

JewishTimes

VOL. XXIV NO. 5 — JAN. 16, 2026

What is God?

Why did God
make the world?

Is Bible for
all people?

What's my purpose,
why am I here?

God isn't a man,
so what is Jesus?

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Torah Mode

Top 50 Googled Questions on the Bible



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KNOW WHAT TO ANSWER

Jews and gentiles everywhere are inquiring about Judaism's difference from other religions. At some point, you too will be asked by someone. Maybe you will even be the one who is asking. We hope you enjoy our answers in this issue. Email us with your questions: comment@Mesora.org

TALKS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God “Created” Moses

DANI ROTH: The following verses are very strange:

Amram took as wife his father's sister Yocheved, and she bore him Aaron and Moses; and the span of Amram's life was 137 years. (Exod. 6:20)

It is the same Aaron and Moses to whom God said, “Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop.” It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt to free the Israelites

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from the Egyptians; these are the same Moses and Aaron. (Exod. 6:26,27)

Why must we be told—and told twice—“They are the same Moses and Aaron?” Who else would they be?! There’s only one Moses and Aaron.

RABBI: A quick rewind of history will explain. Have you ever wondered about the need for all the details about the killing of the first borns, that Moses’ mother Yocheved had given birth to Moses three months prematurely, that she had to hide him, then build a raft-basket into which she placed her infant Moses on the river to escape, followed by Moses being found by—of all people—Pharaoh’s daughter?! Accident? No. That’s why God recorded such detail. But not just recorded, God orchestrated Moses’ life and events from his birth. And when Moses finally grew and defended a Jew by killing the Egyptian taskmaster, Pharaoh sought to kill him, but God saved him from the sword. “This” is the Moses that stood before Pharaoh means. God planned Moses existence to save the Jews. This explains why this whole lineage immediately proceeds Moses finally coming before Pharaoh. Because this entire history from Moses’ birth to his standing before Pharaoh has its objective that the great man Moses saves the Jews and teaches Egypt the fallacy of the worst sin of idolatry.

God is teaching us how He took great care to plan the Jews’ salvation through creating^[1] the genius mind of Moses, and ensuring his survival, despite first born murders and Pharaoh’s wrath, and securing Moses survives by arranging that of all people, Pharaoh’s daughter be the one to find him.

“These are the same Moses and Aaron” teaches us to appreciate it was the Moses that God created and protected so the Jewish nation would emerge. ■

[1] Maimonides says that God “created” Moses (Laws of Star Worship 1:3).

Creation Exists Not for Itself

AVI: The medrash says, “Each of the 6 days of Creation had a partner, except Shabbos. Therefore God made the Jewish people as Shabbos’ partner.” What does this mean?

RABBI: What is meant by “partner?” When we say “day,” are we talking about the 24-hour period, or perhaps we are talking about that day’s creations? For example, on Day 3 when God created all the grasses, this would be futile if there were no animals created on Day 6 that would eat the grass. Or on Day 4 when God created the sun, this would be futile unless there was an Earth created on

Day 1 that would benefit from the sun’s light. Therefore, each day “having a partner” means that a day’s creation doesn’t function for itself, but it functions in the context of some other days’ creations. Thus, one day is a partner to another. However Shabbos is a day where nothing was created so we can’t say this idea.

What was the essence of Shabbos? It was the “absence” of creation, a day of rest. Now why did God determine inactivity as so significant, demanding its own day? This is because the goal of creation—however counterintuitive it is—is not for creation! The goal of creation is for an intelligent being to appreciate God’s wisdom embedded in all creation; creation was made for observers. Therefore the partner of Shabbos is the Jewish nation, which through their rest from all activity, can observe and study creation and Torah, and revel in God’s brilliance. ■

Talmud Torah: The 3 Blessings

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

God, please make the words of Your Torah pleasant 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. Blessed are You, God Who teaches Torah to His people, Israel.

Blessed are You 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.

The blessings refer not only to us, but to 1) our children, 2) all of Israel, and that 3) God teaches the nation Torah. Plus, Maimonides says the mitzvah of Torah study is to teach others as part of the very command. What is the central theme running through all these?

Torah’s inception was “transmission” to masses. Thus, Torah’s very nature is a “shared” entity. Just as we cannot conceive of kingship without a kingdom, the very nature of Torah too exist for the world. To suggest Torah is to benefit a small group denies the universal benefit Torah offers all mankind. Torah came into existence as a shared communication. We must fulfill that form of sharing Torah in our very fulfillment of the command to study it. This explains the final blessing, “Blessed are You God, giver of the Torah.” God gave Torah to the world...not just the Jews. ■

Circumcision

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Rabbi Acha said, "More pleasant before God is the patriarchs' servants' mundane speech than the Torah of their children, as we find Eliezer's account (describing his encounter with Rebecca) repeated in the Torah, while many of the most central Torah ideals are only given by way of hints" (Rashi Gen. 24:42 quoting Genesis Rabbah 60:8)

This quote validates this principle.

All else in the universe is perfect as-is; man will detract from nature's perfection if he alters anything. Of course, we're not talking about creating medicines ("mixing" natural elements is not "altering"). But I refer to one who, for example, crossbreeds. The sterile offspring indicates corruption of nature. But as God commands us in circumcision, why not create man without a foreskin? The answer comes from God:

[God said to Abraham] "I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages" (Gen. 17:7); "Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised" (Ibid. 17:10); "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come" (Ibid. 17:19).

