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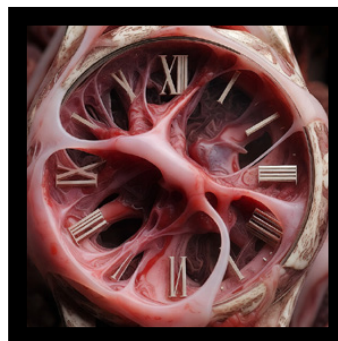
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MORALITY

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Cheating a Cheater?

Jacob worked for his father-in-law Lavan who wrongly switched his wages 100 times to favor himself (Rashi). If Jacob's wages were speckled sheep, to help Jacob prosper, God made all the sheep birth only speckled, to which the crooked opportunist Lavan responded, "All the newborn speckled shall now be mine." Then God changed the offspring to be streaked to which Lavan again said, "The streaked are mine." Lavan repeatedly changed Jacob's wages so that Lavan would take the current birthing trend for himself, caring nothing for Jacob and his own daughters, Jacob's wives (Gen. 31).

It was due to Lavan's swindling that Jacob—harnessing natural adaptive camouflage—devised a strategy to retrieve his former justly-earned wages. Jacob discretely peeled branches making speckled and streaked patterns conforming to

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his current wages. He placed them in the animals' watering troughs. Jacob knew animals are affected by visuals, which changes their appearance like a chameleon. Clearly Jacob did not sin as we learn from Psalms:

Jacob asked Rachel, "Will you marry me?" "Yes" she answered, adding, "But my father is a trickster, and he will deceive you." To this he answered, "I am his brother in trickery." And she asked him, "Are righteous men permitted to walk in the ways of deceit?" "Yes" answered Jacob, "for it is written, 'With the pure You will act pure, and with the perverse You will deal in kind' (Psalms 18:27) "(Ein Yaakov, Vayetzei).

Of course Psalms was not yet written by King David, who was not yet born. But this teaches that Jacob possessed the perfections later taught in Psalms: one may cheat a cheater, as "God deals purely with the pure people, and with crooked people God deals in kind," like punishing Pharaoh (Ibid. Rashi). Thus, Jacob was morally correct to use shrewd plans to regain what was unjustly taken from him. But there is more to be explained: why does God deal purely with pure people, and deal shrewdly with deceitful men? It is because the pure, righteous person operates according to a system of consistent fairness and transparency, so others trust him. And this trust is devel-

oped by others experiencing a good person's consistent allegiance to righteousness. God too treats the just man justly, thereby endorsing his proper character.

But a deceitful person knows others are not deceitful, explaining why he plans his devious schemes around his expectation of others remaining truthful. For example, a deceitful diamond merchant will lie, claiming his diamond is worth \$2000, twice its true \$1000 value, presenting forged documentation from the GIA of a \$2000 certificate value. He will expect an unsuspecting buyer to pay \$2000 with "authentic cash" and not counterfeit bills. The just response is that the experienced diamond buyer who sees the deceit, uses counterfeit bills for half the price, paying only the true \$1000 worth with real dollar bills. Thus, justice is achieved when the buyer plays the same game as the deceitful seller. God too deals this way to counter wrongdoing. And Jacob was correct to do the same.

The rule is that justice is the objective, and deceit—at times—is the correct path to justice. Deceit works as the crooked businessman doesn't expect others to be as cunning as he is. This is the meaning of "with the perverse You will deal in kind." That is, God—and wise men—use their knowledge of crooked people to defend against harm. During Channuka too, Yochanan deceived Nikanor through a pledge of fealty, and secured a private meeting with Nikanor so as to kill that evil man." ■

PERFECTION

Jacob was cooking a stew, Esav came in from the field and he was exhausted. And Esav said to Jacob, “Pour into my mouth that red, red stuff, for I am exhausted”, which is why he was named Edom (“red”). Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” And Esav said, “I am going to die, so of what use is my birthright to me?” But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Jacob then gave Esav bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. And Esav degraded the birthright. (Gen. 25:29-34)

Dani Roth: Of what significance is Esav being named Edom?

Rabbi Chait: This is a very good question. Rashi states, “On that day, Abraham had died in order that he might not see his grandson Esav falling into degenerate ways.” Rashi adds that Esav’s exhaustion was due to murdering others that day.

When Esav saw his grandfather Abraham die, it destroyed his own immortality fantasy, explaining why Esav told Jacob, “I am going to die, of what use then is my birthright to me?” Esav did not stray from Abraham’s ways until Abraham died (Rashi).

