

# JewishTimes

VOL. XXII NO. 4 — MAR. 7, 2025

FUNDAMENTALS

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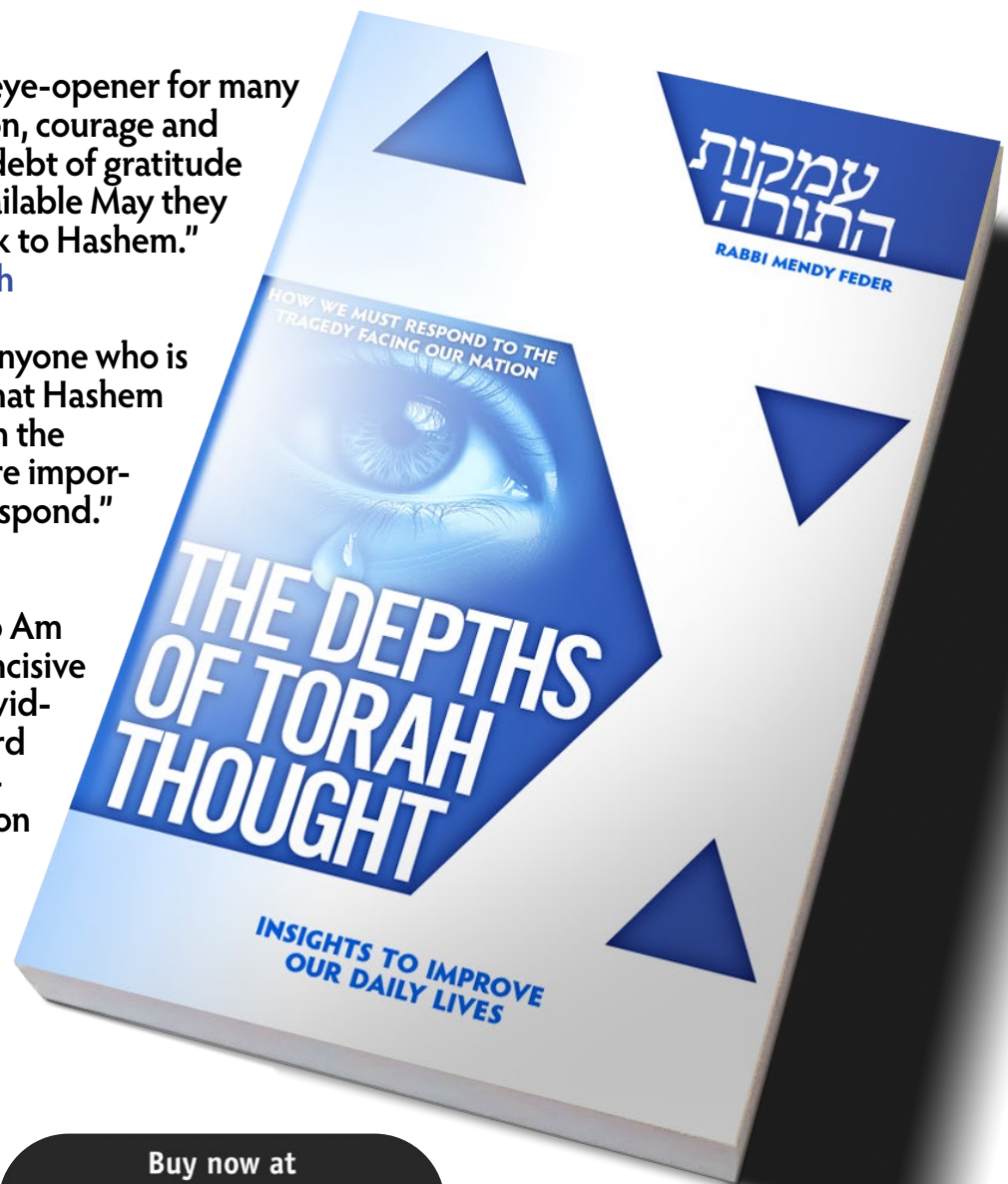
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## GOD: THE SOLE WORLD POWER

As God alone created the universe, nothing other than Him can affect any existence outside natural law. There is no force of fate or destiny. Stars and planets cannot determine personality types or affect free will. Seasons and times are nor fortuitous. Objects of mitzvah like mezuzas are defenseless and burn when ignited, and can't protect you either.

God gave us senses to determine all these truths—not ignore them and follow false imaginations. Yes, we have needs, but they are met either through our free will and ingenuity, or through God's help. Nothing else exists.

### DISCUSSIONS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## Identifying with Egyptians?

**HOWARD:** The Jews ate only matzah—not bread—throughout their 210 years of servitude. You explained the Jews' wish to embody free Egyptians as harmful. God's Egyptian exodus was not to simply offer unconditional freedom, but that freedom was to enable Torah practice. Thus, when the Egyptians ousted the Jews, the Jews universally grabbed the dough from their Egyptian Passover seder, "rolled it in their clothing and carried it on their shoulders" (Exod. 12:34), you said as a badge of sorts, parading their freedom with their intent to make bread. But God retarded the dough's rising to prevent the Jews mimicking free Egyptians who ate bread.

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Thereby, the dough became matzah. God prevented the Jews' damaging expression of freedom (bread eaters) as an end in itself, without following God and Torah. Thus, copying free Egyptians is damaging.

My question: In the following verses God commands the Jews to wear Egyptian clothing! Doesn't this mean embodying Egyptians is permissible?

*I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go. And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, despoiling the Egyptians" (Exod. 3:20-22).*

**RABBI:** The theme here is unlike Exodus 12 above. Here, God wishes the freed Jews to regain dignity, not leaving Egypt impoverished. As they ventured towards a new life, parents desired something better for their children: children—not parents—are the focus here regarding clothing. An additional elevation of the Jews' degraded spirits is gained through despoiling the Egyptians and enriching themselves. This comparison to themselves as newly enriched is a further step in dignifying the Jews. So, here Torah discusses offering dignity: parents gaining confidence in caring for their new generation, so impressive clothing is warranted. But during the Exodus, it was not about children, but the adults sought a dangerous identification with bread-eating Egyptians, and were prevented from doing so. ■

## Joseph Proving Pharaoh's Dreams were Prophetic

**RABBI:** Ibn Ezra on Bamidbar 12:6 says "all prophecies are doubled." Joseph had two dreams when he was still home. Then the wine steward and baker had two dreams, and now Pharaoh had two dreams. Joseph new Pharaoh's dreams were prophetic. The reasoning why two dreams indicates prophecy is because a single dream is a natural psychological phenomenon which Sigmund Freud says intends to keep the person sleeping, they are "guardians of sleep" as they intend to allow the person an outlet of his desires that were frustrated during the day. So naturally, a person does not dream the same content twice, as he already had an outlet for those desires. A person having two dreams that are identical must indicate a prophetic dream source.

