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PERFECTION

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Charity & Justice: No Simple Matter

Rabbi Elazar said, "Anyone who performs charity and justice, it is as if he filled the whole world with kindness, as it is stated, 'He loves charity and justice; the earth is full of the kindness of the Lord' (Psalms 33:5). But maybe you will say that anyone who comes to leap and perform an act of kindness may simply leap and do so without scrutiny? Therefore we are taught otherwise, 'How precious is your kindness, O God' (Psalms 36:8). It is a precious and rare occurrence to perform an act of kindness properly. One might then have thought that even a God-fearing individual cannot perform kindness. Therefore the verse states, 'But the kindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon

them that fear Him' (Psalms 103:17). Meaning that God-fearing people can in fact perform proper acts of charity and justice." (Talmud Sukkah 49b)

Similarly we learn:

Any judge who gives a rightful decision—as truth demands it—even though he spends but one hour on it, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had occupied himself with the Torah the whole day long, and as though he became partner with the Holy One, blessed be He, in the work of the Creation of which it is stated, "It was evening and it was morning" (Rashi, Exod 18:13).

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The rabbis also say when a Jew recites “Vayichulu”—“The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array” (Gen. 2:1)—he too becomes a partner with God in Creation. But as Creation was complete, how can one subsequently partner in a concluded act?

These 2 matters address 2 areas: justice and creation. We partner with God not in the “act” of Creation, but in its “purpose.” Creation is purposeless without man recognizing God as Creator, and also upholding His will through justice. Thus, by 1) judging truthfully, and 2) attesting to God as Creator when reciting Vayichulu, man gives creation purpose. Man cannot partner with God in the act of creation; it concluded long ago. But man can partner with God by giving creation purpose: in both enforcing justice, and spreading the truth of God is the sole creator.

Anyone who performs charity and justice, it is as if he filled the whole world with kindness

Rabbi Elazar says here too “it is as if.” One person’s isolated act of charity and justice cannot literally fill the world with kindness or anything. But in as much as a person acts this way, he gives purpose to God’s creation of the entire world.

The gemara continues:

But maybe you will say that anyone who comes to leap and perform an act of kindness may simply leap and do so without scrutiny? Therefore we are taught otherwise, “How precious is your kindness, O God” (Psalms 36:8). It is a precious and rare occurrence to perform an act of kindness properly.

Rabbi Elazar teaches that charity and justice require a high level individual. Why? It is because true charity requires a proper recipient, “How precious is your kindness, O God.” God’s kindness—charity and justice—are a deep science, like all God’s thoughts. One cannot simply respond emotionally, and give anyone large sums charity (we must give any asker at least something). But for larger sums, there are those who will not use the funds properly, as earlier discussed: “Charity is akin to planting, for at times, nothing grows.” Charity too

when given to an abuser of funds, won’t use it intelligently and the charity misses its mark. Justice too requires research and not emotional responses. A woman once came with two witnesses before Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l. The witnesses wished to attest to her husband’s death so she could remarry (unverified spousal death prohibits the wife from remarrying). Rav Moshe told her to return in a week. She did, and Rav Moshe again said the same: return in yet another week. Finally, weeks later, the husband was found alive and well. Rav Moshe didn’t act on mercy for the woman, my guess is, as Rav Moshe viewed any death claim having only 2 witnesses as highly suspicious. For all people are known by at least dozens if not hundreds others throughout his life. Only 2 witnesses is suspicious. Rav Moshe used intelligence to ascertain a just decision, revealing the woman and witnesses as liars.

The gemara concludes:

One might then have thought that even a God-fearing individual does not always encounter the opportunity

to perform acts of kindness? Therefore, the verse states: “But the kindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him” (Psalms 103:17). Meaning that God-fearing people can in fact perform proper acts of charity and justice.

Why can God-fearing people perform proper acts of charity and justice? This is because they fear God: not man. They are objective when assessing people, like Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l. This objectivity about others removes their emotions from clouding clear character assessment. God-fearing people will arrive at accurate assessments of worthy recipients of charity and justice.