Esav’s exhaustion was in fact depression. Abandoning Abraham’s ways, Esav chased the lusts, *taaveh*. But it offered him little satisfaction, leading him to depression. He was so depressed, he could not say “give me lentils”—he couldn’t accurately describe the food, and he couldn’t feed himself, but he spoke like a child, “Pour the red stuff into my mouth.”

Here, Torah teaches a *yesode*, a fundamental: the life of lusts leads to depression. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, “Every pleasure is followed by another pleasure, or depression.” He meant this point: physical pleasures do not satisfy man but momentarily, which drive man to seek yet another pleasure, or realize the failure of such pursuits, leading to depression. Man’s pleasure is derived only from pursuing God’s wisdom.

So vital to our lives is this lesson, that Torah stops mid-story and names Esav “Edom” to epitomize what Esav was (naming a person defines him); he followed lusts exclusively. Torah teaches both, what is beneficial, and what is destructive, and by naming him Edom, Torah shines a light on the great depression Esav experienced pursuing his instincts: his inability to call the food “lentils” or feed himself, highlights the inescapable depression of the instinctual life.

While Abraham was alive, Esav retained his immortality fantasy as he imagined that to be the greatest good afforded to him through Abraham’s philosophy. But once Abraham—Esav’s impressive authority figure—died, Esav’s immortality fantasy was shattered and he veered off to a life of satisfying his instincts. The birthright then meant nothing to him, to the point, that Esav degraded the birthright.

Without immortality, Abraham’s philosophy meant nothing to the instinctual man. ■

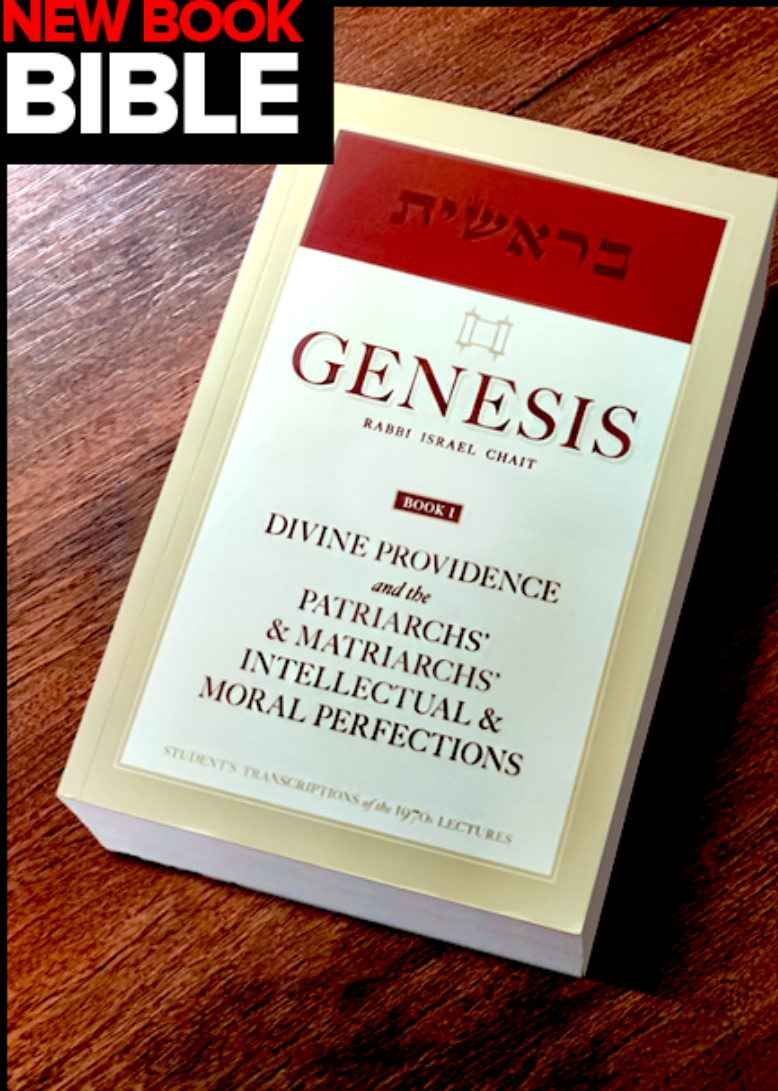
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A Fundamental



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Why did Jacob Leave Home?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Rivka's Concern and Yaakov's Flight

This week's Parsha, VaYitzei, marks a turning point in the life of Yaakov Avinu (our forefather). Circumstances conspired to compel him to abandon his parents' home and his birthplace. Yaakov needed to escape from the murderous intentions of his brother Eisav, who was outraged by Yaakov's "theft" of the blessings their father had intended to give to him!