Rabbi Chait explained that dreams are wish fulfillment. Even in a bad dream—a nightmare—there exists some positive element. It may not be the essence of the dream, which might be very bad, but there exists some good. However, Joseph said, "Pharaoh's dreams are one." If Joseph meant that to address the dreams' repetition, Joseph's words later would be redundant: "And as for Pharaoh having had the same dream twice, it means that the matter is imminent by God, and that God will soon carry it out" (Ibid. 41:32). This would be redundant. But the language in 41:32 indicates that Joseph did not yet discuss the repetition of the dreams. In truth, in 41:32, Joseph addresses the repetition for the first time. Thus,

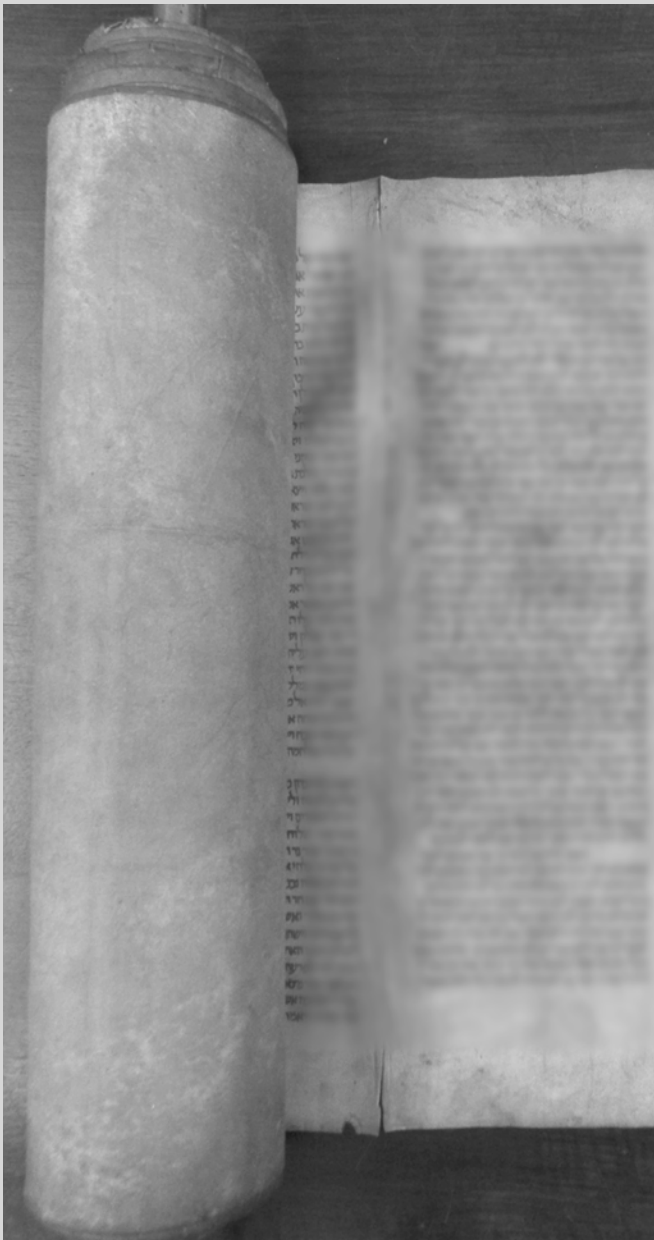


"Pharaoh's dreams are one" stated earlier cannot address the imminent nature of the forecast. It does not mean that there are both good and bad cows, one good element and one bad. "It's one dream" means this: there is no value in the good cows. Meaning, the subsequent emaciated cows completely obscured the healthy cows; there was no good in the healthy cows as they will inevitably be swallowed by the famine. The goodness of the healthy cows serves no good element, Pharaoh gains no benefit at all. [We can paraphrase the dream as] "One dream of bad cows completely removing the good of the healthy cows." The dream is not "good cows" separate from "bad cows." Both cows are tied together; the good cows are destined to be swallowed by the bad cows. Sum total, there is no good in these dreams. [The years of plenty were obscured, as if they never were].

Thus, there was no good element in Pharaoh's dreams. Thereby Joseph understood these dreams were prophetic, for they contained no positive element [natural dreams are partially wish fulfillment—a positive element—but Pharaoh's dreams contained no such good; no such wish. Thus, the dreams must be prophetic]. Telling Pharaoh his dreams were one, Joseph was not explaining the duplication, but he was saying that as a whole, the dreams contained no positive element. This was not a simple nightmare with deeply rooted conflicts. As there is nothing good in these dreams, they must be prophetic. ■

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## Lulav

**HOWARD:** Why do we wave the lulav?

**RABBI:** Talmud says that waving lulav up (what's above) and down (what's is below) indicates the heavens "above" and the Earth "below." These 2 areas include all creations, there is nothing else. Through waving, (using lulav as only a mere sample of creation) we attest thereby that God is the sole cause of all creations. Then, waving in all four directions north, south, east, and west indicates not creations, but events, what takes place "on Earth," meaning man's actions in any location. This now addresses the other aspect of God's greatness, that God not only created everything which is up and down, but He then "governs" man after creation in all locations. Thus, God is great as He created all, and that He governs all. ■

## What's the Purpose of Mitzvah & Halacha?

**HOWARD:** Mitzvah is the ultimate means of human perfection. How? Is it because you're subordinating yourself to god? Or something else.

**RABBI:** God knows all the areas of the human mind and emotions. Therefore He structured each individual mitzvah to improve man in every facet of his life. Each individual mitzvah addresses one part of man. But as Rabbi Chait said, the entire corpus of all mitzvahs fully addressed the entire human being, and missing out on even one mitzvah means man is lacking in that area.

**HOWARD:** Rabbi Chait says a person must understand Halacha for mitzvah to perfect him. But before it seemed he said just the action of mitzvah perfects, but here he says you need to know the Halacha to perfect you. Which is it?

**RABBI:** No, the action of mitzvah alone without understanding it will not perfect a person. It's not the physical actions that perfect man because that does not affect his mind. Man must understand the reasons for all mitzvahs which is why Rambam wrote at length about the reasons of mitzvahs. ■

## Love of God: Only through Wisdom—other Methods are Idolatrous

**RABBI:** "Idolatrous" refers to psychological and emotional modes of relating to God. Creating an idol expresses man's inability to detach from physical security, and properly trust in the unknowable, metaphysical God. Amulets too are idolatrous, even if it's a mezuzah that is believed to ward-off imagined evil forces. When igniting a mezuzah, it burns. Thus, if it can't save itself, it can't save a person. Assuming a certain date is fortuitous is another imagined power. Man's insecurities compel him to seek protection and security. But when he invents his own means, he acts psychologically and not in reality. This is what is means by "idolatrous."

In contrast, Judaism demands man follow not imagination, but reality and wisdom, which is what Torah teaches. Thus, only through Torah wisdom can man love God through placing his trust is what is real. ■

## Can Man Bind God?

**AVI:** How do you understand the Rashi that the brothers put a curse on anyone—including Hashem—who revealed the truth about Joseph's sale?

**RABBI:** It means that God agreed with not revealing anything to Jacob. This was God's plan as Rashi says on Genesis 37:14. In other words just as a curse restrains all parties to a single plan not to violate it, this curse indicates that God was compliant with the same will of the brothers

**AVI:** Yes but not because of the curse. It is because He willed that Yaakov should be separated from Joseph and eventually end up in mitzrayim? True, he could have gotten them there anyway He wished but there was a plan to be separated

**RABBI:** Exactly, there was no curse.... it's a metaphor to show how in line the brothers were with God's will. It would be the height of foolishness and arrogance to assume that a person can bind God through a human curse. How could the mouth control its maker? It's like a puppet controlling the puppeteer. ■



“And Moshe turned and descended from the mountain, and the two tablets of testimony were in his hands; tablets written from both sides, from this side and that side were they written. And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, inscribed on the tablets.”

