelation occurred when Hashem created a great sound that conveyed the Ten Commandments to our nation of approximately three million men, women, and children. The Torah (Devarim 5:18) describes this sound as a great sound that didn't yasaf. But what does the word yasaf even mean?

Rashi provides two interpretations: (1) It was a great sound that did not falter: Whereas ordinary sounds get weaker with time, this consistent and loud sound didn't weaken or falter; (2) It was a great sound that would never be repeated: This loud and public sound would never be repeated throughout the history of the world.

These two interpretations teach two fundamental lessons about Sinai:

First, the Rambam (Yesodei ha'Torah 8:1) says that a belief based upon miracles is a belief that is prone to doubts - after all, the believer may think that perhaps the unexplainable miracle was performed through some form of trickery or witchcraft. Sinai, on the other hand, was different. The entire Jewish nation experienced the event of Sinai first hand - they heard the voice of Hashem, k'viyachol, telling Moshe to give us the Ten Commandments.

For this event to have its desired effect, it was paramount that everyone present was absolutely convinced that this was no magic trick or loudspeaker but was a sound produced by none

other than the Borei Olam, the Creator. To accomplish this task, Hashem made the sound like no other sound: it was exceedingly loud and, unlike all other sounds, it was lo yasaf - it didn't falter or waver. While we don't know exactly what it sounded like - we can only imagine - we know one thing: the entire Jewish nation was convinced that this sound was Divine and subsequently devoted their lives to adhere to its precious commandments.

Second, part of the greatness of this sound was that it was never to be repeated in this public manner. The eternity and unchangeability of the Torah are ensured because the Ten Commandments were conveyed in an unrepeatable manner. If any false prophet ever attempts to undermine or change the Torah, we are commanded to shut him down and put him to death. The Ramban (Devarim 13:2) explains that this decisive treatment of the navi sheker (false prophet) is based upon the uniqueness of Sinai. Because the great sound that did not falter was simultaneously a great sound that would never be repeated, no navi sheker could ever produce evidence that could rival Sinai. And because Hashem told us that this sound would never be repeated, our nation confidently and consistently devotes itself to Hashem's eternal system. While the great sound of Sinai that was accompanied by shofar blasts will never be repeated, we yearn for a renewed shofar blast that will bring our final redemption and usher in the era of yemos ha'Moshiach, bi'miheira bi'yameinu. ■

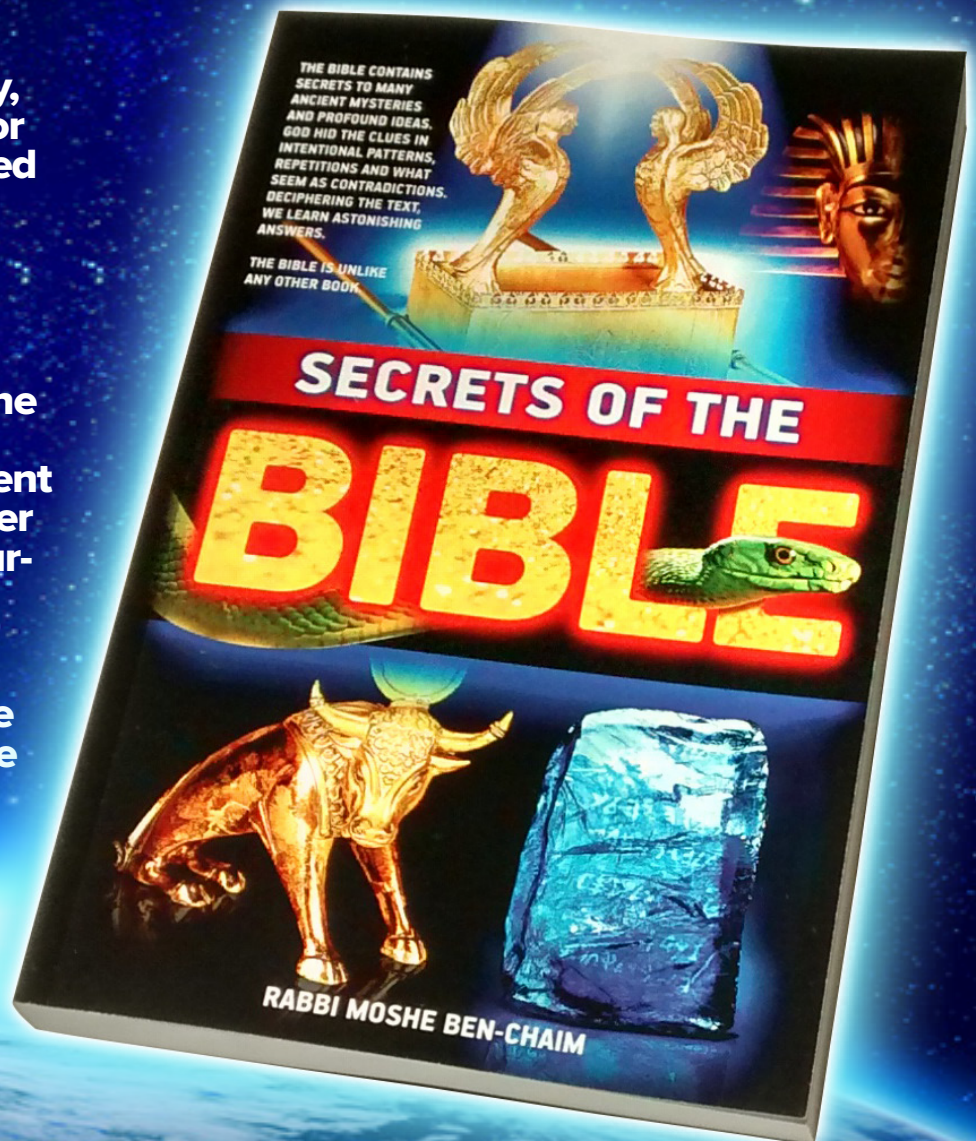
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True Goodness