This was not a Lech Lecha-type situation, akin to that of his grandfather, Avraham. This matter came about because Rivka overheard Yitzchak instructing Eisav to hunt and prepare a tasty meal for him in order that "I may eat, and my soul will bless you before I die" (Bereishit 27:4).

Rivka was alarmed by this development. Her view of Eisav was radically different from that of her husband, who loved Eisav "because the game was in his mouth" (Bereishit 25:28). The Torah does not reveal the reasons for Rivka's suspicious attitude toward her elder son. It seems that she had a sharp intuition in these matters, having been raised in a home where people like Lavan were well-practiced in the arts of deception. She did not regard Eisav's demonstrations of meticulous observance of certain Mitzvot as sincere. On the other hand, she loved her son Yaakov, who dwelled in the tents of Shem and Ever, devoting all his time and energy to the pursuit of wisdom. That type of dedication cannot be faked. Moreover, Yaakov was an Ish Tam (wholehearted person), not the type of person who seeks to create a false image.

Rivka faced a serious dilemma. She believed that Yitzchak's blessing of Eisav would constitute a disaster for the Abrahamic movement. It would confer upon him the ability to pose as the legitimate leader of the religion initiated by his grandfather, Avraham. But what could she do?

We instinctively feel that she should have brought forth her concerns to her husband. Isn't that exactly what Sarah had done when she noticed alarming behavior in Avraham's son, Yishmael? True, Avraham disagreed with her assessment, but when Hashem confirmed her view, Avraham came around and sent Hagar and her son away.

We lack insight into the nature of Yitzchak and Rivka's relationship. Rivka realized that she would not be able to change her husband's evaluation of Eisav and that attempting to do so would only cause needless strife, resulting in a breach of Shalom Bayit (peace in the home). So she took matters into her own hands and persuaded Yaakov to disguise himself as Eisav and thus cause Yitzchak to pronounce the blessings upon him.

That part of the plan worked successfully, but then Eisav returned from the field and prepared the tasty dishes, only to discover that he was too late. When he realized what had

happened, his reaction was harsh. Somehow, Rivka became aware of his intention to slay Yaakov once their father passed away. She therefore urged him to leave town and take refuge in the home of her brother, Lavan, in Charan, until Eisav's anger abated and it would be safe to return home.

In obtaining Yitzchak's approval of this plan, Rivka did not reveal the true reason behind Yaakov's departure. Instead, she complained about the Canaanite wives Eisav had chosen, and accordingly, Yitzchak instructed Yaakov to go to Paddan-Aram and seek a wife there from his brother-in-law's family.

[Note: We tend to think that spouses are bound to reveal everything to their mates, but this story seems to indicate otherwise.]

Rivka's Strategy and Its Consequences

Thus began the journey of Yaakov, which entailed his victimization at the hands of his mother's brother, Lavan. He was very attracted to his younger and very beautiful daughter, Rachel, and agreed to work for seven years to obtain her hand in marriage. When that commitment was completed, Lavan arranged the wedding party and Yaakov entered the bridal tent only to discover, in the morning, that he had spent the night with Leah.

He confronted Lavan about his treachery, but Lavan parried by saying he could not flout the local custom, which prohibited marrying off the younger daughter before the elder. But, being the "nice guy" that he was, he would allow Yaakov to marry Rachel immediately after the week of celebration was over in exchange for another seven years of labor. There was not much that Yaakov could do. He very much wanted to be married to Rachel, and Lavan held all the cards. Sometimes you are forced to acknowledge your powerlessness and adapt to the situation before you.

Eventually, Yaakov worked out a deal with his father-in-law through which the livestock of Lavan increased tremendously, making both of them extremely wealthy. However, the sons of Lavan suffered from Ayin HaRa (the evil eye) and could not tolerate that Yaakov had become wealthy from the flocks that belonged to their father.

Yaakov sensed the danger and, with his family and possessions, made haste to exit from Charan. He was destined to face more adventures on the return journey homeward, especially in his encounter with his estranged brother Eisav. With Hashem's help, he was able to effect a reconciliation and eventually made it back to the land from which he had departed twenty-two years earlier.