(Exod. 32:15,16)



Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

# Torah's Validation

## Questions:

- 1) Rambam (Moreh, book I, chap. lxvi) said the tablets and their text were “naturally formed.” He bases this on the above quote, “And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God.” What does that mean? He does hint to some explanation by saying that man’s actions are “art and craftsmanship,” whereas God is the source of “natural” formations. What does that tell us about the two tablets and their text?
- 2) Exodus contains the 10 Commandments, and they are repeated in Deuteronomy. So what’s the need for the tablets’ 3rd repetition of the 10 Commandments?
- 3) As Moshe hewed the 2nd tablets, certainly he could have etched letters into them. So what did the tablets prove to the nation? The nation can dismiss any claim of Torah’s divine origin by saying that Moshe made the tablets and etched the commands into them. How is Torah’s authorship validated as Divine with these tablets?
- 4) What is the significance of the tablets being “written from both sides?”
- 5) What is meant by the tablets and their writing were “God’s acts?” Aren’t all miracles God’s acts?

Based on Rambam (Moreh, book I, chap. lxvi), who said the tablets and their text were “naturally” formed, I suggest the tablets’ text formed “inside” the tablets’ grain during Creation (Avos 5:6). That’s the meaning of “seeing the writing from both sides.” If the writing was only surface etchings, once you turn the stone around, you can no longer see that side’s writing. The only way to see the same writing from “both sides” is if the writing is “inside” translucent stone, which sapphire is. The commandments formed naturally with the formation of the sapphire tablets during creation. The commandments grew naturally inside the grain of these 2 sapphire tablets. This served as proof that Torah is of divine origin, for Moshe could not have etched letters “inside” stone. Man can write ink on parchment, and Moshe did. That’s no proof of God. The Jews witnessing Sinai and hearing “a voice within the flames” recognized a divine element: nothing biological can exist in fire, let alone communicate from inside fire. But future generations too needed proof of God—a miracle—after Mattan Torah concluded, and this miracle was writing “inside” the stone tablets. The One who created stone also created Torah appearing inside the stone. Man cannot create such text. God wants man to know that Earth’s creator is Torah’s creator. Earth exists for Torah (Rashi, Avos 2:8). ■





# Fearless Defenders of Torah

Rabbi Reuven Mann

## The Kohanim and the Legacy of the Levites

This week's Parsha, Tetzaveh, is the second of five Parshiyot that revolve around the construction of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness and deals with the special garments worn by the Priests during the Temple Service. Ministering in the holy sanctuary without the divinely mandated attire was strictly forbidden. The uniform of the ordinary Kohen consisted of four garments, while that of the Kohen Gadol (Chief Kohen) included an additional four pieces. The worship in the Temple could only be performed by the Kohanim, who traced their lineage back to Aaron and his sons. The Tribe of Levi was chosen to oversee the care of the Beit HaMikdash and its sacrificial program. They merited this distinction due to their zeal in opposing idolatry and their willingness to execute justice—even against close relatives—in order to eradicate it. Moshe, in his final blessings to Klal Yisrael, described the Tribe of Levi:

*"The one who says of his father and mother, 'I have not favored him', to his brothers he did not give recognition and his children he did not know; for they (the Levites) kept Your word and guarded Your Covenant." (Devarim 33:9)*

These words refer to the terrible sin of the Golden Calf, an event that nearly led to Hashem's destruction of Am Yisrael (Nation of Israel) and creation of a new Chosen People out of Moshe. Moshe's first task upon descending from Mt. Sinai was to purge idolatry from the nation, which required executing judgment against those guilty of idol worship.

## Unwavering Commitment to Justice

The great challenge this entailed was that justice had to be carried out against all the sinners impartially, irrespective of any bonds of friendship and family. Most ordinary leaders would find this to be an extremely difficult or even impossible endeavor, and certainly not one which would increase their popularity. Political figures, for example, often prioritize personal connections over moral principles. Before leaving office, former President Joe Biden, just minutes before his power expired, issued a slew of pardons. In addition to the pardon he had already granted to his son, he also pardoned his family members and associates—who were not yet even accused of any crime—in case they were ever brought up on charges. This act revealed his prioritization of personal interests and that he was not really committed to an impartial judicial process; rather, he viewed power as a means to personal advancement. Strangely enough, many people actually defended his actions, arguing that this is only natural; and is what a father should do for his son. Such reasoning suggests that acts deemed immoral or unethical are praiseworthy when done for the benefit of relatives.

[To be fair, it is hard to imagine that many other politicians would behave differently than Biden. The granting of pardons to vile and undeserving criminals because they happen to have close connections with a sitting President is something which has become a fairly common practice. Initially, when asked, Biden took a very principled stance, saying that he would not interfere with the judicial process even with regard to his own son. Did he actually mean

that, or was he only saying it because at that time he was planning to run for a second term?]

While this behavior is common in politics, it stands in stark contrast to the example set by Moshe and the Levites. Their absolute commitment and dedication to the true idea of Hashem and their abhorrence of idolatry, motivated them to forestall the anger of Hashem by executing justice against all the sinners—without any exemptions for close relationships.

Their actions established the principle that faithfulness to Hashem is not just another significant virtue. Rather, it supersedes all other considerations, no matter how emotionally challenging or important to us. It is reminiscent of the Akeida (Binding of Yitzchak) in the sense that there Avraham withdrew all of his emotional attachment to Yitzchak in order to adhere to the Will of Hashem. As difficult as it is for us to grasp this, it, in fact, represents the highest level of Avodat Hashem (Service of G-d).

## Preserving the Integrity of Torah

The characteristic which qualified the tribe of Levi for their role in the Beit HaMikdash has great relevance for all of us. A major theme, which runs through the Parshiyot of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), is that Moshe and Aaron and all the Mishkan's builders "were careful to do them exactly as they were commanded." This, the Ramban informs us, means that they did not make any changes from the Divine Plan. (Shemot 39:42) The implication is that, even men as great as these, might have had the temptation to find some (subtle) way to express their personal religious imagination in the construction of the Temple. The Torah is therefore praising them that they resisted this urge and maintained absolute adherence to the instructions of Hashem. That is why Moshe praised the tribe of Levi for having "preserved Your Covenant". Indeed, it is the mission of every Jew to preserve Hashem's Covenant. Our task is to study the Torah in a serious manner in order to understand it to the best of our ability, so

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that we can observe it and also “preserve” it. In the modern world, we are confronted with many versions of Judaism whose values are distinctly contrary to those of Torah. In general, they tend to agree with the social ideals of Judaism but take issue with the so-called ritual laws.

For example, they do not see the rules of Kashrut (Kosher) or sexual modesty as being relevant today, because they do not conform to their moral outlook. They seek to remake the Jewish religion according to their own “theological” understanding. This philosophy is clearly expressed in the charter of the Reform movement called the Pittsburgh Platform (1885):

*"We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization."*

Such an approach contradicts the Torah's principle that all Mitzvot, whether their reasons are readily apparent or not, are equally binding. Our mission is to preserve the authentic version of the Torah without innovations. In doing so, we must remember that all intelligent people recognize the great value of many of the Torah's so-called “rational” commandments such as Tzedaka (charity), Hashavat Aveidah (return of lost objects), Lashon HaRah (evil speech) and many others. However, the Torah also contains Mitzvot that are called Chukim (decrees) wherein the underlying rationale is not visible on the surface. These include the prohibitions of milk and meat and other forbidden foods, ritual purity and impurity, the scapegoat on Yom Kippur and numerous other commandments that seem meaningless to the contemporary mindset.