Circumcision is not for all mankind, only for Abraham's seed from Sarah alone, which excludes Ishmael's descendants. Maimonides explains how sexual satisfaction greater for both the man and woman when the male is uncircumcised:

Circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement, and sometimes lessens the natural enjoyment: the organ necessarily becomes weak when it loses blood and is deprived of its covering from the beginning [right after birth]. Our Sages (Bereishis Rabba, c. 80) say distinctly, "It is hard for a woman who had sexual intercourse with one uncircumcised to separate from him" (Guide, book iii, chap. xlix)

Thus, the objective is that man and woman don't seek lustful urges as a primary focus. Jewish men and women must certainly enjoy sex, but not at its peak level of pleasure. For then, their energies would pursue such lusts without the desire to disengage, and they will abandon the life of Torah thought, which is the most beneficial, and far greater enjoyment. God desires the best for mankind and demands one nation rise above a life of pursuing desires, and instead, engage God's wisdom in order to teach all mankind. But as God desires the

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Rabbi Israel Chait explained why Torah mentions the treaty regarding circumcision 13 times, versus only 3 mentions of the treaty of Torah in general: circumcision is the "application" of the Torah. Meaning, man's fulfillment—application—of Torah principles is of greater importance than the principles themselves unfulfilled.

world to be populated by man and beast, He created the foreskin which drives procreation. But for a select monotheistic nation, God sought to raise them to a higher level so they might redirect their energies away from physical pleasures towards study, and teach God's wisdom to mankind.

In a similar vein, God commands man in charity. How is charity similar? Just like God commands Israel to alter the natural design of the procreative organ, saying the natural design is not for the Jew, God also commands man to alter his view of accumulating wealth. Nature says when we give 20% charity (the highest form), we have 20% less. But God says giving charity will do the opposite, it will make you wealthy: "Test Me please in charity...I will empty out the storehouses of heavens and give you a blessing more than sufficient" (Malachi 3:10). We thereby learn on a daily basis that God's providence overrides nature through rewarding the charitable person. This is the lesson of God's providence to the patriarchs and matriarchs, and His lesson of all miracles.

Returning to circumcision, so central to man's existence is circumcision, that God would not have redeemed from Egypt any Israelite who failed to offer the Paschal Lamb (intellectually rejecting idolatry) or to fulfill circumcision (curbing instinctual drives). Rabbi Israel Chiat said these two halves of man (intellect and instincts) required refinement, if one was to accept Torah on Mt. Sinai three months later. Maimonides says that one loses the afterlife if he does not circumcise himself. And Talmud Nedarim 31b emphasizes the vital role of circumcision

Great is the mitzva of circumcision, as is evident from the the punishment of Moses the righteous for not circumcising his son.

All the mitzvos that Abraham our Patriarch did, he was not called wholehearted until he circumcised himself, as it is stated at the time that the mitzva was given to him: "Walk before Me and you should be wholehearted" (Genesis 17:1).

For were it not for the blood of the covenant (circumcision), the existence of the heavens and Earth could not be maintained, as [Jeremiah 33:25] states: "Were it not for My covenant (circumcision), day and night [and] the laws of heaven and earth I would not have established."

God commanded Abraham:

I am the Almighty God, walk before Me and be perfect ... I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous ... Such



shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised (Gen. 17).

This means that Abraham's yet-unattained perfection refers to circumcision. Abraham was able to perfect all aspects of his intellect, ideas and character...except circumcision, which he could not have concluded was needed without divine intervention. For his opinion was that all God's creations—including man—are created perfectly. So it was no fault of Abraham that he did not circumcise himself without God's direction. Similarly, Abraham could not have arrived at the conclusion that God would spare wicked people. Therefore God said, "Will I keep hidden from Abraham what I am to do?" (Gen. 18:17) referring to destroying Sodom. In that dialogue God taught Abraham that He would save even wicked people, provided sufficient righteous people existed to help correct their evil ways. But of course 10 sufficient righteous people were not found, so God destroyed Sodom. Thus, man cannot know all God's justice, or all that is needed for him to perfect himself. Therefore God directs us in those hidden matters.

So, we explained the perfection of circumcision. Going a step further, this concept of perfection means—against man's intuition—that a person can in fact channel 100% of his energies towards God. This is also what is meant in the Shema where it says you

should love God "with all your instincts, with all your intelligence and with all your energies" (Deut. 6:5). The reason for this command is due to man's corrupt justification of enjoying some instinctual prohibitions. Even religious man wrongly feels at times, "I'm doing so much good, so many mitzvos, therefore it's justifiable for me to have at least some small instinctual outlet." God says this is not the highest level. Man can reach perfection where he directs 100% of his energies to God, with no need for even the slightest deviation.

