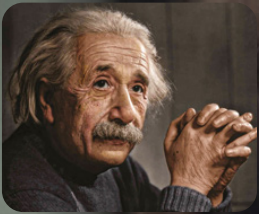


# JewishTimes

VOL. XXIV NO. 2 — NOV. 7, 2025

## Angels

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



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on Equality



Eve and  
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## DISCUSSIONS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## Existing for Ourselves

Our acceptance of any truth requires the utmost humility. For any truth is God's creation...God's ideas are infinitely deep; further than the heavens:

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are My ways your ways" declares God. "Just as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My thoughts above your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9).*

Thus, we cannot tolerate mediocrity when explaining anything God created, certainly when we are explaining His justice, an intangible abstract system. All His ideas are brilliant: (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

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*The precepts of the LORD are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of the LORD is lucid, making the eyes light up. The fear of the LORD is pure, abiding forever; the judgments of the LORD are true, righteous altogether, more desirable than gold, than much fine gold; sweeter than honey, than drippings of the comb. (Psalms 19:9-11)*

Rabbi Chaim Voloshin's son wrote an intro to his work Nefesh Hachaim. Therein he says, "We exist not for ourselves, but for others." The statement on a literal level is contradictory. For this in turn means that my friend exists for someone else, and he, yet for others. In the end, no one exists for himself. This problem is strengthened by other statements: "Your life comes before others" (Lev. 19:18, Ramban), "Do the greater mitzvah and let others do the lesser" (Moade Kattan 9b). Thus, one's existence is of primary value, not secondary to others.

The resolve is that "existing for others" does not suggest one human is more vital, but it is the principle of "human equality." It is wrong to literally suggest I exist only for others, as that is not equality for myself. Rather, the true principle of human equality dictates that I must act as is God's will: society exists, God wants "many" people to have the good, not just me. Therefore I am compelled to support God's will by seeking the good for everyone, not just myself. But we are all to treat, and be treated equally. Let's understand further. I do take priority in terms of saving my life before another: I am to be selfish by drinking the last cup of water in the desert (Bava Metziah 62a): "My life comes first." And I must select the greater mitzvah and leave others to take the lesser. Why then when threatened with being killed if I don't kill another, do I sacrifice myself? Why don't I act selfishly again and kill another to save myself?

In all cases, the rule is to best uphold the Torah system, and this is determined by what is most crucial and primary. Although I must veer from lies, if my friend is marrying an unattractive bride, I must lie and say she is beautiful. This is because what is best in this situation is my friend's happiness and peace of mind. When confronted with 2 mitzvahs, I must perform the greater mitzvah so Torah is best upheld. Keeping lesser mitzvahs retains a lesser Torah. That's clear. When there's insufficient water for both people, I must drink the remaining last cup, so again, without my existence, I cannot continue to uphold Torah. In all cases, I am not performing a negative, but a positive act. However, when threatened with being killed if I don't kill another, I sacrifice myself, because here I am ignorant of who is of greater value: myself or the other. Perhaps the other is a greater Jew, therefore I cannot kill him even to save my own life. Similarly, when my teacher and father are both drowning, I must save my teacher. That choice best supports the Torah system, as my teacher teaches Torah and benefits more Jews. In each case we must evaluate how to best maintain the highest level of Torah. ■

## A Brilliant Blessing

*Blessed are You God, our God, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to immerse in words of Torah.*

It's our command to engage in Torah, so this blessing is formulated around our action. But then the blessing continues, asking God to make Torah sweet:

*God, please make the words of Your Torah sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people Israel. And may we and our descendants and the descendants of Your people the House of Israel, all know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake (lishma). Blessed are You, God, Who teaches Torah to His people, Israel.*

Why is God's act of making Torah pleasant, part of what "we" alone are responsible to perform? The blessing concludes:

*Blessed are You God, our God, King of the Universe who chose us from among all the peoples and gave us His Torah. Blessed are You God, giver of the Torah!*

Now we refer to God's act of giving the Torah. Again, how does God's action become part of our blessing regarding our obligation to study Torah?

Maimonides formulates his Laws of Torah Study, commencing with teaching others, not one's personal study, which is only mentioned afterwards. One would think that when formulating the obligation to study Torah, that Maimonides would first address the one's own study, to indicate its primary objective. But we now see the answer...

The objective of Torah study is not for one person, it is that the Jewish nation learns Torah. As my friend Howard Salamon said quoting Rabbi Freundlich, the High Holidays prayer reads:

*And so, grant that Your awe Hashem our God, be upon all Your works, and Your dread upon all You have created; and [then] all [Your] works will fear You, and prostrate before You will be all [Your] created beings.*

The repetition of "all" means God's kindness in creating man is that He did not create one man. God's kindness is expressed in desiring the good for masses. We ask that all fear God, and all descendants learn Torah. Therefore, Maimonides is correct to first discuss man's obligation to transmit Torah, before discussing our obligation to learn as an individual. Teaching is the more primary aspect of the command of Torah study.

And where do we see the original form of Torah? It is God's transmission of Torah to mankind. The very inception of Torah was in the form of a transmission, teaching. That is Torah par excellence, its primary form, a shared form. Therefore we discuss God giving man Torah in our blessing, to epitomize Torah's primary form: it was through transmission. This must be the focus of the blessing and fulfillment of Torah, that "mankind" enjoys it. Therefore we discuss our descendants benefiting from Torah, and that God "gave" Torah. Transmission is at the core of Torah, and of our command. Maimonides follows this formulation by prioritizing teaching before learning as an individual. Furthermore, we must identify the purest form of Torah, which is where one has no ulterior motive in his studies, rather, he seeks God's wisdom as an end in itself. Not to become a leader. Not to be called a scholar. Not to accomplish. Not to amass. Not to brag. But to study for the enjoyment of God's wisdom alone. What we call "lishma." ■





# Eden & the Snake

## Torah's Psychology Lessons



Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

**H**ow does a person transition from a sinful life towards a perfected life? What are the steps and changes we undergo? As one learns what is truly good and beneficial, that which complies with our psychological and philosophical design, his mind cannot deny clear truths. He abandons his previous flawed values as he sees that they are false and cannot provide happiness. This is the whole theme of Ecclesiastes (Koheles). A person cannot knowingly harm himself and choose something destructive and unhappy over something positive and fulfilling. Rabbi Israel Chait called this the “reality principle.” One must follow what he sees as being the true good; it’s impossible to do otherwise. With this new found knowledge, one’s values naturally attach to the good and one’s actions follow suit, which is what we refer to as “perfection,” our goal as humans. This is the transition. This teaches that with greater knowledge, one can live a happier life. The more one dispels fallacy and acquires greater knowledge of truth and the good for man, the more one advances towards living the good life and increases his happiness. But if one follows fantasy, he can corrupt his values and sin, which leads to failure and corruption. Bible (Torah) is the perfect system our Creator designed precisely to help man achieve happiness and fulfillment. He designed us, He knows best. He is always correct. When discussing Eve’s sin, Maimonides says (Guide, book II, chap xxx): “The serpent had a rider, the rider was as big as a camel, and it was the rider that enticed Eve: this rider was Samael. Samael is the name generally applied by our Sages to Satan.” Samael means “to blind one from God.” And Satan means to “turn one away.” But Genesis does not mention any “rider” on the snake. What was this rider?