The temptation to “pick and choose” which parts of Judaism to maintain is very great. Still greater is the tendency of many religious activists to introduce deviations or to proffer clever new interpretations of ancient laws that are clearly contrary to the way the Torah has been understood and transmitted by the Masters of the Oral Law whose task it is to safeguard the integrity of authentic Judaism in every generation. In this regard it is important to recog-

nize that all the Mitzvot, whether Mishpatim (rational commandments) or Chukim contain deep and profound wisdom. The difference is that regarding the Mishpatim the rationality and utility are evident on the surface. The matter is different with the Chukim. Their deeper meaning is hidden from sight and one must make great efforts to discover it. The Rabbis say that King Solomon discovered the reasons for all the Mitzvot except for the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) and that Moshe understood even this one.

Regarding the Chukim, the Rambam states:

*"The Torah states: 'And you shall guard all My decrees and all My judgments and perform them.' (VaYikra 19:37) Our Sages commented: 'This adjures us to guard and perform the decrees as with the judgments.' The meaning of 'performing' is well known—that one should carry out the decrees. 'Guarding' means treating them with caution, and not thinking they are inferior to the judgments. The judgments are those Mitzvot whose rationale is revealed and whose benefit is evident, such as the prohibitions against robbery and bloodshed and the commandment to honor one's parents. The decrees are those Mitzvot whose rationale is not known. Our Sages said: 'I ordained decrees, and you have no license to question them.' A person's natural inclination disturbs him concerning them, and the nations of the world challenge them, such as the prohibitions against eating pork and mixing meat with milk, the 'Decapitated Calf' and the Red Heifer and the Scapegoat." (Hilchot Meilah 8:8)*

## Upholding Authentic Torah Values

If a person recognizes that the entire Torah was given by Hashem to the Jewish People, and that its elucidation was entrusted to the Masters of the Oral Law, then he must regard every area of the Torah as equally binding—without compromise. He has no right to nullify any aspect of Torah Judaism in favor of the shifting moral currents of the times. We must have the courage and wisdom to adhere to and defend all the Mitzvot of Judaism, even when they elicit disfavor. Furthermore, we must

avoid the temptation to be popular in the eyes of the masses, by catering to their emotional desire for Judaism to be in line with contemporary attitudes. Adapting Torah observance to fit contemporary values undermines its authenticity. Additionally, we must elucidate the genuine positions of Torah, even if this causes us to be ridiculed and disliked.

In this regard, we must take inspiration from the example of Avraham Avinu (Avraham our Forefather). The Rambam, in the Moreh Nevuchim (Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, trans. M. Friedländer, 3:29.), describes Avraham's lonely struggle to proclaim Hashem's truth:

*"... They refused to believe him, because he attacked their evil doctrine. I do not doubt that when he attacked the doctrine of all his fellow-men, he was cursed, despised, and scorned by these people who adhered to their erroneous opinions. When he submitted to this treatment for the sake of G-d, as ought to be done for the sake of His glory, G-d said to him, 'And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee.' (Bereishit 12:3)"*

May Hashem assist us in our endeavor to gain a greater understanding of all the Mitzvot of His Torah so that we can communicate them properly to all people who are thirsty for His guidance and instruction.

Shabbat Shalom. ■

Rabbi Reuven Mann has been a pulpit Rabbi and a teacher of Torah for over fifty years. He is currently the Dean of Masoret Institute of Judaic Studies for Women and resides in Arnona, Jerusalem.

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# ETERNALLY YOURS

*Rabbi Reuven Mann – Deuteronomy*

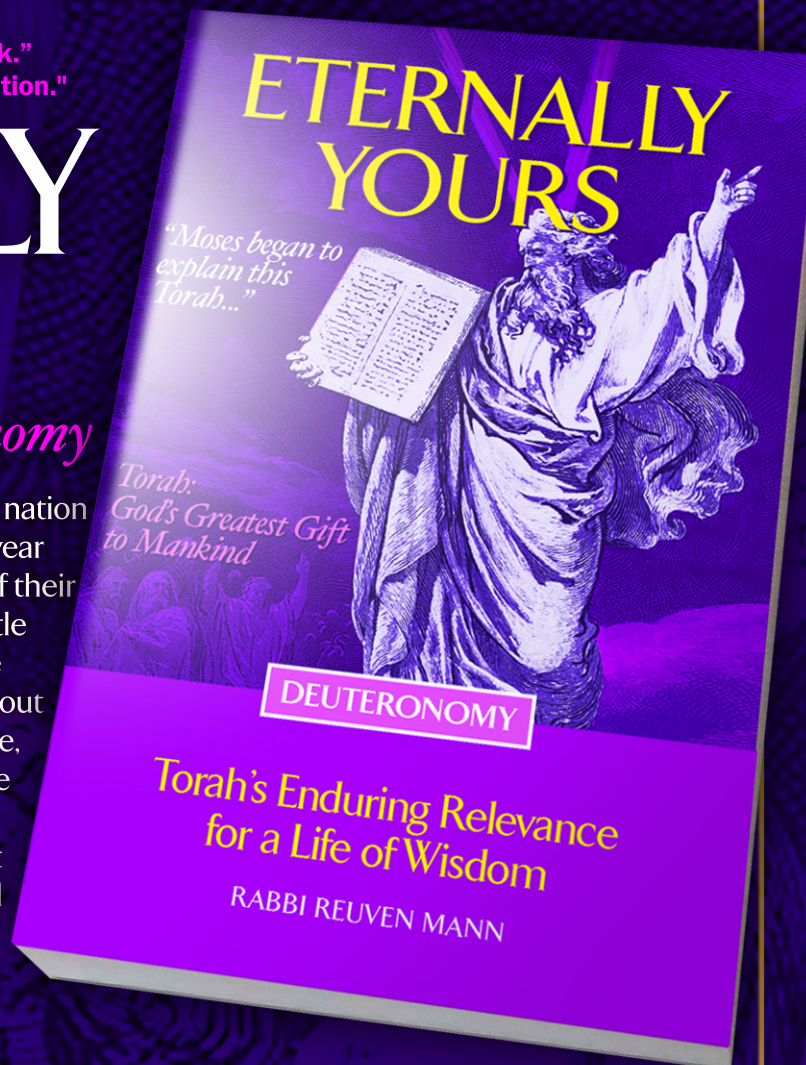
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# Idolatry's Many Forms

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

**QUESTION:** Bible/Judaism places a huge emphasis on not worshipping false gods. It seems relatively simple not to recognize false gods. But the repetition and heavy emphasis suggests to me that it's more complex than just recognizing the one true God. I know it encompasses things like superstition, but what else may be considered worship of a false god?