But since such objective assessments of justice many times result in a penalty for a corrupt person, thereby creating enemies, therefore the verse says, “The kindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him.” In His kindness, God protects good people from their enemies. ■



Securing Eternity

5 Special Mitzvos

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



***MISHNA:** Anyone who performs 1 mitzva has goodness bestowed upon him, his life is lengthened, and he inherits the World-to-Come. And anyone who does not perform 1 mitzva does not have goodness bestowed upon him, his life is not lengthened, and he does not inherit the World-to-Come.*

***GEMARA:** There's a contradiction from another mishna (Pe'a 1:1): "These are the [5] matters that a person engages in and enjoys their fruits in this world, but the principle reward remains for him for the World-to-Come, and they are: Honoring one's father and mother, acts of loving kindness, hospitality toward guests, bringing peace between one person and another, and Torah study is equal to all of them."*

This mishna stating 5 matters, conflicts with the mishna which said there's only 1 mitzvah that entitles one to the World to Come.

Rav Yehuda said, "This is the meaning: Anyone who performs 1 mitzva in addition to his other merits (51 mitzvas and 50 sins) and thereby tips the scale of all his deeds to the side of righteousness, has goodness bestowed upon him, and is compared to one who fulfills the entire Torah." But does this truly mean with regard to those 5 mitzvas listed in the mishna in Pe'a, that one is rewarded even for 1 of them, even if his sins are more numerous? Rav Shemaya answered, "No, if one had only 1 mitzvah even of these 5, it does not tilt the scales when his sins were more abundant. The first mishna means if one's sins were 50, and his merits were 50, but one of his merits was 1 of these 5 mitzvas in Pe'a, that mitzvah tilts the scale in his favor" [due to its superior goodness].

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In short, the 5 mitzvas in Pe'a are greater than all other mitzvas; they tip the scale even when the number of mitzvas and sins are equal. So we must understand what is their greatness.

Honoring parents is found on the first of the 2 Tablets, those 5 laws addressing man's relationship with God. The second Tablet addresses man's relationship with other people. We would think honoring parents belongs on the second Tablet. However, honoring parents targets our acceptance of authority in human terms, ultimately to be transferred to God: "Parents bring us to this world, but God brings us to eternal life," as we are taught. Parents serve as a model for our acceptance of the Ultimate Authority. God could have made all mankind as He made Adam and Eve, created from the dust. But God created the institution of parents for this great purpose. Prior to our arrival at Mount Sinai at Marah, the Jewish nation received three laws: honoring parents, courts and law, and Sabbath. These laws present a progression. As children we recognize parents as our first authorities. As we develop, we recognize governmental authority, and finally recognize God through Sabbath. These laws helped prime the nation for accepting Torah at Sinai from the Ultimate Authority. Furthermore, honoring parents perfects our souls (reward in World-to-Come) because we receive the least amount of recognition. This is due to the parents' obvious expectation of their children's unwavering and unquestioned attentiveness, often not met with a parent's "Thank you." As our parents' health declines, greater and more

frequent selfless effort is required of us. The greatness of honoring parents is in one's selflessness. The other mitzvas also share this selflessness: loving kindness, hospitality toward guests, bringing peace between others.

How is selflessness in these 4 mitzvas such a perfection, that our souls reap the true reward in the World-to-Come?

The lesson is that acting in line with reality—God's will—is the height of human perfection, earning us God's promise of eternal life. This means we abandon our egos and view all mankind as God's will: that all others attain all their material and spiritual needs, and we help others attain these. Recognizing others have needs like our own, we don't place ourselves first. There's no reason to, we are no more special than the next person. A rabbi once said that the happiest day of his life was when he was on a ship sitting among the luggage, and a brazen base fellow urinated on him. The Rabbi sensed no aggression, and because of that, he was happy that he finally conquered his ego.

This is a great level where one has conquered his most powerful emotion of self-aggrandizement and treats others as equals and has no ego: "And the man Moses was exceedingly more humble than any man on the face of the Earth" (Num. 12:3). Abraham displayed this when serving 3 strangers humbly, with exceeding energy and generosity. Rivka did so too, as well as all other matriarchs and patriarchs. We treat others as God treats them: they all have existence as is God's will in creating them, and we endorse God's will by treating all others with kindness. Thereby, we attain the

height of human perfection by embodying God's will. Therefore, as we value God's will, God grants us eternal life to learn even more of God's will for eternity. But there is one level greater than moral perfection as the mishna concludes, "and Torah study is equal to all of them." This is because moral perfection is not an end in itself. It is only preparatory for one to have complete freedom from his emotions so his intelligence is free to pursue greater wisdom, untapped by emotions, where one can grow in knowledge and love of God with the "greatest intensity," "Bichol M'Odecha" (Deut. 6:5). Knowledge of God's wisdom is our objective, not simply moral perfection. ■