We read that Eve did not sin immediately after the snake spoke to her, the snake said, “God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad” (Gen. 3:5). What follows is this verse: “The woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). Eve’s words about the “value” of the fruit (in her imagination) convey that it was not the snake alone, but it was her value system that misguided her and which employed her instincts into action to sin. Eve’s desires (snake) only started the path towards sin, which she could have controlled. However, Torah describes that after the snake evoked her emotions, she fantasized (Gen. 3:6) about the fruit’s benefits, and this fantasy blinded her from following God’s command. Metaphorically, her value system is referred to as the snake’s “rider.” The snake is her instinctual drives, but they do not to choose where to apply their energies; this is based on one’s values which many times are distorted by fantasy. And as Eve (incorrectly) valued the forbidden fruit, her instinctual energies followed her values at that moment, and she sinned.

Our values are controlling, and why they are viewed as “large as a camel” while the instincts are not as large. But if we study Torah’s truths, our values adapt to what is good and we redirect our instincts towards following Torah. Our values (camel) direct our drives (snake). The snake alone is neither good nor bad.

Maimonides also says the following: “It is especially of importance to notice that the serpent did not approach or address Adam, but all his attempts were directed against Eve.” Here, Maimonides hints to the truth we stated: the snake represented Eve’s instincts, a faculty that can communicate only with Eve. Eve’s instincts have no pull—no communication—with Adam or others. God gave us instincts as the drive, but we are to harness it by truths, driving us towards good. But in Eve’s case, her corrupt fantasies created poor values that drove her towards sin. ■

# EINSTEIN ON *Equality...*



*not just  
about  
math*

(Photo: Courtesy of the Institute for Advanced Study / Einstein Family Collection, 1946)

**A**lbert Einstein knew what it felt like to face hate. In Germany, he was treated unfairly because he was Jewish. Einstein was one of the greatest scientists in history. He developed the theory of relativity, which transformed our understanding of space, time, and gravity. But when he came to America, he saw how Black Americans were being mistreated. It broke his heart. He had seen this kind of injustice before, and he knew he had to speak up. In 1946, Einstein visited Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. It's an HBCU and one of the first degree-granting colleges for Black students in the United States. During his talk with students and faculty, he spoke about the importance of unity and fairness. He was very vocal about segregation and said, "I do not intend to be quiet about it." According to research published by

Rutgers University Press in 2005, Einstein's words at Lincoln University came from deep compassion and his own experiences with discrimination.

Einstein didn't just talk about equality. He lived it. At Princeton University, he supported the NAACP and publicly stood with W.E.B. Du Bois. When Black visitors were denied hotel rooms in Princeton, he opened his home to them. According to Smithsonian Magazine, Einstein invited the famous singer Marian Anderson to stay with him when she was turned away because she was Black. Einstein showed that kindness and action can go hand in hand. The man who changed how we see the universe also tried to change how we treat one another. Albert Einstein used his genius, his humanity, and his compassion to stand up for what is right. ■





# IGNORING GOD'S WILL?

**Bible Provides Happiness  
and Our Afterlife**

**G**od needs nothing, that's a Bible tenet. His creation of man is for our benefit. Ignoring God and His Bible is as foolish as ignoring a doctor's warning. We can't know better than God. Every Biblical law or Bible personality is there for our imitation. By following God's commands and the ways of His prophets, our lives comply with what is beneficial to our natures, to our ideas, morality and ensures only success. Being kind and charitable creates harmony, while following our selfish needs and ignoring others creates strife. Chasing money and fame is fleeting and novelty quickly vanishes. While pursuing God's wisdom imbues us with the greatest satisfaction. For when we don't feed our core element, or soul, we are dissatisfied. Moreover, God helps those who follow Him. Studying God's wisdom offers man the greatest enjoyment and appreciation for God. That is the greatest satisfaction and fulfillment, as our great kings David and Solomon exclaimed. Following God, we also earn the afterlife and avoid punishment.

Mesora and the Jewishtimes hopes you—our reader—will return often to study God's words and marvel at His astonishing lessons. ■



# How Can I ENCOUNTER Hashem?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

**T**his week's Parsha, VaYeirah, describes a most unlikely "debate" between Hashem and Avraham Avinu. Our first reaction must be one of astonishment. How can such a thing be possible? The knowledge of Hashem is perfect, and men—even the wisest of them—are limited. In describing the Mitzvah of the "fear" of G-d, the Rambam says:

*"When [man] reflects on [His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison], he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited wisdom before He Who is of perfect knowledge, as [King] David stated: 'When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers... what is man that You should recall him?' (Tehillim 8:4-5)" (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:2).*

Yet, in our Parsha, Avraham challenges Hashem regarding His plan to annihilate two sinful cities, and—almost incomprehensibly—Hashem concedes to his arguments. How are we to understand this?

## The Paradox of Divine Debate

This encounter occurred when Hashem decided to communicate His intention to eradicate the wicked cities of Sedom and Amorah (Sodom and Gomorrah) to Avraham. According to the Ramban (Nachmanides), the corruption of these cities consisted mainly in their brutal treatment of all "outsiders." This is amply illustrated by their vile attitude toward the guests who were lodging with Lot. The entire city surrounded Lot's home and demanded that he hand over his guests so that they could "know them." The implication of this demand was that they intended to abuse them in a perverse sexual manner. Lot staunchly protected his visitors, even to the seemingly

absurd extent of offering his own daughters in their place. However, this did not pacify the crazed townspeople, who persisted in their efforts to break down the door. Why, indeed, were they not at all tempted by the offer of Lot's chaste daughters?

I believe that their refusal of this "magnanimous gift" supports the Ramban's interpretation. The locals did not surround Lot's residence in search of sexual gratification. Their hostility was directed at the strangers, whom they wanted to serve as an example, namely, that all foreigners should stay away from their luxurious land. They were fortunate to live in a place that was extremely bountiful, and they could not tolerate the idea that anyone else might benefit from it as well.