**RABBI:** Bible's opening verse teaches God's role: the sole cause of the universe, and thus, He is also the sole guide, as nothing else can control His creations. Maimonides commences his Mishneh Torah with the identical message of God being the sole cause of all. But there, he informs the reader that this fundamental truth is also the basis of all truths. We already gain sensitivity that this topic is most crucial. And the Rabbis add, "If one acknowledges idolatry, it is as if he denies the entire Torah; and if one denies idolatry, it is as if he acknowledges the entire Torah" (Sifrei Devarim 54:4). Yes, there is great emphasis on idolatry, but not only repetition: there are many permutations of idolatry.

## What is Idolatry?

Idolatry is the collective set of man-made practices attempting to gain security. A psychologically and philosophically healthy person follows truth. He trusts his senses as God deems we all do. Therefore he understands the world operates through cause and effect, and through God's providence for righteous people. He dismisses any baseless beliefs, despite his need for security. He wishes to live in reality. But many others even within orthodox Judaism, have invented or copied practices and beliefs offering the promise of security, success, marriage, and health. They deny Torah's many warning against idols, people, signs and omens.

## The Seeds

Youth and dependency have their purpose: we are trained in respecting authority. To assist in attaining this goal, just prior to receiving Torah on Mount Sinai, God gave Moses laws of honoring parents, courts, and Sabbath. To accept God's authority at Sinai, man is more primed to do so when recognizing his first authority figures (parents), then societal authorities (courts and judges), and finally God through Sabbath observance. Man is to transpose his recognition of authority, ultimately viewing God as the sole authority. Sadly, too many people and civilizations succumbed to cleaving to their first impressions of an authority figure (man/parents), the seeds of idolatry. They didn't train in wisdom, and therefore their emotions dictated their beliefs. When realizing their parents are mere humans who live and die, they become insecure in what will now protect them. This child mindset cannot abandon a tangible authority figure and follow an abstract God, so one creates "replacement parents" in the form of idols, gold calves, Jesus, rabbis, witches and warlocks. They sought security from that which closely resembles parents: idols of man and woman (father and mother). But these dependent minds also viewed the amazing

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heavens as higher than man, and so worshipped the stars, sun and moon. To reassure them that through their day they were protected, they invented signs they believed were warnings, like black cats, broken mirrors, horseshoes, 4-leaf clovers, red strings, and even checked their mezuzas when sick. Nothing was off limits when it came to finding security in tangible signs. Even calendar dates and heavenly events were viewed as significant. Viewing themselves as important creations, they looked to the weekday and zodiac on which they were born to gain insight into their forecasts: "I was born on Sunday, so I will be a leader as Sunday is the lead day of the week."

It is due to man's many insecurities and endless imagination that he developed such mystical solutions to his fears. God created man and knew man would deviate from truth and follow fantasy. Therefore in Torah He addressed the main categories of false security types by prohibiting star worship and heavenly signs, astrology, idol worship, human worship, omens, and all ineffective acts.

Worship of a false god—idolatry—may be defined as following a belief or act where one attributes an effect to an imagined cause, when no effect is witnessed (Rabbi Israel Chait).

We must search our own personalities for idolatrous and mystical tendencies, as we each have false beliefs unique to each one of us. Regarding the famine in Canaan, Abraham thought, "Wait...what is happening? God told me to travel here, and this land has a famine?" A mystical thought entered his mind that Abraham felt all should go well while following God's mission. But Abraham conquered that thought [and passed that trial]. (Rabbi Israel Chait, *Pirkei Avos* Chap. 5/6, p. 57). God desires to refine great people to even greater levels of perfection. So here, God helped Abraham overcome incorrect notions.

Idolatry rejects the most fundamental truth that God alone controls the universe. God defines not only truth, but morality. Knowing God alone runs all is the goal of the entire Torah. If we reject this truth, all else we do is a lie. Even if we live "kind" lives, we are not kind based on a recognition that this is God's will. We simply follow our emotions. At times, doctors will feel kind by medically treating Arafat, which results in more murdered Jews. If our sympathy is not based on God's rules, the Rabbis say, "All who are merciful to a vicious person, are vicious to a person deserving mercy." Without knowing God's absolute truths, we might murder



through abortion. When does life start? When is life sacrificed? "If one comes to kill you, rise early and kill him" is also a Torah principle. But a liberal mindset with distorted morality may argue that this is murder. The entirety of moral answers is lost without accepting God's authority. This trust in human decisions too can become a form of idolatry; it renders man as having a monopoly on truth. The rabbis teach that one must not greet his friend in the morning before reciting his prayers, as he renders man into an "altar." The need for human approval must be conquered: "Remove yourself from man, whose soul is in his nostrils, for what (bameh) importance is he?" (Isaiah 2:22). The rabbis say, "Do not read bameh, but bammah" which means altar. The rabbis' message: Don't raise man to the level of importance where you treat him as deserving your sacrifices, to gain his approval of you. God alone must retain your trust. This is the core, raw infantile psychological dependency upon man, lying at the root of idolatry.

Torah asks man to recognize God. Idolatry is man's attempt to gain recognition of himself, to be favored.

"For your gods have become as many as your towns..." (Jeremiah 11:13). Following reality—Torah—we follow cause and effect and trust in God. No other powers exist, that's Genesis 1:1 and Maimonides 1:1. Idolatry has many expressions, as throughout man's day and life, he encounters many situations threatening his confidence with fears of failure, from which man seeks protection. Thus, idolatry has many forms. Jeremiah states this. ■