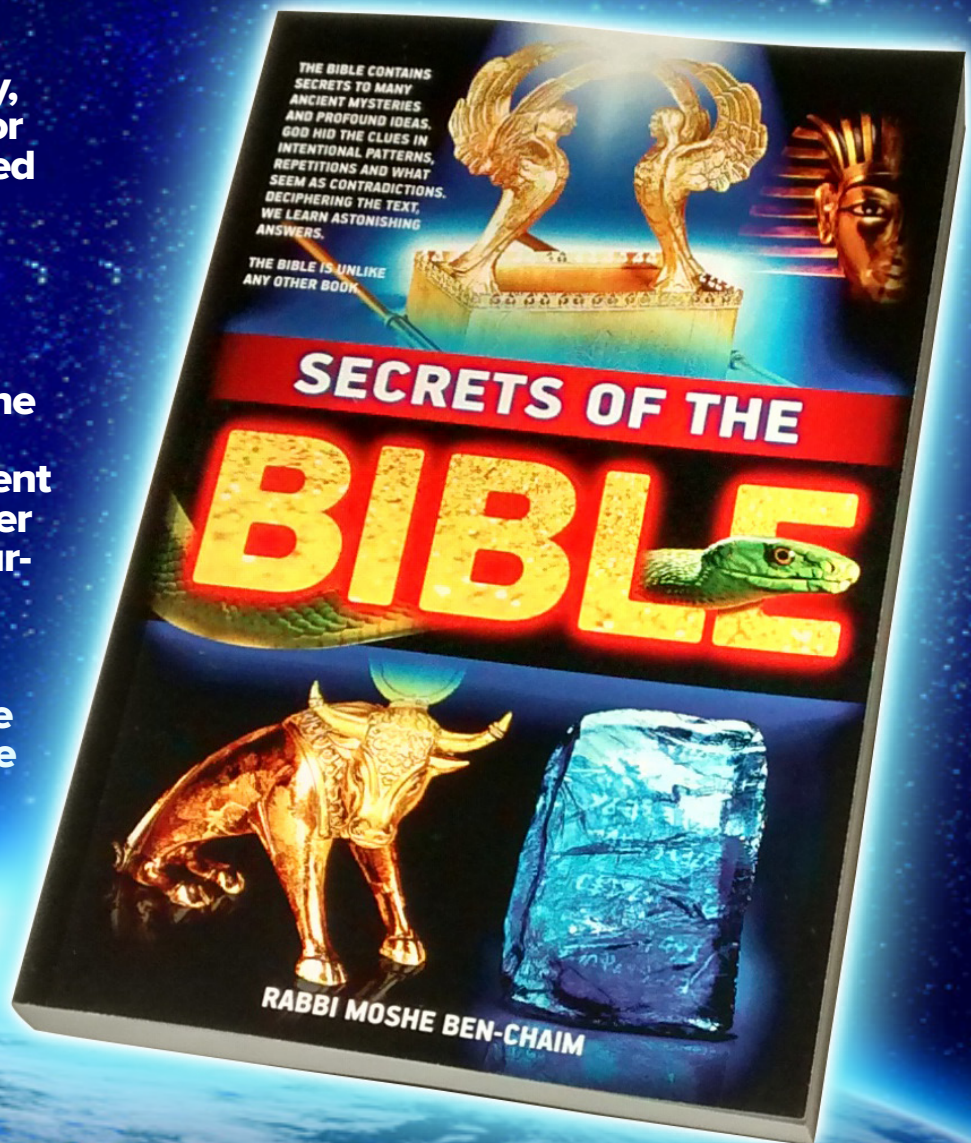
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God's Complete Forgiveness

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

And when the wicked person repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and charitable, he shall live; he shall not die. All his transgressions he committed shall not be remembered to him because of the righteousness he practiced, he shall live. (Ezek. 18:21,22)

And when the righteous person turns from his righteousness and performs evil as all the abominations the evil man performs, should he live? [No], all his righteousness he performed will not be remembered in his rebellion that he rebelled and in his sin that he sinned, he shall die (Ezek. 18:24).



We wonder, how can God act as if either person never sinned or never acted properly? History cannot be erased.

Anyone who regrets the mitzvas he has performed and regrets the merits, saying in his heart, "What value was there in doing them? I wish I hadn't performed them," he loses them all and no merit is preserved for him at all (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:3).