The crucial point is that a person tends to satisfy his instincts in some area, like Lote who was generous and hospitable, but had some corner of his mind of escape (offering his daughters to the public). Rabbi Chait gave an analogy: If the police said they will govern all jurisdictions except for one small city, all the robbers relocate in that city. That is a metaphor for the righteous man allowing some small area of instinctual satisfaction. Lote was the opposite: he sought justification for all his poor qualities by being kind to a few men. Whereas God's lesson to Abraham touches upon a righteous man requiring no minor escape of emotions. Man justifies instinctual prohibitions either through feeling "I'm good in every other matter," or through one token good act.

Finally, why does God commence his address above to Abraham saying "I am the Almighty God?" Rashi interprets "Almighty" as, "My Kingship is sufficient for every creature, therefore walk before Me and I will be a God to you." What does this mean and what is the relevance to God commanding him to "be perfect" through circumcision? Here, God tells Abraham that His command of circumcision can only be for human benefit, as "My Kingship is sufficient for every creature." Kingship refers to man's acceptance of His laws, and even this bodily surgery should not be viewed as any risk, for His laws help man and cannot harm him. Ibn Ezra too says the "perfection" of circumcision is that man should not ask "Why do circumcision?" This does not mean that man should not inquire of the perfection of any of God's laws. Rather it means that Abraham should not make his understanding of this law what determines his fulfillment of the act; he must perform the act regardless. Evidently, Ibn Ezra suggests that Abraham might have difficulty grasping the purpose of this command. Similarly, the Uva L'Tzion prayer concludes, "Trust in God forever, for God is the rock of the world." A rock refers to something eternal and unchanging, 100% reliable. God too will never fail man in his needs, provided man follows God's word. This prayer offers man 100% security, and God offered Abraham 100% security to care for him as circumcision does present a level of physical ordeal. ■

Top 50 Googled Questions on the Bible

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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Torah Mode

Foundational Beliefs

1. WHAT IS JUDAISM? Bible, Torah and Judaism all refer to the same entity: the one true religion. 3,338 years ago 2 million Jews at Mount Sinai heard intelligence emanate from a mountain engulfed in flames, from which Moses descended with the Bible, the Torah. The Bible is God's instruction for the perfected life, embodied by the patriarchs and matriarchs, and God's laws fostering intelligence, peace, kindness, justice, holy days, restrictions, and prohibitions against fallacy, superstition, idolatry, immorality, and interpersonal perfection. No other religion validates its claim of divine origin. This explains why all other religions demand blind faith, for they have no proof of their claims.

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2. WHAT IS JUDAISM'S WORST SIN? False ideas of God, such as idolatry, polytheism, atheism, deification, the worship of man or beast, and superstition.

3. WHAT IS GOD? God is the sole, non-physical cause and governor of the universe.

4. DO POWERS EXIST OTHER THAN GOD, LIKE MYSTICAL FORCES, LUCK, OR ASTROLOGY? No, they do not. No evidence exists that one creation affects another creation other than through observed natural laws.

5. WHAT'S MY PURPOSE IN LIFE? God's gift of the intellect to mankind and no other creation indicates that we are to use our intellect which means pursuing the life of wisdom.

6. DO JEWS BELIEVE IN HEAVEN AND HELL? God's Bible has been proven divine and discusses reward and punishment. It refers to an afterlife for those who follow God and punishment for sin.

7. WHY DON'T JEWS BELIEVE IN JESUS? Such belief in a man violates God's prohibition against worshipping anything other than Himself. Jesus was not validated as God's messenger, which requires miracles and full obedience to God's word. He failed on both accounts.

8. WHY AM I HERE? We each exist as God's will is to benefit us all with the greatest experience of uncovering His wisdom.

9. CAN ONE DOUBT GOD'S EXISTENCE AND STILL BE JEWISH? No. Maimonides lists 13 core principles defining Judaism, the first being belief in God's existence.

Jewish Texts & History

10. WHAT ARE THE SACRED TEXTS OF JUDAISM? The Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings.

11. WHAT IS THE TORAH? The Torah is the Bible: the Five Books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Christian New Testament violates God's command not to alter the Torah and is therefore not of divine origin (Deut. 4:2, 13:1).

12. WHAT IS THE TALMUD? It is the rabbis' discussions of the Oral Law, recorded about 2,000 years ago and written over several centuries.

13. WHY IS THE TORAH CONSIDERED DIVINE? As explained in Question 1, it was observed as being given through a miraculous event. No other religion claims mass witnesses to divine revelation.

14. DID THE JEWS REALLY RECEIVE THE TORAH AT SINAI? Validated mass transmission demands that this must be true.

15. HOW OLD IS JUDAISM? Judaism is 3,338 years old, dating to Revelation at Sinai.

Practices & Rituals

16. WHAT IS SHABBAT AND HOW IS IT OBSERVED? Shabbat is the Torah command to refrain from creative labor each Saturday, commemorating God's rest after creation. This rest draws attention to the Jewish nation and spreads the truth of creation.

17. WHY CAN'T JEWS USE ELECTRICITY ON SHABBAT? All creative activities are restricted to enforce rest, thereby providing one day each week to be fully immersed in Torah study.

18. WHAT DOES KOSHER MEAN? Kosher refers to animals permitted for consumption and the laws governing permissible food combinations.

19. HOW DO JEWS KEEP KOSHER? This is done by eating only permitted species and permitted mixtures. Refraining from detestable species (insects, reptiles, crawlers and shellfish) retains a level of abhorrence that helps us reject other detestable matters like poor character.