The screams emanating from Sedom reached Hashem, and He decided to "visit" and "see for Himself" if, in actuality, things were as bad as they seemed. It is important to note that these statements of the Torah cannot be taken literally. He, blessed is He, is All-Knowing and "needs" nothing—least of all to "visit" a place to gain a clearer picture of what is happening there. Why then does the Torah make it appear that way?

The major purpose of the Torah is to communicate ideas to man that are essential to his spiritual perfection. Therefore, Hashem allows Himself to be depicted in a manner that is relevant to the human context—Dibra Torah KeLashon Bnei Adam ("the Torah speaks in the language of man").

## Sedom's Sin and the Call for Justice

Thus, in the case at hand, Hashem is demonstrating for us—by example—that no matter how compellingly clear-cut things may appear, before reaching consequential conclusions, people, especially judges, must make every effort to investigate the facts of the situation for themselves.

Hashem communicated to Avraham His verdict—that all of Sedom and Amorah were guilty and needed to be destroyed. But Avraham challenged the justice of this decision and began to "negotiate" with Hashem, ultimately securing agreement that if even only ten righteous people could be found in the condemned locations, then the entire place would be saved because of them.

After all was said and done, that meager quantity of Tzaddikim (righteous people) could not be found, and all of Avraham's importuning efforts were of no practical consequence. But how is it possible for man to seemingly best G-d in a dispute? Can a created human being know something that somehow escapes the knowledge of his Creator? How can man alter the decisions that have been determined by the Ruler of the Universe?

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



In my opinion, Hashem made no changes in His plans because of the arguments of Avraham. Everything was decided upon at the outset. Rather, He set up an opportunity for His faithful servant Avraham to participate in the “deliberations” pertaining to the sinful cities. The context of the proceedings was that of justice—an area vital to human existence. Note: In this context, we can perhaps understand Avraham’s complete reticence, when Hashem commanded him to sacrifice his son Yitzchak. That was not a matter of Divine justice but an expression of the inscrutable Will of G-d, which man is unable to comprehend. Thus, it was a test of the Emunah (faith) of Avraham and the extent of his Yirat Hashem (fear of Hashem), but not a forum for disputation. Avraham confronted the challenge head-on and mastered it. As a result of his participation in every step of the “judicial process,” Avraham gained important insights into the subject of Mishpat Hashem (Divine justice) and how it intersects with the ideal of Divine compassion.

#### Avraham’s Role: Partner in Judgment

In addition, this story reflects a significant element in the relationship between Hashem and man. Hashem assumes the role of a teacher, who guides His students to a higher level of wisdom and Rachmanut (mercy). The great sages of Israel were predominantly teachers. They learned Torah for themselves as well as for its perpetuation in the Jewish nation. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik was fond of saying that he regarded himself as merely a Melameid (school teacher). He would then quickly add that in the blessing for the Torah, we praise Hashem as the One Who is Melameid (teaches) Torah to His nation Israel.

#### Encountering Hashem Through Torah

The study of Torah, when undertaken with humbleness and dedication, can lead one to a special encounter with HaKadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy One, Blessed Is He). The Gemara in Berachot (6a) states:

*“And from where is it derived that when [even] one person sits and studies Torah, the Divine Presence is with him? For it is stated: ‘Wherever I permit My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.’ (Shemot 20:20)”*

This personal encounter with the Creator is available to everyone—man and woman, young and old, great scholar and ordinary student—who, with diligence and humbleness, seeks to be instructed by Hashem through the study of His Torah.

In the sincere act of learning, we can experience, as it were, a rendezvous with the One Who revealed His Torah on Mt. Sinai. If you search for Hashem with the appropriate diligence and humility—as did Avraham, who said, “Behold now, I desired to speak to my L-rd, although I am but dust and ash” (Bereishit 18:27)—you will find Him.

May Hashem assist us in this noble endeavor.  
Shabbat Shalom. ■

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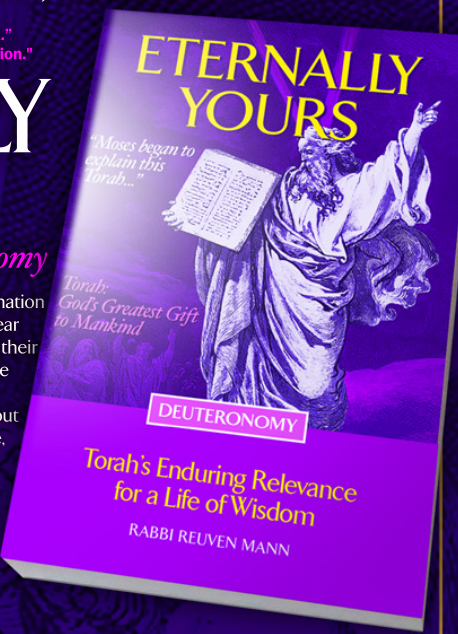
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# DICHOTOMIZED MAN'S WRONG ANSWER

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**H**ow does conflicted man behave? How does he justify his sin? As Rabbi Israel Chait taught, Torah differs from other philosophies by presenting role models, not by merely identifying abstract truths. We might apply this also to models of sinners. Role models surpass abstract principles, as we are more impacted by peoples' practices: their concrete actions with which we identify. Identification is a great tool to motivate us as our psychological faculties include a self-image, and we create an acceptable self-image when we copy those whom we admire. Seeing role models in action offers us a most clear personality to copy. Human examples improve us, steering us away from evil and towards goodness, far better than what dry, abstract principles merely describe in text.

The story of Lot and the angels is one such role model presentation. The deeper psychological phenomena and dynamics are cloaked in God's scripted story, with very subtle clues, the details of which teach many nuances of human nature. The purpose of concealing psychological principles is because human emotions and psychological faculties are not tangible or observable, and many individuals reject what is not observable. They are not on the level to accept such truths, so God hides the lessons for those who can appreciate psychology and philosophical perfection, and know how to decipher Torah. Let's review this startling Torah story:

The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground, he said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early." But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square." But he pressed them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people from everywhere—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them." So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him, and said, "I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Come here," and one said, "You came here to dwell, and will you now judge [us]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them." And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved forward to break the door. But the angels stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.

And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blindness, so that they were helpless to find the entrance. (Gen. 19:1-11)

Maimonides teaches: "We have already shown that the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in scripture took place in a vision or dream" (Guide, book II, chap. xli). Following Maimonides' understanding that Torah stories including angels must be understood in a non-literal sense [angels are not physical], I suggest below in this essay the following interpretation. Support for Maimonides' view is found in the following implications:

- Lot offers his daughters' for sexual pleasure—to an entire city—while sheltering complete strangers. This is extremely peculiar, that greater mercy is expressed for strangers than for one's daughters, whom the father treats cruelly as harlots.
- The practically impossible sudden gathering of literally all Sodomites—from "youths to elders"—from "all corners of Sodom" is not credible, if literal. News does not spread that fast, nor do all society's members act identically.
- The Sodomite's relentless search for Lot's door...even after they were blinded.
- The very phenomenon of blinding the Sodomites.