Each and every person has merits and sins. A person whose merits exceed his sins is righteous. A person whose sins exceed his merits is wicked. If [his sins and merits] are equal, he is an in-between (bayn oni). The same applies to an entire country: if the merits of all its inhabitants exceed their sins, it is

righteous. If their sins are greater, it is wicked. The same applies to the entire world.

This might give the impression that the number of merits and sins we perform are recorded and remain in existence, like dollars or debts in a bank. And we must pay for sins we commit, even if we repent, those sins remaining in existence demanding retribution.

However, God says He won't recall any sin of the sinner when he repents. What then happens to all his sins? Doesn't he deserve punishment? I mean, he committed crimes. This crimes don't vanish. History cannot be erased.

Here is where we mature to God's system of justice. God punishes to correct us. But if we correct ourselves, there is no poor character remaining requiring correction. That is the meaning behind "All his sins

are not remembered." God judges not the sins, but our character, our current values. Have we repented and abandoned our evil ways? If so, we are identical to one who never sinned. Nothing remains in us requiring correction. But what of all our criminal and evil actions? The answer is, we are no longer identified with that previous person. Maimonides even says the ways of repentance include changing one's name (Ibid. 2:4): he is not that former man. This idea aligns perfectly with God's view.

Thus, God views a person at each moment: what is his state, what are his values? If he repented from all his evil, he does not deserve any corrective measure, although he must return stolen goods and plead for forgiveness from his victims. Having done all this, a penitent person is as pure as one who never sinned. ■



Book Reviews

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

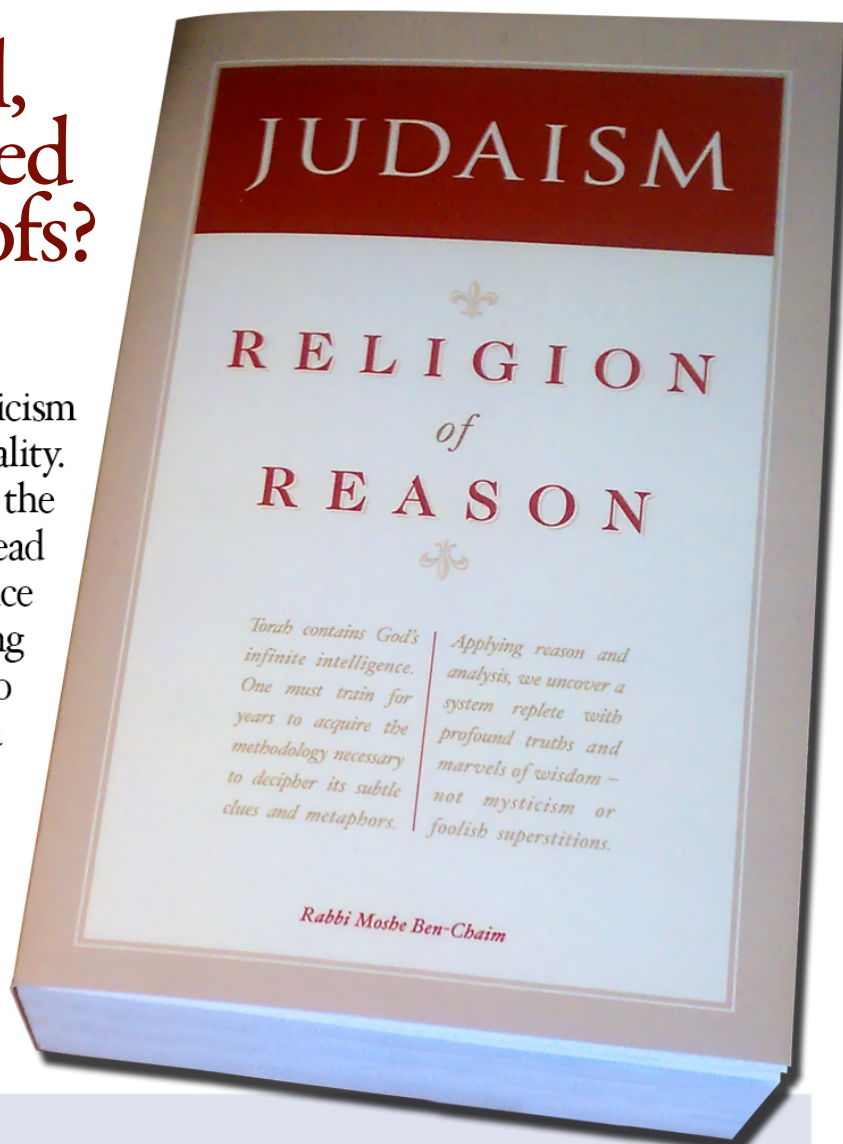
Rabbi Steven Weil — *CEO, Friends of the IDF*