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The Deeper Meaning Behind Yaakov's Exile

That number is very significant. For as it happened, Yaakov's beloved son Yosef was sold into slavery in Mitzrayim (Egypt), and it took all of twenty-two years until father and son were reunited. Was the number of years they were separated purely coincidental? Our Rabbis say no! They assert that Yosef was away from Yaakov for twenty-two years as a punishment, measure for measure, for the same number of years that Yaakov failed to fulfill the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av VaEim (honoring father and mother). In my opinion, there is a glaring difficulty with this rabbinic interpretation. It seems to presuppose that in absenting himself from the presence of his parents, Yaakov somehow committed a transgression. However, that does not seem to be the case because Yaakov had to run away to save his life from Eisav, and the saving of life overrides all other Mitzvot (with the exception of three cardinal prohibitions).

Moreover, by going to Charan, Yaakov was actually fulfilling the instruction of his father and mother, both of whom had urged him to travel to the home of Lavan. It is therefore clear that in departing from his parents, Yaakov was in fact obeying their wishes and thus fulfilling the commandment to honor one's parents. Why then should the length of his absence be a cause for punishment?

In order to resolve this issue, we must have a deeper understanding of how the Rabbis viewed the matter of Hashem's punishment. When Hashem punishes a righteous individual, it is always for the sake of making him or her a better person. So while Yaakov's leaving of his parents was actually the right thing to do, that doesn't mean that it didn't also entail a spiritual loss. He no longer had the opportunity to reap the benefits of being actively engaged in ministering to his parents.

The Mitzvah of honoring one's parents properly is one of the most difficult ones to perform. When doing so, a person must confront all his rebellious and egotistic emotions and overcome them. One who cannot perform this Mitzvah because of circumstances beyond his control is not considered to be in violation of the Torah. Nevertheless, he lacks all of the spiritual benefits that accrue to one who works through and overcomes all the emotional challenges involved in this complicated relationship. Perhaps this is what the Rabbis had in mind when they asserted that Yosef was away from Yaakov for twenty-two years because that was how long Yaakov didn't perform the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av. They meant to establish an association between those two events. Yaakov, through no fault of his own, missed out on the opportunity to attain the high degree of spiritual perfection involved in fulfilling the Mitzvah of Kibbud Av. Perhaps then, his separation from Yosef would remind him of his own detachment from his parents and cause him to look within and seek to rectify any defects he might have had in this area.

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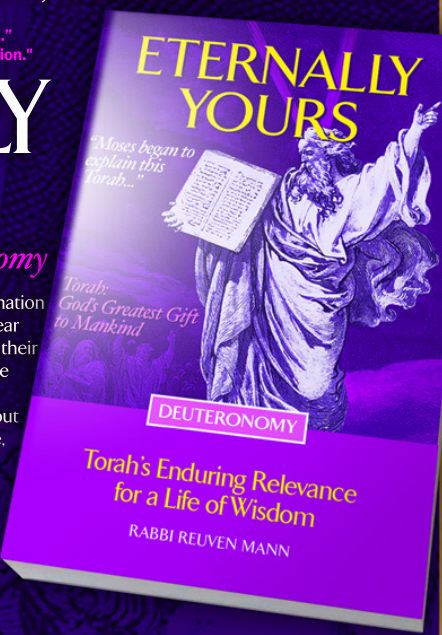
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Mitzvot as Spiritual Refinement

This understanding has great relevance to contemporary Jewish existence. We should not view the commandments exclusively as a vehicle of rewards and punishments. The aim of all the Mitzvot is to enable us to overcome our shortcomings and attain the highest possible level of spiritual perfection.

As the Rambam says (Moreh Nevuchim III:26–49), every Mitzvah has a purpose in elevating our souls and enhancing our relationship to the Creator. Thus, we should not be content to perform the commandments perfunctorily—i.e., just for the sake of fulfilling our religious obligations. We should also think deeply about the reason for the Mitzvah and seek to implement its spiritual purpose, so that we can attain a higher level of Avodat Hashem (Service of G-d). May Hashem assist us in our endeavors to know Him in all of our ways.

Shabbat Shalom. ■



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

WISDOM WITHOUT GOD?

Howard: Can man enjoy scientific wisdom while being ignorant of God's existence?