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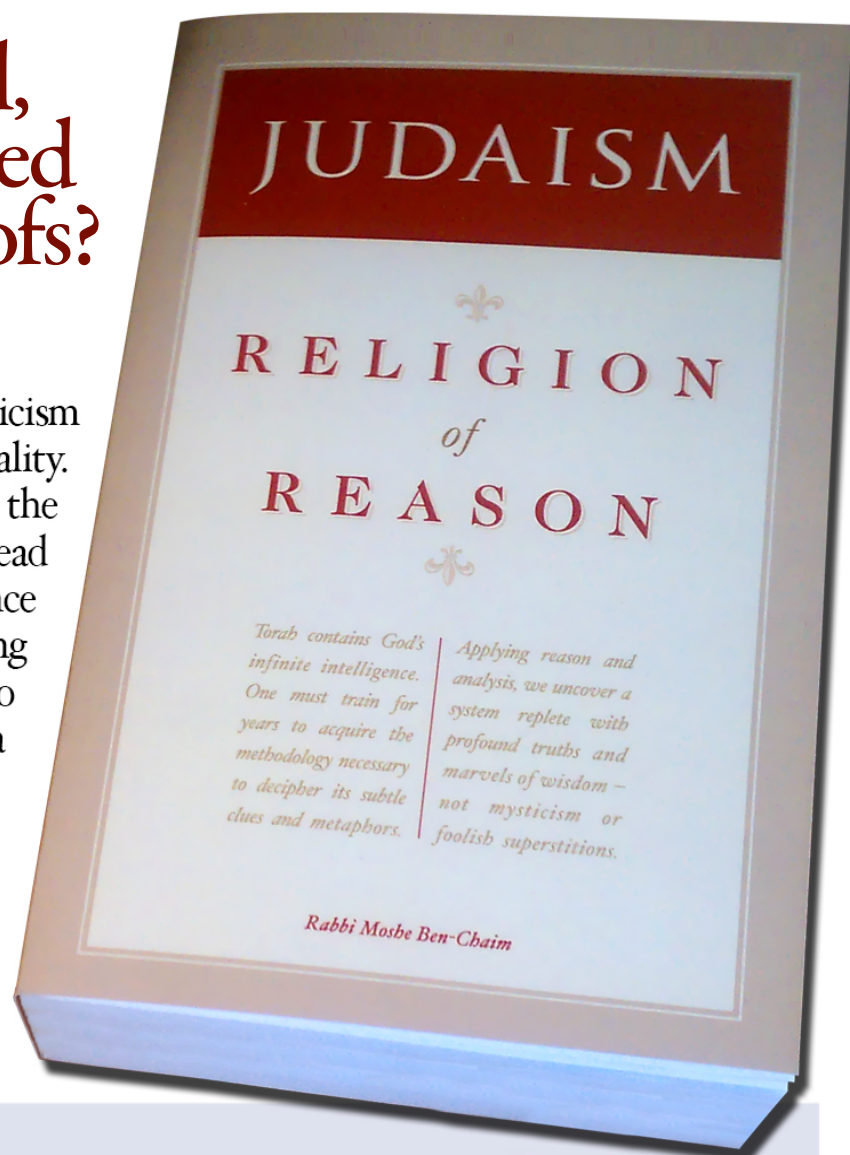
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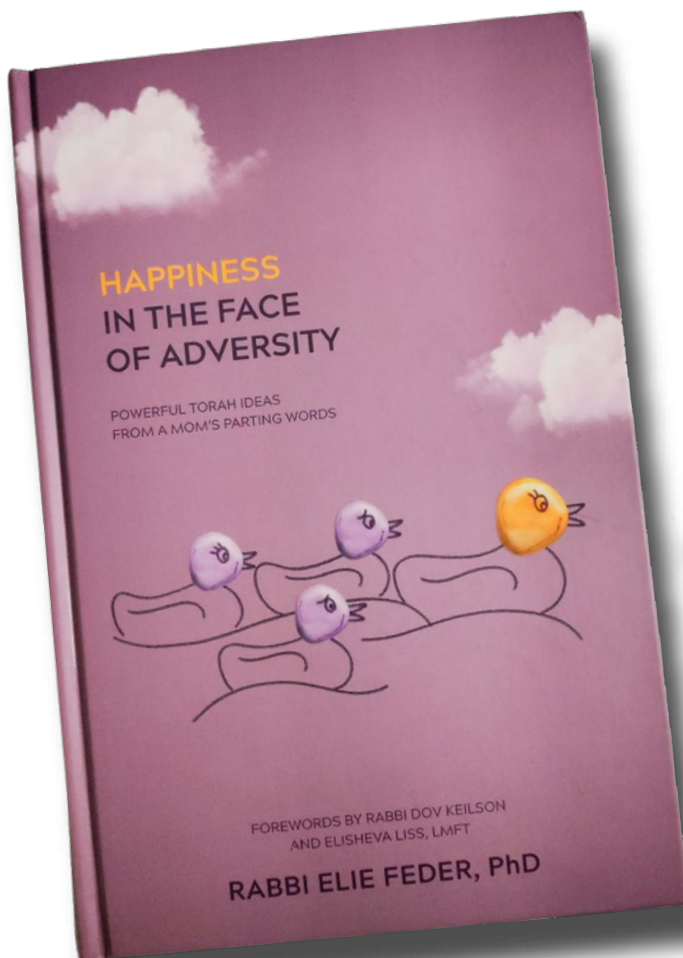
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# HAPPINESS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

*Part 1 of 5: My Mother's Letter*

**RABBI ELIE FEDER PHD**



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At the funeral of my mother, Shani Feder a"h, my father recounted a regular occurrence during her short yet joyful 57 years. Whenever a new doctor requested her medical history, my mother would launch into a detailed account. After detailing her five major illnesses, twelve major surgeries, over 100 medical procedures, and over 200 hospital nights, the bewildered doctor would reply, "But you look good?" She would invariably respond, "I feel great!"

Despite my mother's cheerfulness, there wasn't a day in her last two decades when she wasn't in pain. Yet she never complained. Always happy and bringing joy to those around her, she left us all wondering: How did she do it? What was her secret to happiness in the face of adversity? To convey her wisdom, she wrote the following heartfelt letter to my siblings and me just before another life-threatening surgery:

*Just a Happy Mother's Day note from Dear Old Mom (although I decided not to send on Mother's Day):*

*I am awed by watching the miraculous order of God's nature unfolding in my backyard — you can see throughout nature, a mother's job is to give her child wings, teach them to fly, and watch them soar. Each year I watch the swans hatch ugly ducklings, teach them to hunt for food and — when strong enough — teach them to fly. Then they turn into beautiful swans and fly off to start their own lives (so it seems). Fortunately, children may leave the nest — but don't always leave the neighborhood. And I have really had the zechus to watch you all soar.*

*I just have a few words of motherly advice, as you soar. It's not Torah miSinai — that, your father and rebbeim have taught you well, and I, in turn, have learned much from you — but just some thoughts on happiness.*

*Enjoy and cherish every day — don't worry so much about tomorrow, on what might or might not happen. Do the best you can — but if you focus your worry on tomorrow, it makes you lose today and tomorrow. If something bad is going to happen, it will happen. You won't be able to deny it. At least you have today — and so many wonderful things happen in today.*

*If something bad or unexpected happens, you will deal with it — you are stronger than you think — and maybe some good will even come from it. Only God knows what lies ahead, what's just around the corner. We cannot write the script. We don't even always know what is good or bad. Sometimes it's a matter of a person's perspective on life and what's truly important to them. One can only strive for the best Torah life.*

*Always thank God for all the good that you have (and for the bad that you don't have). Nothing is a given. Appreciate it all — but try not to judge people who don't seem to. You never really know what their true circumstances are. But, do try to treat them as you would like them to treat you (God created all of us).*

*And of course, try to do things with a smile. Nobody*

*likes a grump; your words of wisdom (and even help and criticism) are better accepted if given with a smile.*

*OK, enough preaching. I could keep going — but as you realize, that's not the point of this message. (I can take lessons from you all on these topics.) As I hope you realize, the point of this all is to simply say, I thank God every day that I am truly blessed with happiness (to be clichéd, Yiddishe nachas).*

*Bumps in the road are just that and make me appreciate what I have more. I am sorry for how they affect you and your father. My wings may be clipped for a short time but God willing all will be well (even better, I hope and pray — no pain no gain, as they say).*

*So shut off this computer and go teach my grandchildren to fly ... With God's help, I will be there very soon to help.*

*Love,  
The Tough Old Bird*

Baruch Hashem, my mother lived for two more years after this surgery. While her moving letter offered insight into how she maintained her positivity despite her illnesses, I yearned for a deeper understanding. It slowly became clear to me that while my mother's happiness was truly remarkable, it wasn't purely her own; it was the happiness of a life deeply rooted in Torah principles. As my mother intuitively sensed the Torah's lessons about happiness, she built her life around them. Since these lessons empowered her to face her challenges with joy, she carefully crafted her letter to show us how to follow in her footsteps.

Each year, as I prepared for a shiur in honor of her yahrzeit, I would study my mother's letter in combination with associated words of our Sages. The more I analyzed her letter, the more I appreciated its depth. Over time, I came to see each part of my mother's letter as a pearl of wisdom that guided me in living a joyous Torah life.