20. WHAT ARE JEWISH HOLIDAYS? Jewish holidays commemorate historical events in which God saved the Jews through overt and hidden miracles.

21. WHY DO JEWS CELEBRATE PASSOVER? Passover commemorates God's refutation of Egypt's false gods and beliefs, and the Jews' liberation after 210 years of Egyptian bondage, known as the Exodus. Passover confirms monotheism, the greatest truth, and explains why any Jew failing to sacrifice the Paschal Lamb—the killing of Egypt's prime god—loses his afterlife.

22. WHAT IS PRAYER IN JUDAISM? Prayer consists of praising God, requesting our needs from Him, and expressing gratitude.

23. WHY DO JEWS SIT SEPARATELY BY GENDER IN SYNAGOGUE? Separate seating helps both genders focus on prayer rather than social interaction. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



Jewish Identity & Community

24. WHAT MAKES SOMEONE JEWISH? A Jew is traditionally defined as someone born to a Jewish mother and, more fundamentally, one who accepts Maimonides' 13 Principles defining truths about God.

25. WHAT ARE THE DENOMINATIONS OF JUDAISM? God gave only one form of Judaism: Orthodox Judaism. Modern movements such as Conservative and Reform Judaism are distortions of God's word, which He commanded not to alter (Deut. 4:2, 13:1).

26. IS JUDAISM A RELIGION, A CULTURE, OR A RACE? Judaism can be described as a religion or a comprehensive system of truths.

27. DO JEWS EXPECT A MESSIAH? Yes. He will be a descendant of King David. Maimonides states that he will surpass King Solomon in wisdom and approach Moses in prophecy.

28. CAN NON-JEWS GO TO HEAVEN? God did not create religious or racial classifications, only man and woman. Any person who follows truths about God and lives morally can attain the afterlife.

29. IS CREATION TRUE? Yes. The universe cannot exist without a beginning. It cannot be eternal nor self-creating. There must be a First Cause responsible for all existence.

Beliefs vs. Modernity & Science

30. HOW DOES JUDAISM VIEW SCIENCE AND EVOLUTION? Judaism follows reality. Anything conclusively proven is accepted as true.

31. WHY DOES JUDAISM HAVE SO MANY LAWS? Asking this is no different from asking why the universe has so many laws. Both originate from God, whose wisdom is vast. Anything God creates will operate by many beautiful principles. Studying science continually unravels more and more principles. Another area of God's wisdom is how man should live, and this refers to Bible which has many details about interpersonal relationships, truths about what God is what He is not, psychological principles, and the vast study of philosophy.

32. WHY DO JEWS SPEND SO MUCH TIME STUDYING TORAH? For the same reason great minds like Einstein devoted themselves to wisdom: it is deeply enjoyable. Seeing reality is of the greatest interest.

33. WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE? Maimonides taught that evil falls into three categories: natural disasters, harm inflicted by others, and self-inflicted harm, which is the largest category. Even good people make mistakes at times. But for the most part a wise person understands how the universe operates and how people have various emotions and he makes decisions that avoid conflicting with natural law and people that can harm him. So for most part, a good and wise person avoids most problems. But we also cannot know the reason for everything and if we see a righteous person who is having problems, we may not have the answers but we trust that God is just.

Common Curiosities About Jewish Life

34. WHY IS JUDAISM DIFFERENT FROM OTHER RELIGIONS? The Torah was given to two million witnesses. No other religion claims mass revelation by God, the only valid method of historical verification of God's will.

35. WHY ARE JEWS CALLED "THE CHOSEN PEOPLE"? God chose the Jews to teach mankind because Abraham alone rejected idolatry in an idolatrous era.

36. ARE THERE DIFFERENT JEWISH ETHNIC GROUPS (ASHKENAZI/SEPHARDI)? Yes. This is a well-established fact.

37. WHY DO JEWS WEAR A KIPPAH/YARMULKE? "Yarmulke" means fear of the Kingdom—fear of God. We remind ourselves of God. Covering ourselves indicates we are of little importance. This helps follow God to a greater degree.

38. WHY DO ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN COVER THEIR HAIR? Married women cover their hair to signify a new stage of life and dedication to their husband. They no longer flaunt their beauty to attract men (Rabbi Israel Chait).

39. WHY DO SOME JEWS NOT WORK ON JEWISH HOLIDAYS? Certain holidays prohibit labor in order to free our time for Torah study. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Controversies & Misunderstandings

40. WHY DON'T JEWS ACCEPT THE CHRISTIAN MESSIAH?

God's true messengers must perform miracles and adhere fully to God's law. He failed in both.

41. IS JUDAISM RACIST FOR BELIEVING IT IS CHOSEN?

No. The Jewish people were chosen to teach humanity, which is the opposite of racism.

42. WHY DO PEOPLE HATE JEWS? Rabbinic teachings describe this as resentment toward the people God chose to convey His teachings. Sibling rivalry.

43. DOES JUDAISM TEACH HUMAN EQUALITY? Yes. Judaism teaches that all people are created equal.

Jewish Law

44. IS JEWISH LAW UNCHANGING? Yes. God repeatedly forbids adding to or subtracting from His law (Deut. 4:2, 13:1). As God knows the future and all the details of the human design that He created, He designed the Bible/Torah taking into account every consideration to ever unfold, which avoids any need to change his Bible. An update or an alteration is only necessary by one surprised by new considerations. Nothing can possibly surprise God who knows everything.