Rabbi: An atheist or one ignorant of God—by definition—does not recognize that natural order has a designer. They assume things came to be randomly with no intent or purpose. To such people, existences and natural forces follow merely mechanical behaviors, which somehow benefit man, that also curiously cooperate. An unsatisfying explanation. But if trees grew auto engine parts, that when assembled would propel a car, such people would surely claim the tree is the work of a designer. But strangely, they treat nature differently.

Without knowledge of a creator, one cannot understand the true nature of anything, as will be explained below. Furthermore, considering that man's existence is not temporary, as our eternal metaphysical souls do not suffer physical death, we expand our question: Which knowledge benefits our souls? For our eternal existence surely is of greater concern to us than our temporal earthly life.

Maimonides states:

The fundamental of all fundamentals and the pillar of all wisdom is to know that

there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being. If one would imagine that He does not exist, no other being could possibly exist. If one would imagine that none of the entities aside from Him exist, He alone would continue to exist, and the nullification of their [existences] would not nullify His existence, because all the [other] entities require Him and He, blessed be He, does not require them nor any one of them. Therefore, the truth of His [being] does not resemble the truth of any of their [beings]. (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 1:1-3)

Nothing came into existence or continues to exist without God. That is the meaning of a "first cause." Reality dictates that nothing can create itself, so a creator is mandatory for everything to exist. And if one assumes no God exists, meaning no first cause, nothing could exist. Others suggest the universe is eternal with no beginning. But that would mean the present could never be reached; an impossibility. Thus, all existence—the universe and mankind—are due to a first cause: God.

Let's consider Howard's question: Can man enjoy scientific wisdom while being ignorant of God's existence? The atheist cannot explain how any existence came about, or how it remains existing. Therefore, he lacks knowledge of "existence": the most primary property of everything. Thus, his knowledge of anything concerns minor knowledge, only accidental properties, like color, shape, location, motion and interaction, but he doesn't know how anything exists. He lacks knowledge of the most crucial property of everything. This is Maimonides' point, that God is the cause of everything, and that all existences and knowledge of everything depends on His existence. And without this knowledge, an atheist has knowledge only of a thing's mechanics, but not knowledge of its essential nature, nor of its purpose. The atheist's enjoyment of natural interaction is no different than the appreciation of a house created randomly by wind blowing branches accidentally into form.

But if one discovers that existence is due to a first cause, now he knows the truth of a thing's primary properties of how it exists and remains existing. That's essential knowledge that greatly surpasses an atheist's knowledge. Furthermore, as Rabbi Israel Chait taught, now he is enabled to move past the first question of how everything exists, and progress to learn its purpose. For without a

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designer, one cannot discuss "purpose." If during a violent volcanic eruption, the volcano walls blasted apart, shattering into randomly formed stone fragments, one could not seek any purpose in their shapes. But if an architect drew a house blueprint with various size windows for each room, one would correctly determine such variation has reason, as there is a mind behind the design. Without a designer, purpose cannot be determined. Rabbi Israel Chait taught, "knowledge of God is the pillar of all wisdom, as it propels man to search for perfectly rational explanations of the world which must exist, due to God's existence." An atheist cannot demand reasoning behind all existence, as he rejects a designer. Thus he fails to search for answers and fails to attain wisdom.

An atheist will marvel at the intricate and harmonious systems of meteorology, botany and biology: the design of water, evaporation, cloud formations, wind, condensation, rainfall, irrigation and vegetation growth, human digestion and human growth. He would say random evolution developed living beings perfectly fit to find sustenance through vegetation. He could not explain why evolution progressed that way or what drives the existence of evolution. He feels, "It's all accidental that the precise needs of biological organisms perfectly match the nutrients in vegetation." But in truth, it's impossible there should exist a perfect match between the properties of meteorology, botany and biology without a designer, for any orchestration of diverse systems that complement each other demands a mind developed all the parts with a plan for the interactive whole. No one would suggest evolution naturally formed pistons, gas tanks, drive trains, transmissions, gas, tires and spark plugs. No, there must be a mind intent on creating autos. And even without cars, no one would suggest such mechanical parts would evolve from nature. None ever have. The atheist is outside the pale of a reasonable explanation for existence, and he's also outside the pale of explaining purpose in creation. All his knowledge is limited to mechanical knowledge or knowledge of accidental features.

Without a designer—God—existence and the purpose if existence cannot be rationally explained. Therefore, the atheist and those ignorant of God miss the essence of the wisdom of all existences. Their advanced knowledge and manipulation of the mechanics of creation are no reflection of true knowledge. Essential knowledge must explain the essence of existence, which refers to how existence came about, and why it exists, its purpose.