Over time, as I studied her letter alongside the wisdom of Chazal, I realized that her words held profound lessons not just for me but for anyone seeking joy in the face of life's challenges. Inspired by her example, I felt compelled to share these insights more widely. Happiness in the Face of Adversity: Meaningful Torah Ideas from a Mom's Parting Words is my small attempt to teach my mother's Torah lessons in a way that can help us all be a little happier today than we

were yesterday. It takes readers on a journey to decipher my mother's clues and unravel her secrets about confronting adversity with joy.

While inspired by my mother in particular, this book provides a thought-provoking analysis of the Torah's path to happiness that's available to everyone. Some Torah topics that are discussed include: emuna, reward and punishment, brachos, gam zu le'tovah, sameiach b'chelko, dan l'chaf zechus, the golden mean, midas chassidus, jealousy, love your friend like yourself, lishmah and lo lishmah, hakaras hatov, miracles and natural law.

Happiness in the Face of Adversity combines probing analysis of important Torah concepts with meaningful and practical lessons about happiness. Each chapter takes a different part of my mother's letter, shares relevant anecdotes from her life, and then delves into the deeper meaning of her words. To do so, it analyzes relevant teachings from Chazal to uncover the Torah's wisdom about happiness. The conclusion of each chapter provides practical steps to incorporate these lessons into our lives. G-d willing, Happiness in the Face of Adversity will provide its readers a path to follow my mother's example in framing their lives around joy instead of adversity.

The next four parts of this essay series will present insights into living a joyful Torah life through excerpts of Happiness in the Face of Adversity.

My mother's life demonstrated that true happiness comes from a mindset deeply rooted in Torah values and principles. For a deeper analysis of Torah sources on happiness, or to explore more lessons from my mother about living a joyous Torah life, you can find Happiness in the Face of Adversity on Amazon at <https://amzn.to/4i8PkLg> and at Mosaica Press, or at your local seforim store.



Bio: Rabbi Elie Feder PhD, a Rebbe at Yeshiva Bnei Torah and a math professor at Kingsborough Community College, is the author of Gematria Refigured (2022) and Happiness in the Face of Adversity (2024). He is also a cohost of the podcast "Physics to God" and the host of the podcast "Simply Deep."



Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

# Bloodied Doorposts

**F**or that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt, both human and beast; and I will mete out judgment to all the gods of Egypt, I am God” (Exod. 12:12).

*[God said] Consecrate to Me every male firstborn; human and beast, the first [male] issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine. And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how God freed you from it with a mighty hand: no leavened bread shall be eaten. (Exod. 13:2,3).*

These 2 verses reveal that it was with firstborn deaths—not other plagues—God emerges victorious with a “mighty hand; Yad Chazaka.” For it is in this plague that God unveils all Egyptian gods as false, as Rashi says, “metal gods melted and wooden gods rotted” (Ibid.). Thereby God “judged” all other gods as false. The relationship between firstborn deaths and destroying idols is that all Egyptian leadership is eliminated: their ultimate leaders were their idols, and their firstborns were the ones who transmitted their culture. With the destruction of both, God emerges as the sole universal power, the meaning of “mighty hand.” Might belongs to the defeater.

During firstborn deaths, the Jews were commanded to paint their doorposts with the Paschal Lamb’s blood. It would appear that the essential act that earned the Jews salvation was rejecting the Egyptian God (the paschal lamb) by killing and eating it. So what was the

additional need to put blood on the doorposts, and why is that which God “looks at” to save the Jewish homes, instead of looking at the slaughtered Egyptian lamb-god? They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it (Exod. 12:7).

*And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt (Exod. 12:13).*

*Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For when going through to smite the Egyptians, God will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and God will pass over the door and not let the destroyer enter and smite your home (Exod. 12:22,23).*

*God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when smiting the Egyptians, but saved our houses (Exod. 12:27).*

What is significant about blood?  
What is significant about doorposts?  
What is significant about “house”?

Egypt’s—and Israel’s— sensual orientation in that depraved ancient culture, accepted only tangible and sensually-perceived gods (explaining why the Jews created the Gold Calf when they imagined Moses died). How then will the sensual-oriented Jews in Egypt transition to accepting the metaphysical God? Circumcision was commanded in Egypt, but addresses only the rejection of the body’s sensual pleasure. But Egypt’s sensuality also blinded their minds. The Jews required a method to transition into accepting an intangible God.

**2 Steps: Rejecting Idolatry & Accepting God**  
Killing and eating the Paschal lamb rejected

idolatry. But to transition to accept God, God deemed it crucial that the Jews engage in some act expressing (on their sensual level) a conviction that the true intangible God, is truly real. Painting blood on their doorpost as the Egyptian firstborns were killed expressed this belief:

“Outside my home’s doorway God is killing Egyptian’s firstborns; outside my doorway is death (blood). I admit to God’s existence. He can destroy or save those in my home too. His fatal effects outside my door are real, so He is real.”

The word “home” is mentioned 6 times above as one’s home provides deep security. But now God asks the Jews to align their security with His reality through painting their homes with blood. God wished to raise the level of His reality, to be on par with the Jews’ same sense of security in their homes.

Mere acceptance without physical expression is too abstract, so God commanded the Jews in painting their doorposts, thereby expressing their firm belief in Moses’ and Israel’s God reality and might: “Outside my doorposts, God is killing (blood). God is real.” The Jew could not leave his home that night as a further affirmation of God’s real powers at work.

*When I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt (Exod. 12:13).*

Instead of looking at the slaughtered Egyptian lamb-god, God looks the Jewish homes painted with blood as the cause of their salvation. For it is not rejecting idolatry alone that earns life, but it must be replaced with a recognition of the intangible God miraculously controlling everything including human life operating outside the bloodied doorposts separating life from death. Similarly, freedom alone was not God’s intent, so He retarded the dough so the Jews should not enjoy identification with free, bread-eating Egyptians. Such an identification misses God’s goal of freedom to accept Torah. Therefore chametz was not prohibited in the Egyptian Passover, but only afterwards when the Jews all grabbed the dough and paraded it, “rolled up in their clothes on their shoulders” (Exod. 12:34). ■

# Questioning the Questions: Why Ma Nishtana?

DANI ROTH



**A**t the start at Maggid, right after filling the 2nd cup of wine, the first thing said is Ma Nishtana. Ma Nishtana has no mention of the events of Yetzias Mitzrayim, so why should it be included in Maggid? How does this fit in with the mitzvah of “Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim”? Is it different than the mitzvah of “Vihiggadita Levincha”?