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by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

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Superstition
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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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The Unique Nature of Devarim

Parshat Devarim initiates the fifth Book of the Torah, which shares its name. This final section of the Torah is unique. In the other four books, Moshe acted as a scribe, simply recording with absolute exactitude every word and syllable dictated by Hashem. Moshe's own intellect played no role in determining the content of the Torah: we are privy to Hashem's "words" and "thoughts." Moshe was designated to be the most suitable scribe to transmit Hashem's words in the most accurate manner. Devarim is different, because this book consists of Moshe's final addresses to his people. Here he is not transmitting words that Hashem instructed him to convey to Bnei Yisrael (Children of Israel). Rather, he is speaking from the heart and communicating his personal final message to the people he led out of Egypt. How did the utterances of Moshe become incorporated in the text of Scripture (i.e., how can Moshe's own words be part of the Torah if they were not direct dictation from Hashem)? This happened because Hashem instructed him to include these words in the final section of the Torah. Moshe wanted to do his utmost to ensure the successful conquest of the land and the establishment of Bnei Yisrael as a holy society that would be "a light unto the nations" (Yeshayahu 42:6, 49:6). Thus, Moshe reviewed certain Mitzvot (Commandments) and elaborated on some not previously recorded or emphasized. He also elucidated certain fundamental principles upon which Judaism is based.

Moshe's Mission of Rebuke

Moshe did not shy away from the most challenging aspect of his farewell address: rebuke. His ability to deliver his message effectively stemmed from the fact that he was "very humble, above all the men who were on the surface of the earth" (BaMidbar 12:3), and had no desire for the leadership role imposed upon him.

Most political leaders are motivated by egotistical considerations. They claim that they only want to serve their people, but the truth is just the opposite: the people are a vehicle for the magnification of the leaders' personal egos. Thus, they are most concerned about winning the people's adulation and leaving a favorable legacy. As they near the culmination of their tenure, they are not likely to rebuke and criticize the subjects whose approval they crave.

Not so Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses, Our Teacher). His prime function was to be the teacher and spiritual inspiration for Bnei Yisrael. He had no desire for them to love him and was fully cognizant that they could turn against him in an instant, as when he pleaded with Hashem, that "just a bit more, and they will stone me" (Shemot 17:4).

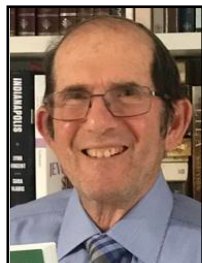
Moshe's conduct as a leader was based on his ultimate mission, which was to be a "servant of Hashem" (Devarim 34:5). He did what was best for the people, whether they would like it or not. He therefore reviewed the history of the 40 years since they had left Egypt. He pulled no punches as he scathingly pointed out their flaws and failures. While this had to have been extremely painful to hear, especially since it came from the greatest prophet who ever lived, Moshe did not hold anything back.

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Champion of Rebuke

RABBI REUVEN MANN



The Power and Necessity of Rebuke

The Book of Devarim teaches us about the importance of rebuke and the attitude we must assume toward it. In this day and age, most people are averse to criticism. Many rabbis today feel constrained, fearful of saying anything that might not be perceived as flattering. People seek spiritual leaders who will constantly praise and show them love.

The Torah states, “the one whom G-d loves does He rebuke” (Mishlei 3:12). And the Rabbis add, “There is no true love without rebuke” (Talmud Berachot 5a). We are not born perfect and need to confront and overcome our flaws to become holy. This demands an ability to accept and respond to well-intentioned criticism. We must demand leaders who have the courage and insight to offer vitally needed rebuke. For this is the measure of true love.

A Call to Self-Reflection and Redemption

The Parsha of Devarim is read aloud in synagogue during the summer, near the time we mourn the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple). When we prepare to observe Tisha BeAv, the day of mourning for the destruction of the Holy Temples, we should remember the poignant words of the Additional (Musaf) prayer of the Festivals, “Because of our sins, have we been exiled from our land and distanced from our soil...”