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• The angels' initial rejection of Lot's hospitality, when they were in fact in Sodom to save him, is contrary to their goal.

As Torah is written with complete precision and no redundancy, where many details share many lessons, we wonder about the focus 11 times on Lot's "house," "door," "roof," and "entrance." Of what instruction are these details about Lot's home? And this verse captures our attention: "You came here to dwell, and will you now judge us? Now we will deal worse with you than with them."

### The Metaphor: Lot's Personality

This event is a metaphor. Of course, Lot was literally saved and Sodom was destroyed, as stated later: "Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval" (Gen. 19:29). However, this highly detailed account of the angels, the Sodomites, and Lot and his "home" are unnecessary, if we are only meant to learn of Lot's salvation and Sodom's destruction. What then do all these details teach? This entire metaphor depicts Lot's personality. God is once again instructing mankind on how the psyche operates, to guard from poor qualities and cleave to righteousness. Let's decipher the verses one by one:

*But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square." But he pressed them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house*

Lot must coerce the angels to enter his home means that Lot must "force" proper morality upon himself. The angels' reluctance to enter Lot's home refers to Lot's reluctance to incorporate complete justice into his life. Lot chose to live in Sodom, a corrupt society bent on extreme promiscuity; he was attracted to immorality. Nonetheless, Lot followed some morality: he provided hospitality. Why? This was due to his conflict: he craved lusts but learned morality and kindness from Abraham. Lot was conflicted. Lot's solution was to assuage his guilt by performing some token act of kindness [towards these angels]. Support for Lot's resistance to act with full kindness was his meager "feast" (only dry matzos) served to the angels, while Abraham served the angels a lavish feast of meat, milk and cake, not meager matzos.

*They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people from everywhere—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them."*

Suddenly after the angels entered—"They had not yet lain down"—the mob descended upon Lot's house—every citizen. As mentioned, it is impossible that the news spread immediately, and that "all" Sodomites arrived. But metaphorically speaking, this means that as soon as Lot performed some proper act of hospitality, his corrupt emotions (represented by the Sodomites) immediately conflicted with his token act of morality.

*So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him.*

Why must we read 11 times about the "house," "entrance," and that he closed the "door"? Here is the key. This refers to Lot's dichotomy. His guilt demanded that he retain some good self-image, and "closing the door" means this: Lot wished to compartmentalize his small measure of morality, to preserve an acceptable self-image. This required a "safe compartment" in his mind (his home in this metaphor) that he kept off-limits to immorality. Lot felt justified in retaining his lewd character, through some just token act (hosting the men), thereby retaining an acceptable self-image. He could even tolerate a separate act of giving his daughters to the Sodomites for homosexuality, but he would not cross the line of homosexuality with those angels, which

secured for him a sense of justice. This explains Lot's words, "But do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof." In this metaphor, Lot's home represents a part of himself which he required to remain untainted, so as to view himself in some favorable light. God refers to Lot's home 11 times! That's excessive, unless God wishes to emphasize the significance of this psychological phenomenon: Lot's home represents a "place" in his mind...a degree of abstinence from sin, through which he justifies all his other lusts. The conflicted man will dichotomize his values and actions to preserve his self-image. Every person must feel he acts correctly. Lot "forces" good angels into his home, but prevents entrance by sinners into this compartment of his behavior. In other words, Lot forces some morality into his life. The numerous instances of Lot's home intend to call our attention to the core of the metaphor: a "moral compartment of his character." That compartment is Lot's self-image. Lot's "home" is the compartment of himself engaging in a just morality. Lot offering his daughters to the Sodomites displays his corrupt dichotomy, his absurd sense of justice...as the following conveys...

### Indecision Corrupts

*Lot said, "I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof." The Sodomites replied: "You came here to dwell, and will you now judge [us]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them."*

Torah identifies Lot's dichotomy and teaches a primary lesson: indecision corrupts. Lot moves to Sodom, yet he tells the Sodomites to restrain their sin, thereby Lot straddles both sides of the fence: he has not chosen any one lifestyle. A person who cannot choose is more susceptible to corruption, as he has no firm grip on any philosophy. His mind is incapacitated. This uncommitted mind state allows him to accept any corrupt act, for his choices are not rooted in any opinion:

*You came here to dwell [you value lusts], and will you now judge us [you also value righteousness]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them".*

This is Torah's method of communicating Lot's precise flaw, and danger. Similarly we read:

*Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if it is Baal...follow him!" But the people answered him not a word (I Kings 18:21).*

Elijah criticized the Jews for this same error, and the people could not respond: their minds were disengaged. Astonishingly, Elijah said that following Baal alone would be preferable to following it together with following God. How so? He meant that at least when following Baal alone, one has made a decision, even though it is wrong. Choosing wrongly is preferable to no choice at all, for at least the mind is engaged, and then can be taught its error. But a disengaged mind cannot learn. So too regarding Lot: "You came here to dwell, and will you now judge [us]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Lot's conflicting views rendered him susceptible to great harm.

Rabbi Israel Chait said as follows:

*A psychologist once said that when analyzing a person, all parts of the personality must be scrutinized. He gave the following analogy: If the police said they would patrol all places except for one town, surely all the criminals would relocate to that unpatrolled town. The*

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

*same is true with the human personality. If all but one part of the psyche is scrutinized, that one area is where one will vent all his emotions. (Pirkei Avos, chap. 4, pg 237)*

Certainly, as only one part of Lot's mind was scrutinized, all other emotional areas sought satisfaction, expressed by "The townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people from everywhere—gathered about the house." This is a metaphor for all of Lot's other emotions—"young and old—all the people from everywhere"—which threatened him as he justified himself in one area. When we feel we are righteous with one act, we feel we need not scrutinize any other aspect of our personalities. This gives reign to all the remaining emotions. The Crusades and Nazis could perpetrate so much evil because they justified their religion and warped morality.

*Now we will deal worse with you than with them.*

Lot justified the rest of his lusts due to acting properly in one area; his overall self-image was thereby validated by offering hospitality. Now his remaining emotions would deal worse with him: "And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved forward to break the door." Notice the identical word: Lot initially "pressed" (vayiftzar) the angels, and then the Sodomites (Lot's other lusts) "pressed" (vayiftzaru) Lot. Meaning, that Lot had to force morality upon himself (morality towards angels), this revealed his lustful leanings: his emotions (Sodomites) bearing down on him to the point that he would become fully corrupted. His instincts were about to "break through the door," to obliterate that small amount of good Lot attempted to keep preserved in his heart, "behind the door." That Lot required force to show hospitality means that his nature strongly opposed it, and flowed towards lusts. The same word is used as Torah describes 2 reactions from the same lustful urges.