45. CAN MITZVOT BE KEPT TODAY? Yes.

46. WHAT IS HALACHA? Halacha is the legal framework governing the performance of each mitzvah.

47. WHERE CAN I ASK HALACHIC QUESTIONS ONLINE?
www.mesora.org

Philo Q&As

48. WHAT IS "TIKKUN OLAM"? It means repairing the world by teaching truth and helping society improve.

49. WHERE IS GOD IN TIMES OF TRAGEDY? This question asks why God does not intervene in every tragedy. God knows all and He may decide that a tragedy produces an ultimate good. This is the reasoning behind the Flood and the destruction of Sodom. There's also a great wisdom behind when and where God relates to an individual or a group of people. Maimonides elaborates that depending on the spiritual level of the individual(s) in question, that's going to determine what level of involvement God engages.

50. CAN I CONVERT TO JUDAISM? Yes. Anyone may convert to Judaism, and the prophets state that in the future humanity will recognize Judaism as the only God-given religion. ■



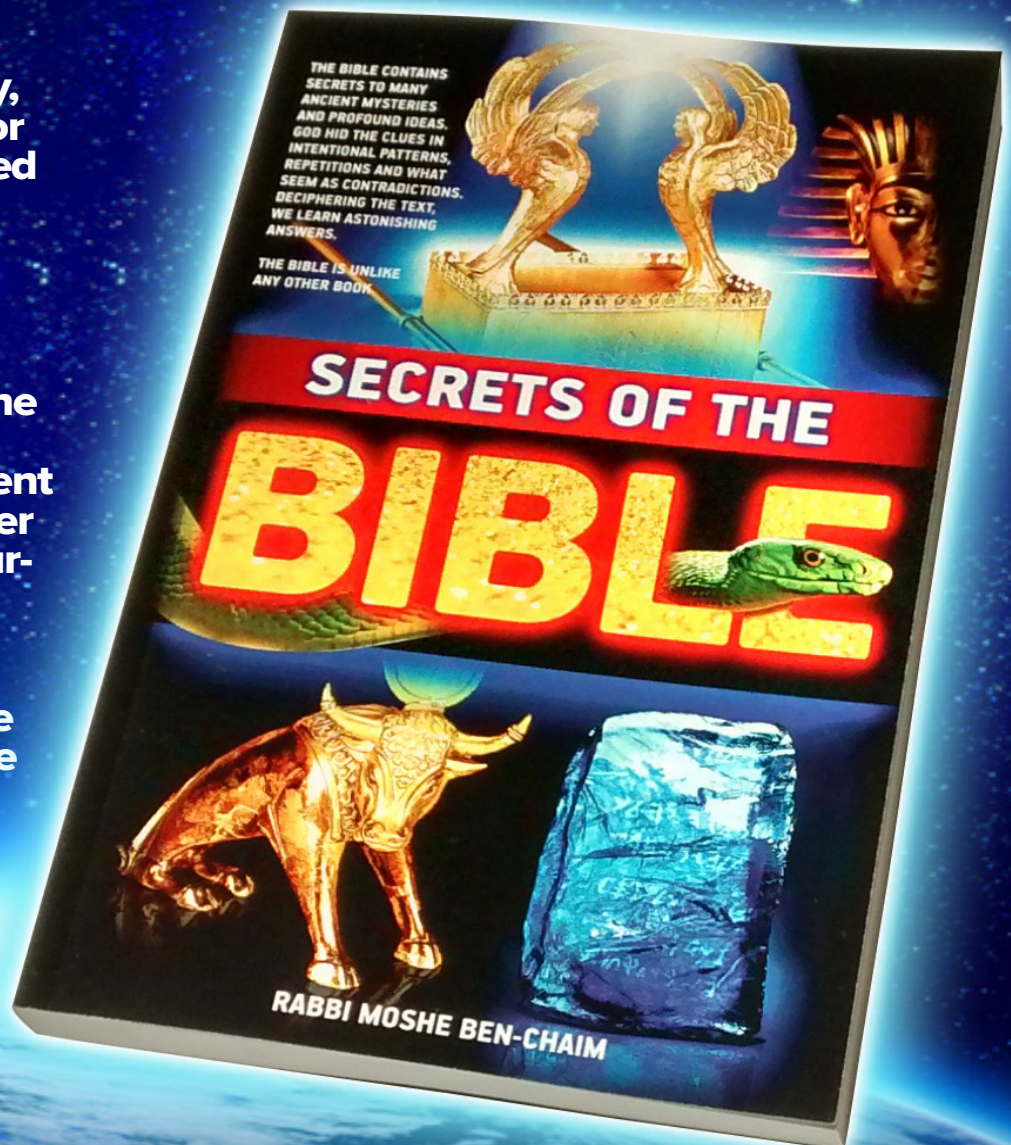
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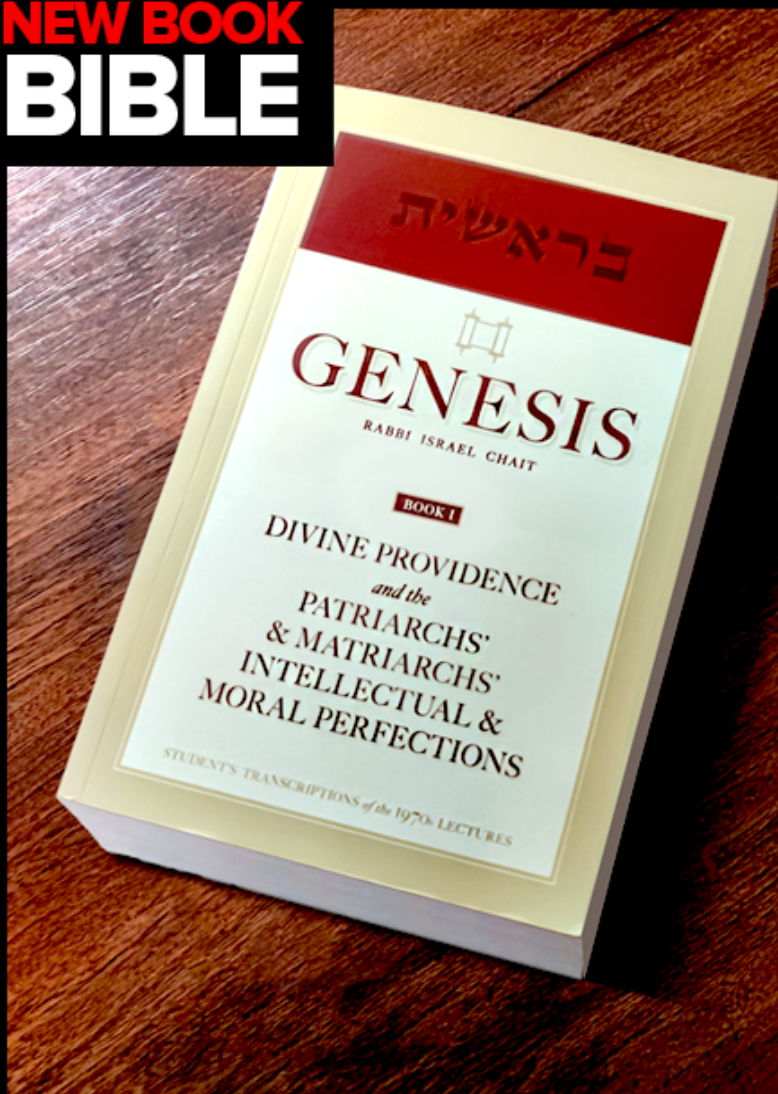
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RABBI REUVEN MANN, ZT”L