Sin is the underlying cause of our misfortunes. We must resolve to restore the Jewish people to its rightful position as the nation that sanctifies Hashem and His Torah. But, in order to attain that, we must first be capable of looking within and acknowledging our own sins and flaws. And we must undertake the difficult work of mending them. Then we might reach the level where we can be a “light unto the nations” (Yeshayahu 42:6, 49:6).

May we merit to attain it.

Shabbat Shalom. ■

The Secret to Peace

Rabbi Chama bar Pappa said, “With regard to any person who has grace about him, it is certain that he is God-fearing, as it is stated, ‘But the kindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him.’ When one sees that a certain individual is endowed with grace and kindness, one can be certain that he is a God-fearing person. (Sukkah 49b)”

Grace refers to one who is liked by all others. What grants him such popularity? The gemara provides a clue: he is God-fearing. What is the function of this dynamic?

One who fears God cares nothing about social concerns, as that is petty to him when compared to the Torah’s brilliance. Now, as he is unconcerned with his social status and public opinion, he does not compete with others, as most do. By not competing, others are not threatened by him, and thereby they feel safe and secure with their elevated self-image when around him. They like him, as he allows them to retain their egos. But had he bolstered his worth and his ego, and competed for greatness with them, friction and hatred is fostered, not grace.

Thus, if you seek a life without friction from others, allow all others to be right, do not seek to have the last word, let others lead the conversation, and say only positive things. Don’t lie, but be silent if you have nothing complimentary to say. In this manner, you make no enemies, and your interactions with all others will be favorable. People will welcome your company and you will attain a sterling reputation, and peace. ■

Torah’s Best Form: The Valiant Woman

Rabbi Elazar said, “What is the meaning of that which is written (Aishes Chayil), ‘She opens her mouth with wisdom, and a Torah of kindness is on her tongue’ (Proverbs 31:26)? Is there then, a Torah of kindness, and also a Torah that is not of kindness? Rather, a Torah studied for its own sake, that is a Torah of kindness. But Torah studied not for its own sake but for some ulterior motive, that is not a Torah of kindness. Another opinion says: Torah studied in order to teach others, that is a Torah of kindness. But Torah studied without the intent of teaching it to others, that is not Torah of kindness.” (Sukkah 49b)”

Torah study is subject to personal distortion. The first definition of “Torah of kindness,” refers to kindness to yourself: you are kind to yourself when you study Torah in the proper manner, which is with no ulterior motive, due only to your curiosity. Only in this manner do you perform kindness to yourself. For if you study to boast your abundant knowledge, you do not study to

appreciate God’s wisdom, but to fortify your ego. This reveals your insecurity with others, and the foolish need to seek human approval over God’s approval. And as your studies are not to seek truth, you cannot find it. You forfeit seeing the beauty of God’s wisdom.

Man’s perfection—and happiness—is measured by his attachment to truth. Ego is false, as the greatest of men testified: Moses said, “We are nothing.” King David said, “I am but a worm.” And Abraham said, “I am dust and ashes.” No matter how much a person learns, it is nothing compared to God’s knowledge. Furthermore, man is created, and not self-made. Therefore, he should know his place as a created thing, that exists only due to God’s will. Once a person can accept his status, and he abandons focus on his ego, he’s now prepared to question what is his purpose, as all God’s creations must have great purpose. Through Torah study, one learns that God wants man to have the most blissful existence, and that is when he is not focused on the self, but when focused on wisdom. God designed man where his greatest satisfaction and fulfillment is when he uses his mind in the process of discovery of creation, and Torah ideas. Happiness is achieved when our attention is not focused inwards (on ourselves), but outwards towards studying God’s creations. The valiant woman embodies this attachment to “Torah of kindness,” living to discover God’s marvels in creation and Torah.

The second definition of “Torah of kindness” is referring to kindness towards others. Thus, it is only when one learns Torah for the purpose of teaching others, that his Torah is referred to as a Torah of kindness. One must realize God created society, not a single person. Thus, God’s will is that the many exist, and that the many possess the good. Only when we study to teach do we attain that highest level of caring for all creations—not just for ourselves—a concern which we then share with God. ■





Tisha B'Av: Our Generation is at Fault

Any generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt, it is considered as if that generation had itself destroyed the Temple (Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma 11a).

This means today we deserve condemnation for the Temple's absence. Now, as the Temples were destroyed due to idolatry and to baseless hatred, this indicates we share these sins, preventing the Temple's rebuilding. In what manner are we idolatrous and aggressive?