Gemara Pesachim 116a discusses the recital of Ma Nishtana. The Mishna says:

*The attendants poured the second cup for the leader of the seder, and here the son asks his father the questions about the differences between Passover night and a regular night. And if the son does not have the intelligence to ask questions on his own, his father teaches him the questions.*

The Gemara then comments on this:

*The Sages taught: If his son is wise and knows how to inquire, his son asks him. And if he is not wise, his wife asks him. And if even his wife is not capable of asking or if he has no wife, he asks himself. And even if two Torah scholars who know the halakhot of Passover are sitting together and there is no one else present to pose the questions, they ask each other.*

The Mishna says that if the son can't ask the Ma Nishtana, then it is the father's job to teach him the questions one should ask. It seems from here that the father would fulfill the Chiyuv to recite the Ma Nishtana. But the Gemara says if the son is not intelligent enough to ask, the wife asks instead. It seems contradictory, why would the father's recital of the Ma Nishtana in the capacity of teaching fail to fulfill the Chiyuv? The answer is that the Mishna and the Gemara are talking about two different “Kiyummim” of the Chiyuv Sipur Yetzias Mitzrayim. One means of being Mikayame Supur is Vihiggadita Levincha, teaching your sons so that the story will be passed down to the next generation, which the Mishna addresses. The father has to make the son recognize the distinctions of the

night, even if the son doesn't ask. The Gemara, however, is dealing with the obligation of the “format” of Sipur, a different Kiyum. The best way to do Sipur is through a question-answer format in a dialogue. This is why the Gemara states that the wife must ask if the son cannot partake in a question-answer format. The father teaching the son, without the son initiating the question, is lacking dialogue. This is why both the Mishna and Gemara are needed.

According to Rabbi Yisroel Chait, the best format is teaching a son, where there is dialogue format and transference of knowledge to the son, fulfilling “Vihiggadita Levincha”. The next best format is teaching your wife, where there's no “Vihiggadita Levincha”, but there's transference of knowledge and dialogue. The third level is between two Chachamim, where there's no transference of knowledge, but you have dialogue. And the lowest level is where there is no real dialogue, but you have a dialogue format when one is alone and asks himself.

On further explaining the role of Ma Nishtana, the Gemara later mentions Rav Nachman:

*Rav Nachman said to his servant, Daru: “With regard to a slave who is freed by his master, who gives him gold and silver, what should the slave say to him?” Daru said to him: “He must thank and praise his master.” He said to him: “You have exempted us from reciting the questions of: Why is this night different”. Rav Nachman immediately began to recite: “We were slaves.”*

This further proves that the function of Ma Nishtana is to render Sipur (“Avaddim Hayinu”) in the framework of dialogue, and that Sipur is a “response”. After Daru's answer that a slave should thank his master, Rav Nachman goes straight to Avadim Hayinnu, making it not just a monologue, but a part of a dialogue. But without Daru saying anything, Rav Nachman commencing with Avaddim Hayinu would not be a “response.”

The reason for the dialogue format is because knowledge is better received when it is a response, because a response satisfies curious minds already engaged in the discussion. Telling a friend a new idea won't impact him as much as if that idea was part of a discussion. This is important for Sipur as this mitzvah is all about transmitting knowledge.

This is the reason Ma Nishtana comes at the start of Maggid. It starts the conversation which Avadim Hayinnu responds to, creating a dialogue format that best engages the son and best fulfills Sipur. ■



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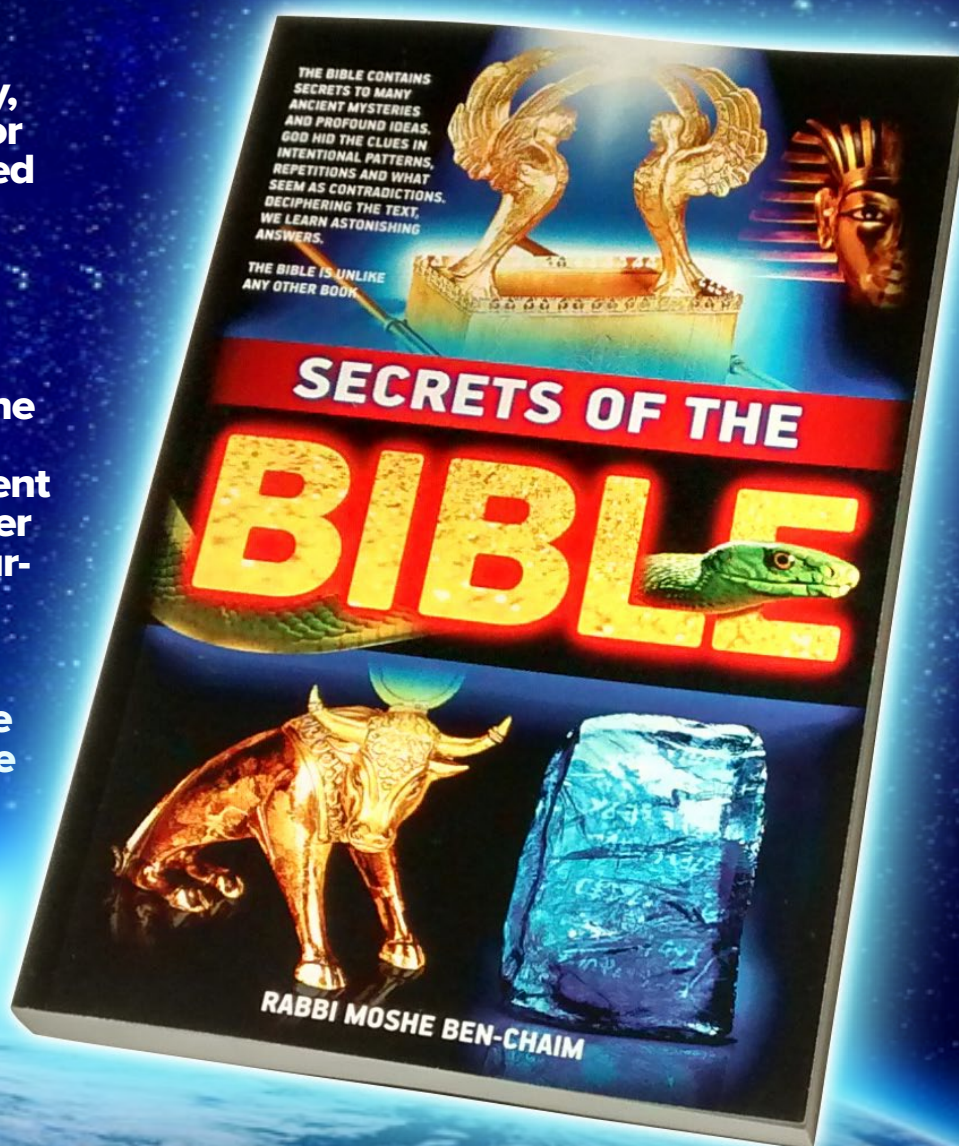
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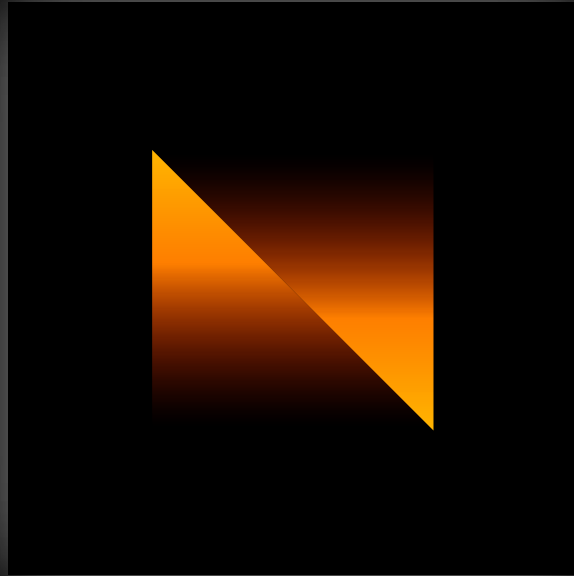
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