Edited by B. Silberstein

Did the Plagues Affect the Jews?

This week's Parsha, VaEira, describes the plagues that Hashem rained down on Egypt because of their refusal to heed His word. Contrary to popular belief, Moshe did not order Pharaoh to terminate the enslavement of the Jews. That subject was not even broached in the extensive negotiations between the two sides.

What Was Pharaoh Really Asked to Do?

All that Moshe was requesting was that the Jews be allowed a brief furlough from their labors, to travel a short distance into the wilderness, and to offer sacrifices to Hashem; the implication being that afterward the slaves would return to Egypt and resume their servitude.

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Yet even this modest request was deemed by Pharaoh to be too much to grant. One can see that the Egyptian king's ego determined his attitude. He responded to Moshe in their initial conversation by saying,

"Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send out Israel?; I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Israel!" (Shemot 5:2)

This is the attitude of the arrogant, who are overcome with their own inflated sense of greatness. A bit of humbleness on the king's part could have saved him and the people he led from much suffering.

The Plagues as a Tool of Instruction

Now the objective of Moshe was to convince Pharaoh of the existence of the G-d he refused to acknowledge. The primary instrument for the instruction of Pharaoh was the plagues, which simultaneously served as indispensable components of Moshe's negotiations with the Egyptian ruler.

The Makkot (Blows) were relatively mild at first, but became progressively more destructive due to Pharaoh's recalcitrance. Even the fearsome plagues of Barad (Hail), Arbeh (Locusts), Arov (Wild Beasts), and Choshech (Darkness), which would have struck sanity into the hearts of most normal people, did not bring Pharaoh to his knees.

[Note: The first atom bomb which America dropped over Hiroshima did not bring that nation to its senses. It took the destruction of another Japanese city, Nagasaki, to awaken the Emperor to the realization that all was lost if he did not surrender immediately.] Pharaoh was totally divorced from reality and unable to make rational decisions. Finally, the terror engendered by Makkat Bechorot (the Plague of the Firstborn) was too much to bear, and he urged the Jews to leave Egypt posthaste.

Were the Jews Affected by the Plagues?

In considering the phenomenon of the Makkot, we must ask: did they only apply to the Egyptians, or were the Jews affected by them as well?

In this regard, the Torah points out that Bnei Yisrael (Children of Israel) were spared from certain of the plagues. For example, in the case of Arov (Wild Beasts), which ravaged the Egyptians, the verse states,

"And on that day I shall set apart the land of Goshen upon which My people dwell, that there shall be no swarm there; so that you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land." (Shemot 8:18)

The same is true regarding the plagues of Dever (Contagion), Barad (Hail), and Darkness. But what about the plagues in which no mention is made that the Jews were protected? Should we assume that these did not distinguish between Mitzri (Egyptian) and Yehudi (Jew)?