*But the angels stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blindness, so that they were helpless to find the entrance.*

The angels referring to absolute justice, cannot coexist with immorality, so they stretched their hands alone "outside" the door. But they did not intermingle in the same area as the Sodomites (good and evil do not coexist). God saved Lot, expressed as the angels saving him. Lot could not save himself. Perhaps Lot's salvation was not so much due to his level, but due to a stain on Abraham's reputation. Had Abraham's nephew Lot been destroyed, this would tarnish Abraham's identity and success at spreading monotheism. Thus, we read "Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval" (Gen. 19:29).

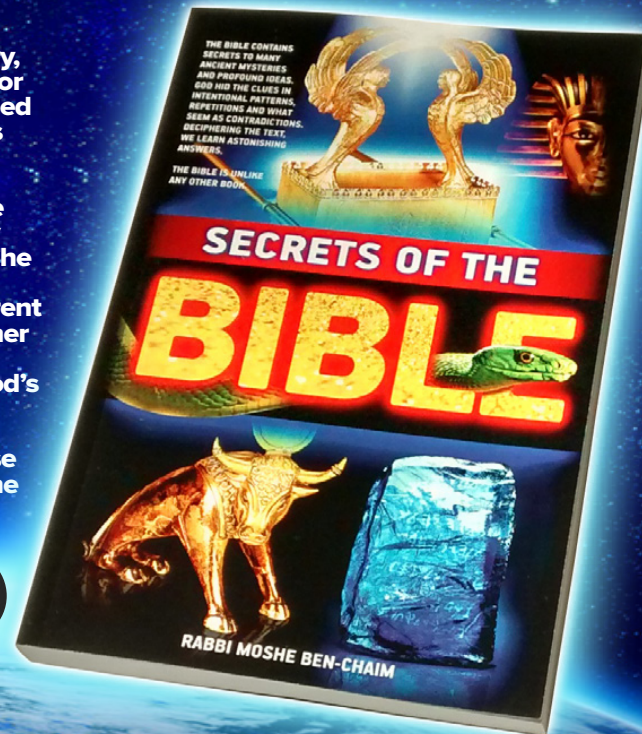
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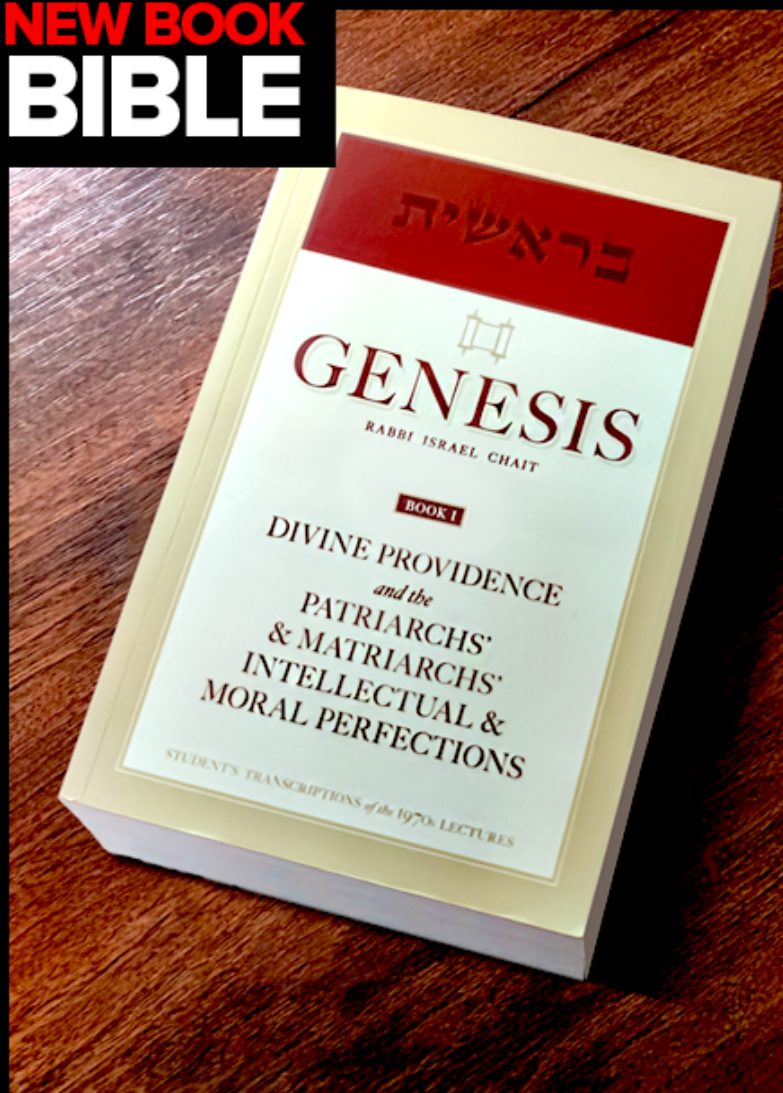
That the Sodomites still sought to enter Lot's home after being stricken with blindness further supports this story as being a metaphor.

## Summary

This story shares a lesson in psychology: how conflicted man attempts to engage in immorality while retaining some compartment in his mind of a morally-correct self-image. But such a compromise eventually fails. "God appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am El Shaddai, walk in My ways and be complete'" (Gen. 17:1). Following God requires "completeness"; partial Torah adherence (Lot) indicates a corruption and leads to failure. It is also notable that this verse (Gen. 17:1) refers to God's command to Abram of circumcision, a moderation of the sexual drive, in contrast to Lot's philosophy of indulging it. This Torah story leaves us with a deeper appreciation for God, as He shares such detailed psychological knowledge with mankind. Torah means "guide," and to guide us towards perfection, God offers us guidance not only in intellectual matters, but also in studying and managing our emotions through human examples. ■