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Children? Longevity? Wealth?

Length of life, children, and sustenance (wealth) do not depend on one's merit, but rather they depend upon fate. As, Rabba and Rav Chisda were both pious Sages; one Sage would pray during a drought and rain would fall, and the other Sage would pray and rain would fall. And nevertheless, their lives were very different. Rav Chisda lived for ninety-two years, whereas Rabba lived for only forty years. The house of Rav Chisda celebrated sixty wedding feasts, whereas the house of Rabba experienced sixty calamities. In other words, many fortuitous events took place in the house of Rav Chisda and the opposite occurred in the house of Rabba. In the house of Rav Chisda there was bread from the finest flour even for the dogs, and it was not asked after, as there was so much food. In the house of Rabba, on the other hand, there was coarse barley bread even for people, and it was not found in sufficient quantities. This shows that the length of life, children, and sustenance all depend not upon one's merit, but upon fate. (Moade Kattan 28a)

We must first define "fate." There is no "power" of fate. Other than man's free will, all follows God's will. There's no "fate power" that exists operating independent from God. We say this, as this imaginary power has never been observed, just like we do not observe truths to astrological claims, good luck charms, omens, and like. "Fate" here means God's will. Thus, man's merits earn his just rewards. But in matters of children, longevity and wealth, merits play no role; it is God who determines these. But as Rabba and Rav Chisda were both so righteous that rain fell for both when they prayed, why did they have such disparate lives? Bais Hillel was quite poor, while Rebbe Tarfon, Rabbi Judah the Prince, Moses and Abraham were wealthy. Why such inequality This

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

among equally great people?

If something depends on one's merit, that means it is an objective good and one should receive it, if he is meritorious. For example, one's merits earn him the afterlife, therefore, the afterlife is absolutely good. But as all great rabbis didn't always have children, wealth or longevity, this means none of these three matters are the true good. Children, longevity, and wealth, are not man's goal, or his perfection. Otherwise, God would equally grant Rabba with great wealth. Isaiah 56:4,5 supports this, saying that Sabbath observance by castrated men outweighs the good of having children.

It is quite interesting that the book of Job describes how Job valued these three matters over all else, and they were taken away from him so Job would subject his mind to diligent inquiry, weighing his cherished values, and eventually abandon his false value system. The lesson was that these three matters are not the good or goal in life, and Job needed to learn this lesson. He finally arrived at the corrected appreciation that the greatest good in life is the enjoyment of studying God's wisdom. Job's concerns about losing his health, wealth, and children were ill-conceived. When Job accepted the truth, God returned his wealth, gave him more children and gave him longevity as now he would view them in the proper context: as a means, not an ends.

Torah wisdom is the greatest mitzvah as stated by King Solomon (Prov. 8:11), and as King David said, Torah was his plaything, his ultimate enjoyment (Psalms 119:92). Thus, it could be for certain individuals that children, wealth or longevity would jeopardize Torah involvement. Genesis teaches us that God abbreviated the life of Chanoch, as he would have eventually followed the evil population during Noah's time. Therefore God took him prematurely so he should die righteous and not die as a sinner (Rashi, Gen. 5:24). Thus, in his case longevity would be evil. What is true goodness? It is the pursuit of God's wisdom. And this is something based on one's merit, and which God will always seek to offer man. Chaim Salamon then asked a good question:

A person's entire livelihood is allocated to him during the period from Rosh HaShana to Yom Kippur, except for expenditures for Shabbos, festivals, and expenditures for his sons' Torah study. In these areas, if he reduced the amount he spends for these purposes, his income is reduced, and if he increased his expenditures in these areas, his income is increased (Beitza 16a).

talmudic portion suggests that in fact, unlike the above, one's finances are due to merit. Furthermore, the Unesana Tokef prayer on Yom Kippur reads,

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Who will be rich, and who will be poor, who will live and who will die...but repentance, prayer and charity avert the evil of the decree.