A Dispute Between the Ramban and Ibn Ezra

There is a dispute on this matter between two great commentators, the Ramban (Nachmanides) and Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra. Nachmanides holds that the Jews were shielded from the effects of all the punishing blows. The reason the Torah mentions that the Jews were spared only in certain cases is that, according to the laws of nature, those plagues should have spread to the Jews. According to the Ramban, it was an additional miracle that prevented that from happening.

However, he maintains that the Makkot were directed solely at the Mitzrim (Egyptians), because they refused to comply with Hashem's command to let the Jews go and worship Him. The Jews, who were destined to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, warranted being saved, and Divine Providence protected them from any harm.

Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra, however, asserts that in the cases where the Torah does not specify that the Jews were spared, we must assume that they too suffered from the blows. Thus, he maintained that the plagues of Blood and Frogs, for example, did affect the Jews. In elucidating his position, he divides the plagues into two categories: those that were relatively mild, and those that involved heavy damage, such as Hail and Wild Beasts.

But the question we must ask of this sage is: why didn't Hashem spare the Jews from all the Makkot, since their primary cause was the obstinacy of Pharaoh?

In my opinion, while it is true that the plagues came about because of the sinfulness of the Egyptians, the Jews did not necessarily merit being spared from their effects. The Rabbis say,

"Once permission is granted to the destroyer to destroy, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked" (Bava Kama 60a).

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For example, Hashem might decree a forest fire in the environs of an especially wicked nation. However, if a good person happens to be in that vicinity, he may not merit a special miracle to protect him from its effects. The same can apply to the Jews in Egypt. Once the plague took hold, it would naturally affect the Jews who happened to be in the wrong vicinity. In order to be spared, they would require a special protective Divine Providence.

Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra holds that the severe Makkot would have seriously harmed Bnei Yisrael and interfered with their mission of exiting Mitzrayim (Egypt) and receiving the Torah. Therefore, Hashem protected them from those. But the minor ones were basically temporary annoyances which left no permanent scars, and if the Jews had been on a high enough spiritual level, they would have been spared from them as well. But were they?

One can argue that the Jews at that time were not on a high enough spiritual level to warrant protection from the effects of the “lesser” plagues. Our Sages maintain that in Egypt the Jews had descended to a very low level, which they characterize as the forty-ninth rung of “impurity.”

They had abandoned the religious approach of the Avot (Forefathers) and emulated the idolatrous practices of Egyptian paganism. The Rambam (Maimonides) states:

“The great principle of the Yichud Hashem (Unity of God), which had been established by Avraham, was on the verge of being completely abandoned” (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:3).

Thus, to a serious degree, the Jews had partaken of the corruption of their host country, and a certain amount of punishment was appropriate in order for them to expunge the sinfulness from their hearts.

There might be another factor to take into consideration as well. Hashem instructed the Jews to place the blood of the Passover sacrifice on their doorposts and not to venture outdoors on the night that Egypt was smitten with the Plague of the Firstborn. It was very important that the Jews not exult over the destruction of their enemy. Under no circumstances was it permitted for them to feel any innate superiority over their stricken neighbors. Instead, they were to feel sadness that these people had strayed so far from proper obedience to Hashem that they warranted such punishment. Why, then, did Hashem pass over their houses?

The verse (Shemot 12:13) states,

“The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses where you are; I shall see the blood and I shall pass over you, and there shall not be a plague of destruction upon you when I strike the land of Egypt.”

Yet does Hashem require a visible sign to recognize the habitations of the Hebrews? Of course not! Rashi addresses this and says,

“Everything is revealed before Him. Rather, Hashem said, ‘I will direct My attention to see that you are preoccupied with My Mitzvot, and I will pass over you.’”

In my opinion, this means that the Jews should obtain no false sense of superiority because Hashem spared them from this

plague. Instead, they should realize that it is only because they keep the system of commandments revealed by Hashem that He relates to and protects them.

Suffering, Humility, and Moral Responsibility

This concept enables us to better understand the position of Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra that Bnei Yisrael also suffered from some of the plagues. The purpose of this was to alert them to the fact that it was not only the Egyptians who deserved punishment due to their transgressions. The Jews had their own share of trespasses as well.

When we witness the sufferings of others, even seemingly rotten people, we should still retain a measure of compassion. We should certainly not luxuriate in any feelings of superiority. Rather, we should look within and see if there are any areas of our spiritual life that need mending. Compassion, humbleness, and self-awareness are the cornerstones of an elevated moral existence.

May Hashem help us to attain it.