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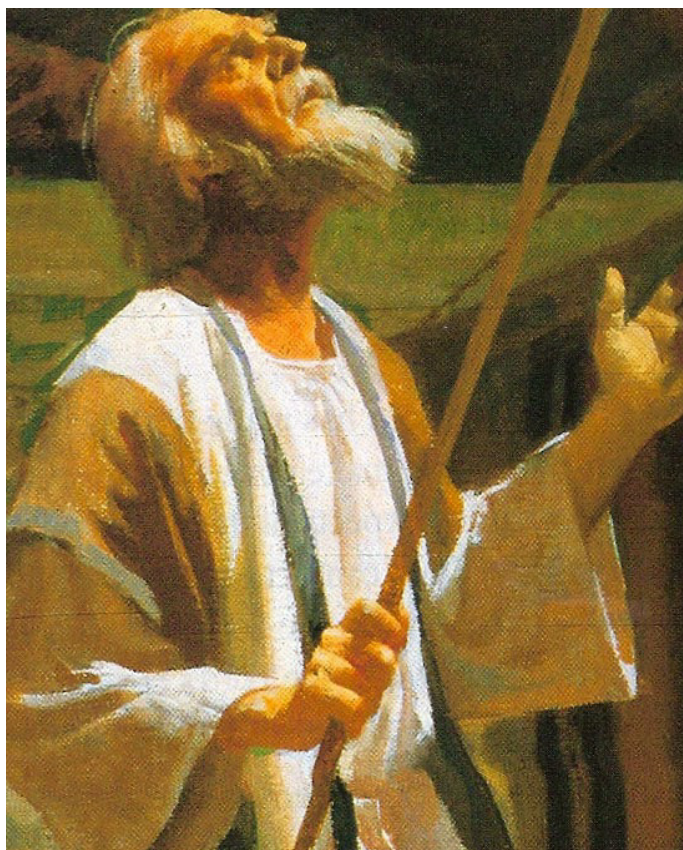


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# Abraham and the Angels



Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

One must repeatedly revisit Torah portions to uncover God's numerous lessons. What catches our attention during our first few reads of a given area, often obscures other questions and insights. However, if we follow the halacha of reading each weekly portion twice yearly, and we are fortunate, new questions arise leading to new discoveries. I will address this account of Abraham and the angels, following God's words that all prophets excluding Moses received prophecy only while unconscious.[1]

Three angels visit Abraham. We read five times how fast Abraham "ran" and "hurried" to prepare a meal for these guests, described as men. What is God's intent in, 1) giving a vision to Abraham that highlights Abraham's kindness to people, and 2) repeating the haste in which Abraham served them? Since God ultimately discusses with Abraham Sodom's destruction—a weighty matter—of what relevance is this seemingly unimportant vision Abraham serving the three men?

Only one angel appears required for this vision, since only its news of Isaac's forthcoming birth was announced. The other two angels were silent the entire visit and could have initially "arrived"[2] at Sodom later. The Rabbis teach that the other two angels had the respective missions of destroying Sodom and saving Lote. Thus, there was no need for them to accompany the angel assigned with the mission of the birth announcement. What then was the purpose of the two other angels visiting Abraham?

One angel asked Abraham, "Where is Sarah your wife?" We would assume this was intended to call her to share the news. But this did not occur. As Abraham responded, "She is in the tent", the angel then announced to Abraham alone the news of Isaac. Why then did the angel inquire of Sarah's whereabouts? It appears inconsequential. The Torah then tells us that Sarah "in fact" heard, as she was behind the angels. She denied her ability to become pregnant at ninety years old. God then ridicules Sarah addressing Abraham, "Is anything impossible for God?" As Abraham was alone in communion with God, what purpose was served by God including Sarah's words in this created vision? (Although this was Abraham's vision, God accurately depicts Sarah's true feelings, which no doubt, Abraham discussed with Sarah in his waking state subsequent to this prophecy. For she too would be instrumental in transmitting God's justice. Alternatively, Sarah might have very well participated in this prophecy; similar to when God gave a joint prophecy to Miriam, Aaron and Moses [Num. 12:4].)

This is followed by the angels "gazing at Sodom", but not yet leaving. Their departure is suddenly delayed, and interrupted by God's following consideration:

*"Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do? And Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God, performing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken. And God said [to Abraham], 'The cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, I know' (Gen. 18:17-21)."*

Following God's words, we read in the very next verse (ibid. 18:22) that the angels departed for Sodom. Again, the angels gazing towards Sodom should be immediately followed by their leaving. What is the meaning behind God's words above interrupting the angels' departure? And what is God's message here?

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## Abraham's Concern for Man

Why the emphasis of Abraham "running" and "hurrying" the meal preparations? Abraham was experiencing a vision, and to him, he was relating to men, not angels, as the verses state. Abraham had a keen sense of kindness, and wished to give honor to his fellow man. One can serve others, but if he runs to serve them, this expresses the height of honoring others, as we see regarding Rivka "running" to draw water for Eliezer's camels (Gen. 24:20). One feels more appreciated when another person runs to assist them, and does not merely walk. Abraham desired to make the three men feel most appreciated. Abraham prized human dignity. Typically, a leader seeks honor. But the perfected leader views all others as equals, and even forgoes personal rights and feelings to accommodate others. But why was this part of the vision God created? How is this related to Abraham learning God's justice?

Men such as Abraham, who are genuinely concerned for his fellow, and who teach others God's ways of "charity and justice" (Gen. 18:19) will be the recipient of greater knowledge in this area. God therefore teaches Abraham not only His ways, but also, that man (Abraham) earns this knowledge due to his acts of kindness to his fellow. Thus, Abraham sees himself showing kindness to the three men, and this is followed by God's dialogue on Sodom's justice. God says in other words, "Abraham, due to your kindness, justice and concern for mankind, I am revealing greater knowledge with you on how My true kindness and justice operate."

## Angels

Angels are not omniscient; they are God's metaphysical agents to perform events on Earth. As King David said, "He makes His angels winds; His ministers [He makes as] blazing flames" (Psalms 104:4). Each angel controls a particular sphere within natural law, and nothing outside that law. As Rashi taught, "...one angel does not perform two missions" (Gen. 18:2). We also read, "And the angel of God that went before the Jewish camp traveled, and it went behind them; and

the pillar of cloud that went before them traveled and stood behind them" (Exod. 14:19). There is no redundancy. This verse teaches a fundamental: there are two entities: 1) the metaphysical angel, and 2) the physical entity (here, a cloud) over which God places the angel as a supervisor. God controls nature through an angel, charging the angel over a specific sphere of nature; here, the specific task of repositioning the cloud to protect the Jews from the approaching Egyptian army. Thus, angels themselves are not physical, but they control physical phenomena. This explains why this verse describes the angel traveling, and then again, the cloud traveling. We are taught that the angel controls the cloud. And angels only control the sphere of laws determined by God. Thus, the angel did not know where Sarah was and needed to ask, since this knowledge was outside its specific sphere of control. Yet, the angel somehow knew Sarah's name. This I believe further proves that this story was a vision. For if it were a literal event and these three were men and not angels, they could not know Sarah's name.