These are two of the three matters stated above that are not based on merit. But this seems to suggest they are based on merit.

My response is that we are not requesting life or wealth. We are merely stating that God decrees these at this time of year. We are accepting His complete control of our lives; the theme of the day is accepting God as King, not personal requests. And when we say "repentance, prayer and charity avert the evil of the decree," we are not saying death or poverty would be harmful, only God knows who is better off with wealth, poverty, death or life. We repent, pray and give tzedaka during these 10 days to ensure whatever God decrees is for our best, be it life, death, poverty or wealth.

Finally, when we spend more for Shabbos, festivals, and our sons' Torah education, God's reimbursement does not necessarily make us any richer, it merely replaces our expenditure. Therefore, again, our merits expressed with these three expenditures do not affect income, for the funds that went out, came back. Our value of the fundamentals of God being the creator celebrated on Shabbos, that God governs man celebrated on the three festivals, and our value of our sons' Torah are all Torah matters, even though associated with finances. Therefore, merit does play a role. ■





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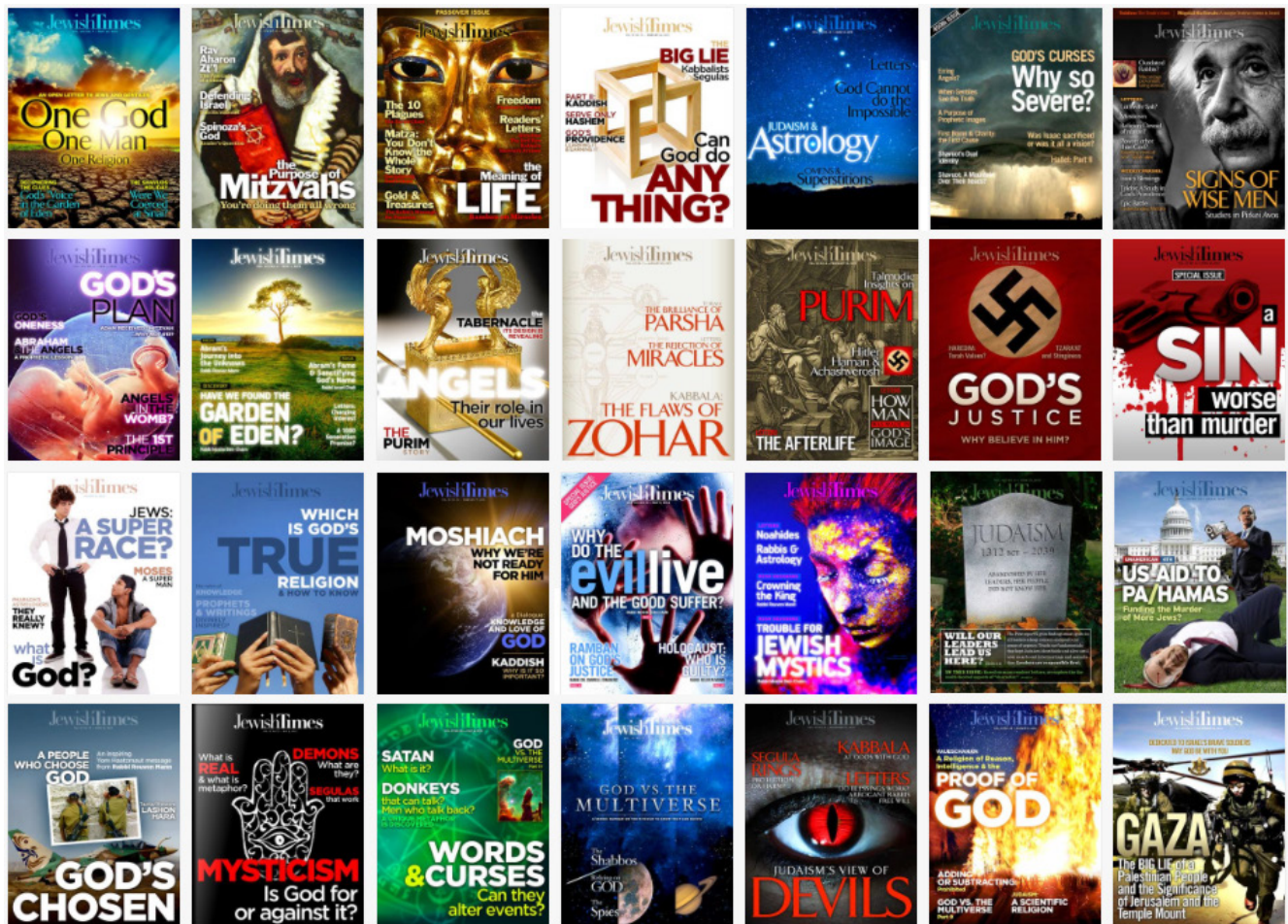
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