Idolatry is not only bowing or sacrificing to stone gods, it includes all tendencies to project power on that which has no power, such as assuming amulets work, that man's words are effective (as in blessings), superstitions, placing notes in walls and rabbis' graves, and the like, all of which God prohibits openly in Torah. Even assuming a mezuzah protects is idolatrous, as it has no power: fire will consume it, and what cannot protect itself, cannot protect anything else, including man. It is the preponderance of such superstitious beliefs among Jews that drive acceptance, as insecure man seeking public approval will copy others, regardless of the foolishness.

Consider this: until we worship God alone, why should God rebuild His temple? Mass popularity does not make truth. Our greatest minds—Maimonides[1] and Meharsha[2]—condemned anyone placing power in a mezuzah. And we

reject such beliefs for 2 primary reasons: 1) there's no evidence they work, and 2) God's system of Reward and Punishment determines our fate. Nothing can interfere with God's will to punish evildoers or reward the righteous. Yet, today's Jews follow the masses and unfortunately, even leaders follow these superstitions, which violate Torah's tenets.

Regarding aggression, we witness singles rejecting shidduchim when the proposed match doesn't fit one's own egotistical idiosyncrasies, and I don't call them minhagim, because they are foolish. The frum world has lost its mind in this manner. They ignore God's advice of Eliezer's search for Rivkah's kindness alone, and instead, foolish Jews today search for irrelevant frum clothing styles, wealth, shul denominations, twisted customs, and other social considerations, when they have no Torah value. Eliezer had no concern that Rivkah's father was Lavan; he judged Rivkah on her own merit, as Torah says we must[3]. But no Jew today would follow Eliezer, and marry a girl who had a "Lavan" for a father, despite her own fine virtues. Today's shidduch word commits social suicide, a self-imposed shidduch crisis.

And outside dating, one Jewish community casts aspersions on all others, both here and in Israel. In all these petty matters we find our baseless hatred.

So here we find the 2 sins that earned the Temples' destruction, sins we must correct to earn the Temple's rebuilding. Without correcting our sins, we can say "We want Moshiach now" repeatedly. But why should God send him and have him rebuild the Temple, unless we deserve him?

[1] Hilchos Mezuzah, 5:4: "It is a common custom to write [God's name,] Shaddai, on the outside of a mezuzah opposite the empty space left between the two passages. There is no difficulty in this, since [the addition is made] outside. Those, however, who write the names of angels, other sacred names, verses, or forms, on the inside [of a mezuzah] are among those who do not have a portion in the world to come. Not only do these fools nullify the mitzvah, but furthermore, they make from a great mitzvah [which reflects] the unity of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, the love of Him, and the service of Him, a talisman for their own benefit. They, in their foolish conception, think that this will help them regarding the vanities of the world."

[2] Shulchan Aruch, in the Gilyon M'harsha, Yoreh Daah, 289, page 113 on the bottom, "If one affixes the mezuzah for the reason of fulfilling the command, one may consider that as reward for doing so he will be watched by G-d. But, if one affixes the mezuzah solely for protective reasons, it in fact has no guidance, and the mezuzah will be as knives in his eyes."

[3] "Fathers are not killed for their son's sins, and sons are not killed for their fathers' sins; each man in his own sin will be killed" (Deut. 24:16, Kings II 14:6) ■

Maimonides' Golden Mean

READER: In chapter 1 of Hilchos Dayos, Rambam says that we must attain the emotional midpoint; only catering to that which the body can't live without. Yet, in chapter 3 he seems to be critical of those who live an austere life of not pursuing pleasures. He writes, "The wise men commanded that one must restrain himself from only the matters which Torah restrains man," implying that one shouldn't deprive oneself of permissible pleasures, like entertainment, wine, delicious fruits, etc. This appears to conflict with chapter 1 where he seems very strict, to only desire things that the body needs.

—Alex Kahgan

RABBI: There's no contradiction. Chap.1 describes the positive character: select the middle road of all emotional spectrums, not gluttony and not starvation, not miserliness and not overspending. Remain equidistant from both poles. Chap. 3 warns not to veer from that middle road by going to the extremes through improper self-deprivation. But pleasures God made are to be enjoyed moderately, without excess. The rabbis don't say to avoid sex, but to limit it. ■



Yahrzeit

READER: What's the concept behind fasting or giving tzedaka on a parent's yahrzeit?
—Howard S.