The angel did not intend to share the birth announcement with Sarah. It is my opinion that it was ascertaining that Sarah was not in earshot of this announcement. The angel's inquiry "Where is Sarah your wife?" is understood as ensuring she did not hear the birth announcement. Why? I believe this teaches another lesson about God's justice. For it was Abraham who taught monotheism and God's justice to his children and mankind (Gen. 18:18). Therefore, the news of Isaac's birth — the son who would continue Abraham's legacy—related primarily to Abraham, and not Sarah.

## The Vision

This entire vision dealt with God's justice. Justice is not merely the destruction of evildoers. A primary aspect of God's justice is educating man about His ways. Therefore, the two other angels, although silent the entire time, came along with the announcing angel to convey a relationship between all three angels. Isaac's birth was vital to continue Abraham's

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teachings, and the destruction of Sodom and Lot's salvation comprise important lessons on God's justice, the very substance of Abraham's teachings. Thus, all three angels' missions related to Abraham, and therefore were all part of this vision.

### The Interruption: God's Dialogue with Abraham

God's will is to teach man. The angels were about to leave to Sodom, but not quite yet. First, God shares with Abraham a clue to greater knowledge of God's justice. This knowledge would have been "hidden" from mankind — "Will I keep hidden from Abraham?" (Gen. 18:17)—had God not suggested to Abraham that although exceedingly great in sin, Sodom might be spared if certain conditions were met. God knew there were not 10 righteous people, and therefore the angels proceeded to destroy Sodom, prior to Abraham's dialogue with God. But the message of the angels not departing to Sodom until God commenced a dialogue with Abraham indicates that the angel's mission of destruction played a great role in Abraham's knowledge of God's justice. So we can read the verses as follows: God is about to destroy Sodom (the angels gaze at Sodom) but God first shares knowledge of His justice before doing so. Once this dialogue ensues, the destruction can take place, and Abraham will attain greater knowledge. Again, God's dialogue is inserted between the angels' gaze towards Sodom and their departure for Sodom, conveying a relationship between Sodom's destruction and Abraham learning God's justice.

### What was Hidden?

What then what the knowledge of God's justice that would remain hidden from man, had God not revealed it to Abraham? There was certain knowledge Abraham did attain on his own, and that was that the "Judge of the whole Earth is just" (Gen. 18:25). But God intimated to Abraham that despite the great evil of Sodom, there was an option that they would not be annihilated. This was news to Abraham, for he knew God would not kill the righteous along with the wicked, "Far be it from You to bring death upon the innocent together with the guilty" (Ibid.). This means that the wicked are wiped away, and the righteous are saved. But for God to now inform Abraham that even the wicked might be spared, this was astonishing. This was a matter that would be hidden from man without God revealing it. Man would never arrive at this concept of justice without prophecy. Man has a simplified mind compared to God. Man can fathom the justice in destroying wicked people, and in saving righteous people. This means that it's unfathomable for the wicked to be spared. This is where God can educate man on a higher level of justice. God also includes mercy in His justice, and if there is an influence that can turn around wicked people towards goodness, God now tells

Abraham He will employ such mercy and not destroy the wicked. The question then becomes one of quantity: How many are needed to turn around evil people: 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10?

### Sarah

What purpose did Sarah serve in this vision? The Torah makes it clear that Sarah viewed natural law as absolute, "After I have aged, will I truly give birth?" (Gen. 18:14). Thus, God's response, "Is anything too wondrous for God?" (Gen. 18:14). The lesson to Abraham by God's inclusion of Sarah's denial within the vision is this: knowledge of God's justice must include the idea that His justice is absolute. Nothing—not even nature—overrides God's justice. This is expressed throughout Torah in the many miracles God performed to benefit righteous people. As God was teaching Abraham new insights into His justice, this lesson was of critical value. Thus, the angels only inquired of Sarah's whereabouts to confirm that she was not nearby; due to her subscription to nature's absolute control, she was not privy to discussions of God's justice, which does in fact, override nature. Abraham's laughter at the announcement of his son was the laughter of delight, while Sarah's was the laughter of denial.

### Summary

God gives Abraham a vision intended to further educate him on His ways, and for him to teach his son Isaac and the world. But God only does so, since Abraham was perfected in his concern for man. Abraham is taught through the vision that this concern is what earned him new insights from God. The other two angels visiting Abraham, and the interruption of the angels' departure by God's dialogue, teaches that man's knowledge of God's justice is a primary purpose in His meting out of justice. Thus, the angels did not leave to destroy Sodom until Abraham was engaged in learning a new insight into God's justice in this destruction. Abraham also learns that God's justice is absolute, expressed in God's rebuke of Sarah. ■

[1] "...If there will be prophets of God; in a vision to him I will make Myself known; in a dream I will speak to him. Not so is it with My servant Moses; in all My house he is trusted. Face to face I speak with him and in vision and not with riddles; and the form of God he beholds... (Num. 12:6-8)."

[2] I say "arrived", but in no manner do I suggest that angels are an earthly phenomenon. Rather, as I elaborated within this essay, that the two other angels could have "addressed" God's will for Sodom without connection with the announcing angel. (Similarly, the angels of God addressed God's will that the pillar of cloud relocate behind the Jews. But angels are not on Earth; only the cloud is. See Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, book II, end of chapter 6.)