The follower of God views meteorology, botany and biology in the context of God, and creation's purpose: sustained life for the objective of pursuing wisdom. That is, man, as the only intellect on Earth, is to pursue knowledge of God. That is why on Earth, man alone possesses intelligence. The atheist is ignorant of the purpose of creation: man is to recognize all that exists targets knowledge of God (Avos 2:8 Rashi). This is Maimonides second chapter (Ibid. 2:1):

It is a mitzvah to love and fear this glorious and awesome God, as [Deut. 6:5] states: "And you shall love God, your Lord" and, as [Deut. 6:13] states: "Fear God, your Lord."

Knowledge must ultimately arrive at an appreciation of God as the source of the universe. Maimonides continues:

What is the path [to attain] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God" [Psalms 42:3]. When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, 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 David stated: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers... [I wonder] what is man that You should recall Him" [Psalms 8:4-5]. Based on these concepts, I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide a foothold for a person of understanding to [develop] love for God, as our Sages said regarding love: "In this manner, you will recognize He who spoke and [thus,] brought the world into being." (Ibid. 2:2)

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Would fruit be shaped as tools without a designer?

Again, "When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name." So not only is enjoyment of wisdom compromised when one is ignorant of how matter exists, but he is also without the enjoyment of wisdom if his studies don't arrive at an appreciation for God. How is man's enjoyment of wisdom crippled when he is ignorant of God? Rabbi Chait was asked why God, in His universe and Torah, embedded wisdom that far surpasses that capacity of any man to comprehend. He said as follows:

There are two things in perceiving wisdom: a perception of what you know, but also a sense of what you don't know. And that's why we mentioned that a great scientist senses that he only scratched the surface. That means man's knowledge enables him to know certain things, but it enables him to sense that what he sees, is only the surface that stems from an infinite source. That's all part of wisdom. There's a draw to wisdom, a draw towards the infinite. That's why scientists say that with every door you open, you then see that there's another five doors. And as man progresses in knowledge, he sees the infinite looms even greater before him. That's the process of wisdom. Without the infinite, there's no wisdom.

Part of man's relationship to wisdom is a relationship to the infinite. It's not enough if a person knows something. He has to be able to sense that this which he knows comes from something which is of an infinite magnitude. He's scratching the surface. That's like Einstein said, that when a person studies nature, he realizes that the elements [tools] that he's using are very crude mechanisms compared to what is necessary to understand the delicate and abstract ideas of the universe. That's the experience of wisdom. If it's not infinite, it's not wisdom. In other words, when a person pursues ideas, there's greater and greater unification and more and more abstract. Man will never be able to get to the end of that road of abstractions. Because the abstractions reach up to God's throne, it's impossible [to reach]. How far on the path he gets, depends on each individual. Depending on his abilities and depending on how much he dedicates himself to it, his discipline, that will determine what level along the path each individual attains. But no one will get to the end.

There's a reason for this. What is study? In study, man approaches God. How does man approach God? His sense of the infinite. Through wisdom, a person senses the infinite, and that relates him to God. Without the

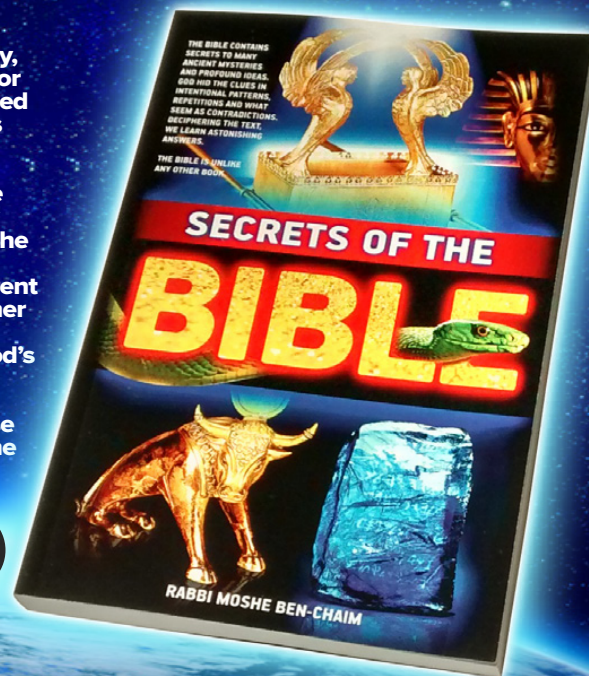
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sense of the infinite, if it's a finite idea and that's the end of it, he has no relationship to God. Ultimately, his draw is towards God. And God is impossible for any being to understand, even angels. And no one, no being can understand God. So that's why it has to be the infinite. Without the infinite, there's no study. Just to know a certain idea, a certain fact, that's not study. Study is where the person is drawn towards God ["One who loves and desires wisdom—even though he does not know anything—behold, this one is called a wise man." Rabbeinu Yona, Avos 4:1]. How is he drawn towards God? When the world of the infinite starts opening up, like the Rambam says, he desires to get closer and closer, to move in a certain motion towards the infinite, towards God.