RABBI: Yahrzeit recalls a parent's passing. There is greater identity with a parent than with others, so one may use this stronger realization of death as a day opportunity for teshuva. Recognizing our parents passing, we thereby reflect on our own mortality. Thereby we can release our fantasies of immortality that drive relentless attachment to earthly life and the pitfalls of sin through preoccupation with pleasures, fame, success and accomplishments. Recognizing life is not eternal, forces us to seek what is eternal. For only what is eternal has value. ■

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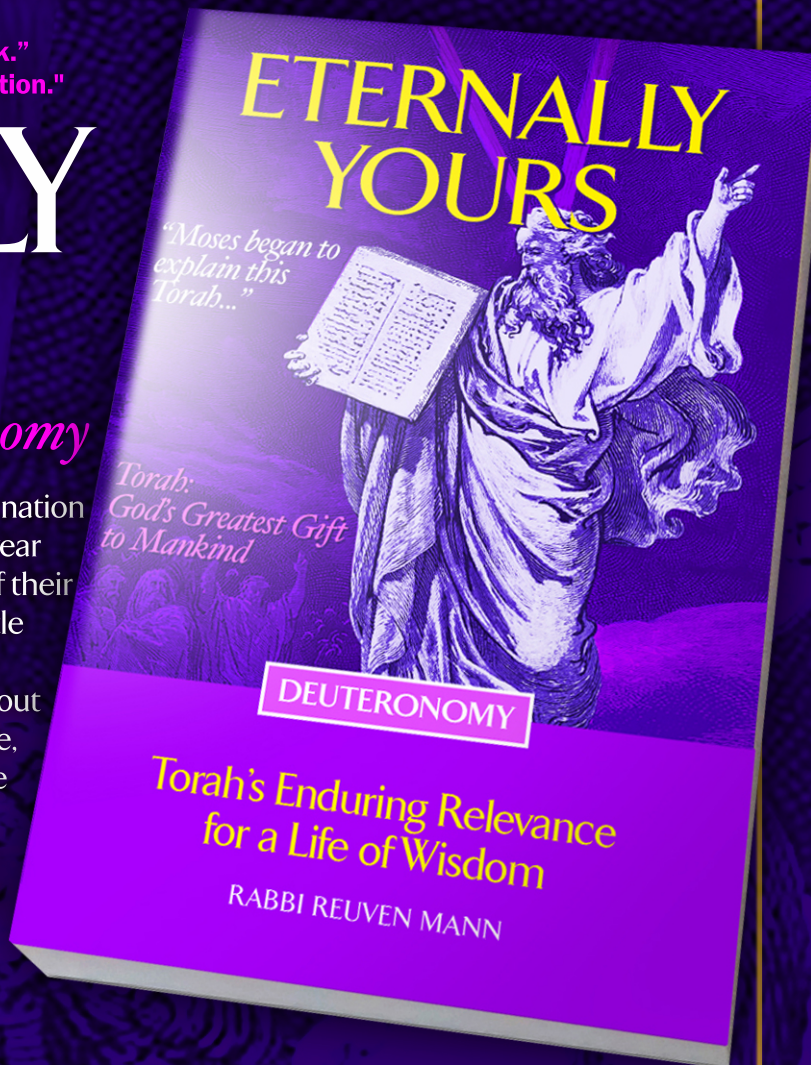
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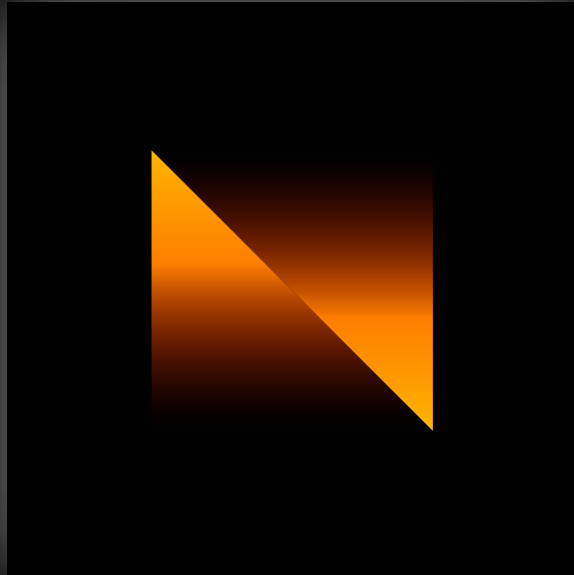
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