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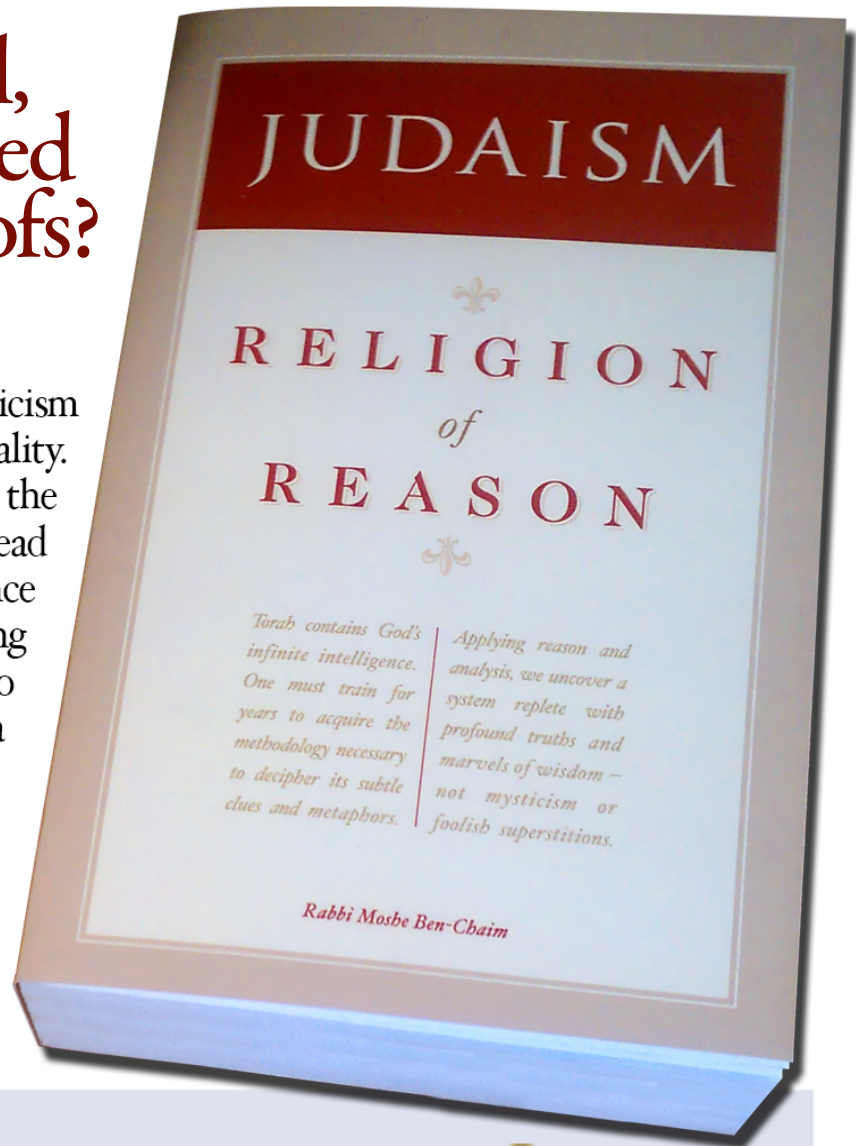
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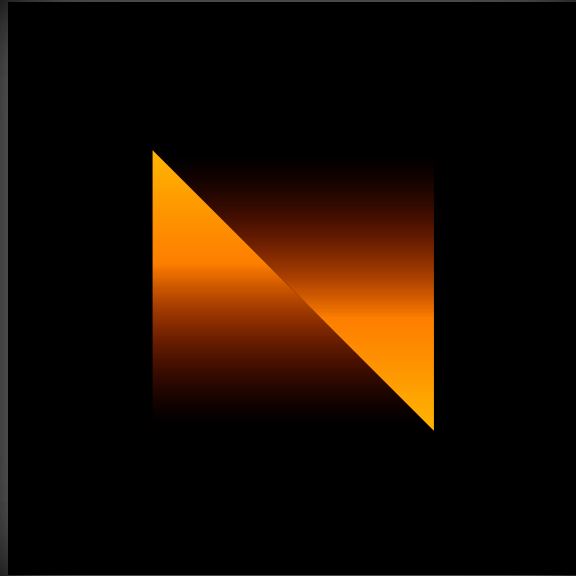
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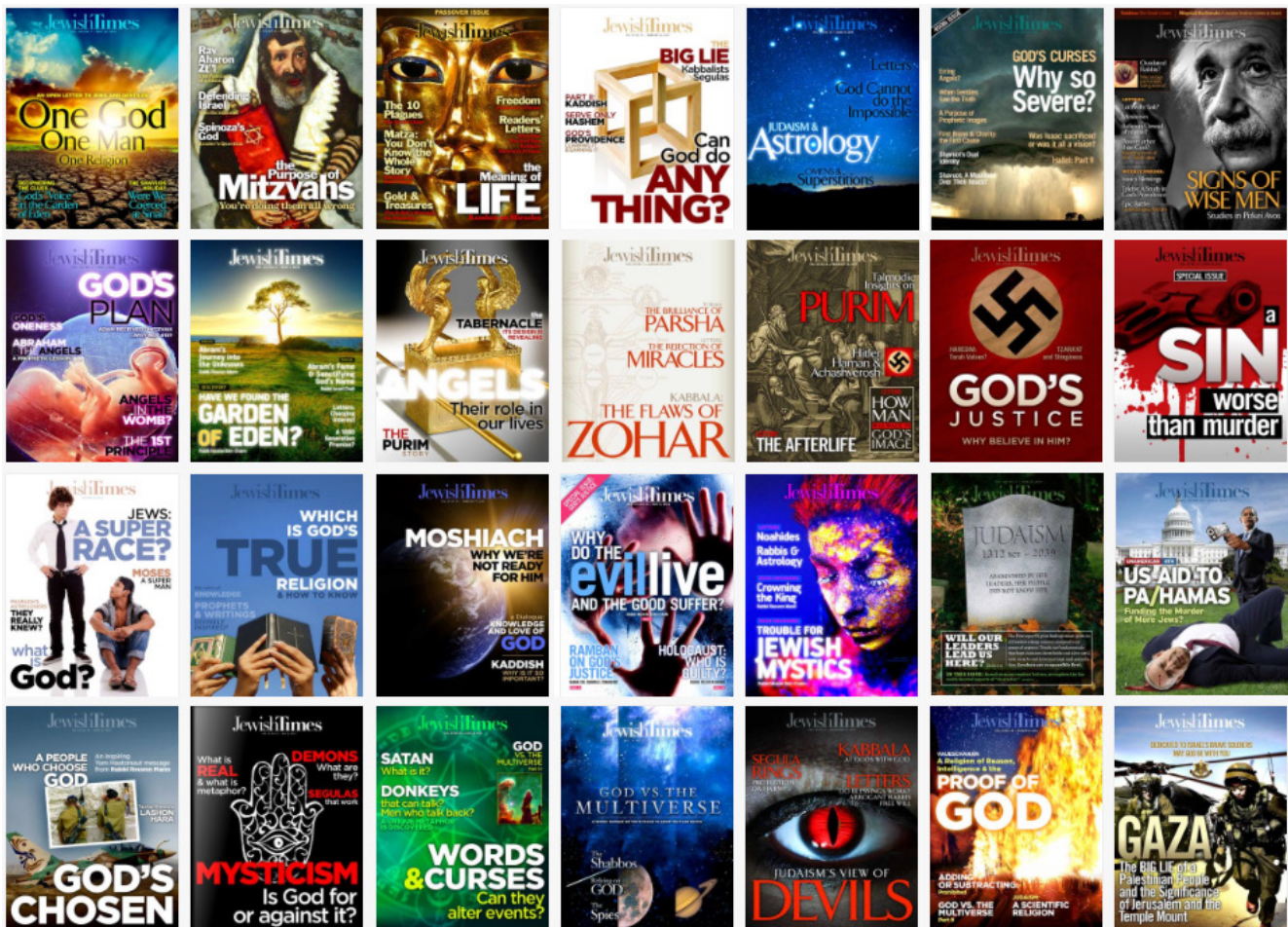
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