Can man enjoy scientific wisdom while being ignorant of God's existence? While a man ignorant of God can appreciate how the world operates, during life he loses immensely by not being propelled to seek answers to every question, as he does not agree there is a designer and a rational purpose to everything. He also has no joy and appreciation for God of infinite wisdom, for Whom King David, Einstein and others marveled. Finally, he forfeits his afterlife, which cannot exist for one who denies God. ■



Book Reviews

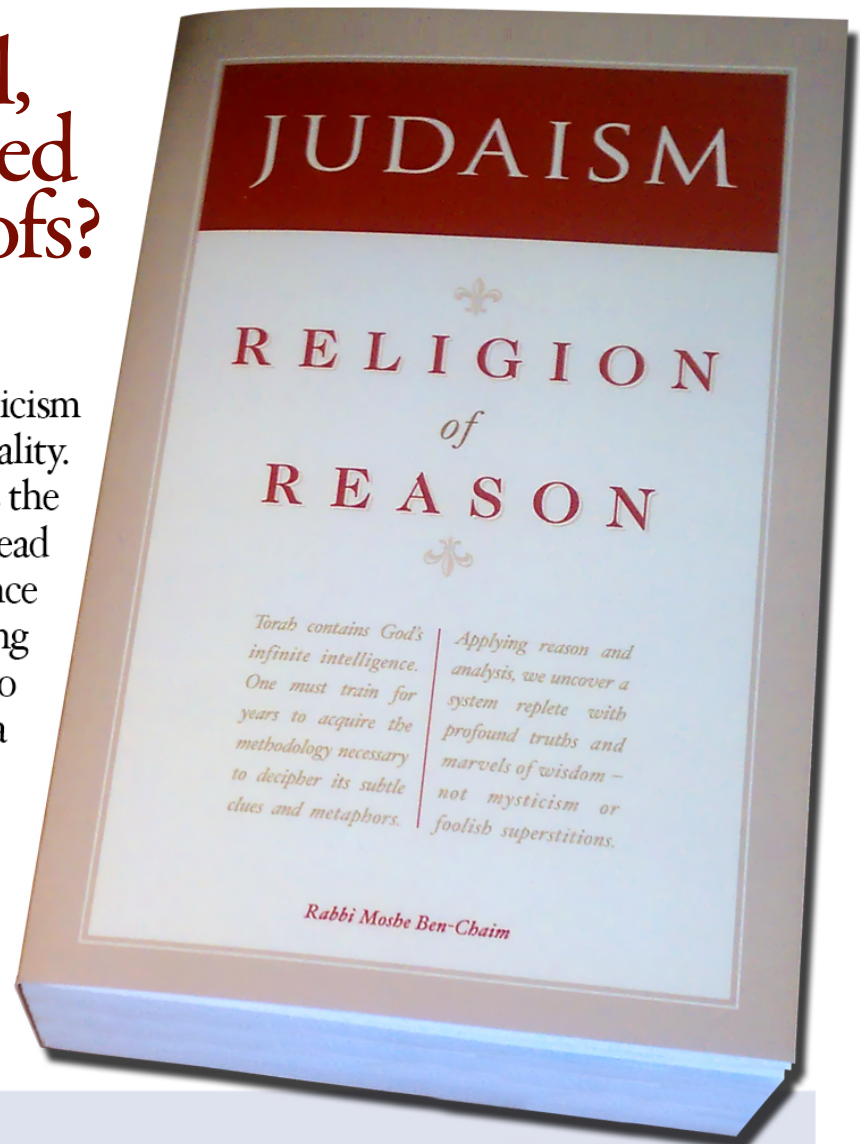
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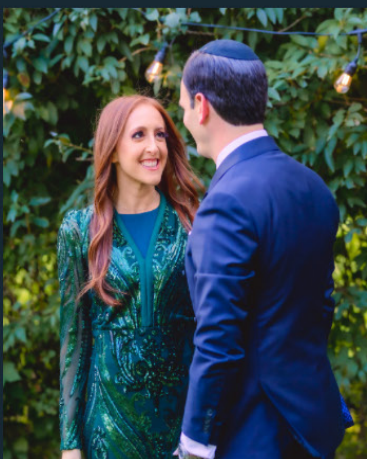




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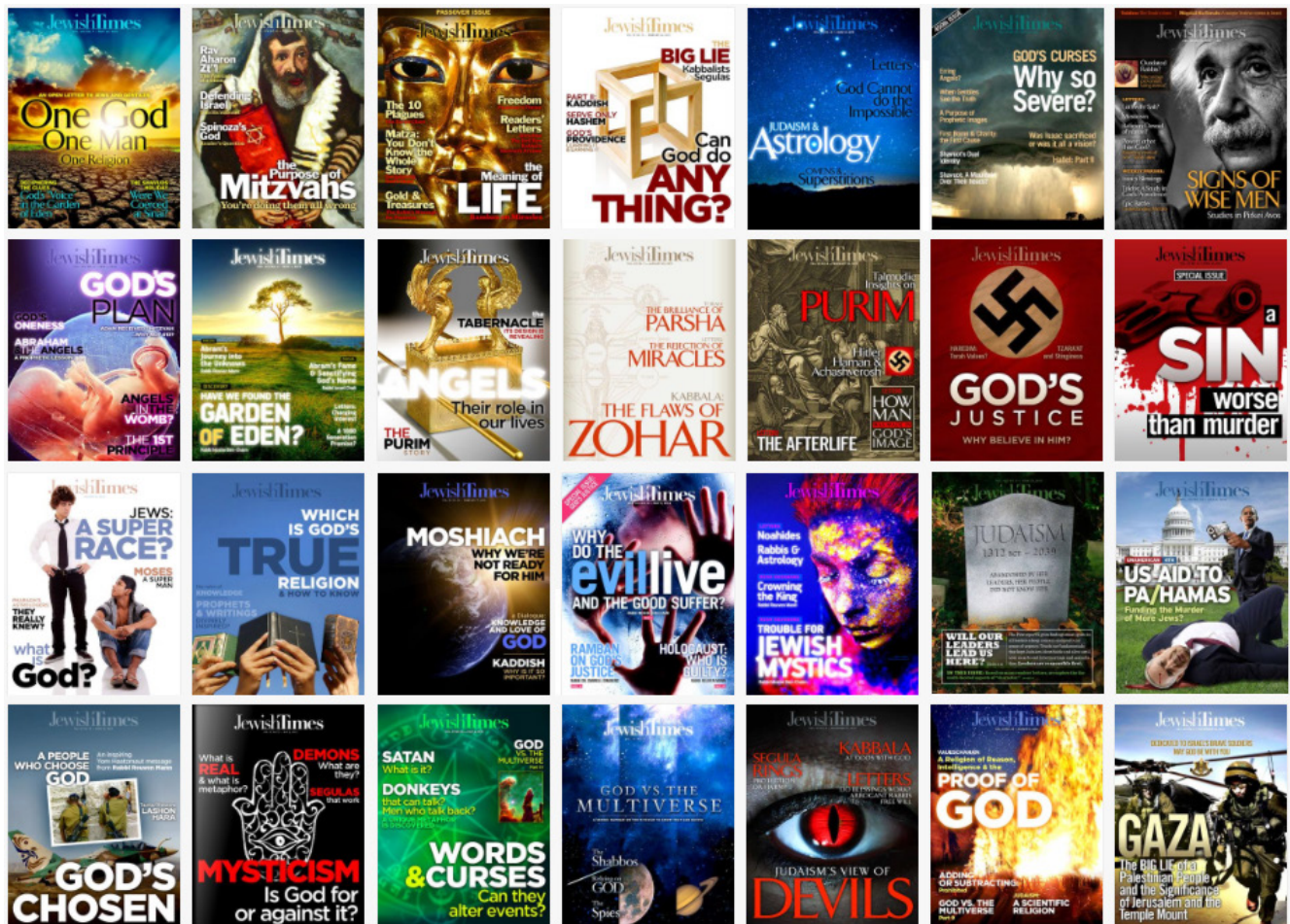
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