Shabbat Shalom. ■





Book Reviews

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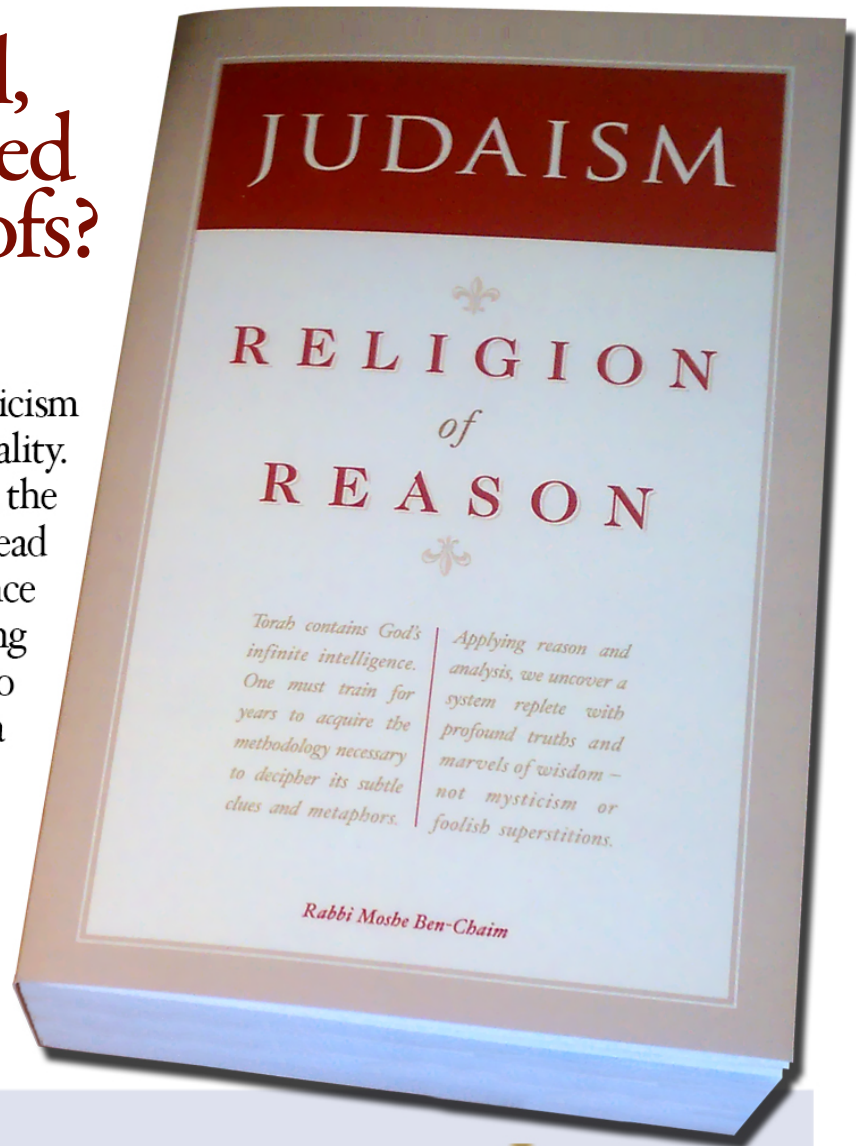
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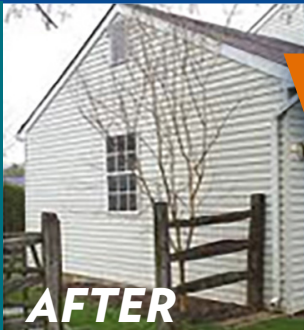
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How Judaism Differs from Other Religions

A religion of reason and proof, not blind faith

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Religion” refers to a lifestyle of submission to an benevolent authority, designed and transmitted by the author. All religions except Judaism claim to be God’s only true religion, but they all lack validation. Judaism is the only religion with proof of Divine origin. This proof is demonstrated through God’s revelation of His existence and His communication to 2.5 million Jews on Mount Sinai exactly 3333 years ago. The Jews witnessed an intelligent voice speaking from within the fiery mountain. Biological or earthbound life cannot exist in fire, precisely why God used fire in this event. No other religion makes such a claim to possess proof because Divine revelation never happened to others, and as Torah (Bible) says, “It will never happen again” (Deut. 4:32-34).

Judaism is the only religion whose claim is supported by world acceptance of Torah. This acceptance is a 100% proof of God’s revelation to the Jewish people. Had

Revelation at Sinai never occurred, it would not have been believed by that generation, and certainly not the rest of the world and all future generations. The only way Revelation at Sinai became accepted is because it was witnessed, and then all witnesses passed the story down to the following generations through today. God wished that this event remain a 100% proof throughout all generations. Had a false prophet attempted to convince any group that they witnessed what they had not, they would never accept him, nor would they replace their known history with the false prophet’s lies. A unanimous identical transmission of a witnessed event occurs only when that event occurred. Unanimous transmission—a single Biblical account—is proof of the truth of Revelation at Sinai. God revealed Himself to masses only once: to the Jews on Mt. Sinai, where He gave the Jews His Bible.

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All other religions are founded on a single person's claim (or a fabricated story) that God communicated with him. Something of this nature cannot be proven, and is precisely why they formulated their religions with the demand for "blind faith." Those religions did spread, but not due to witnessed events. Those religions spread as they appealed to human emotions. People will accept what is pleasing. Someone dying for my sins is very appealing. Praying to a tangible human figure is more pleasing than praying to an invisible and abstract God. But not one other religion can provide evidence of Divine communication. Therefore, there is no basis to accept their religions. Furthermore, as God designed only one human being, multiple religions is nonsensical. Just as all people are treated identically for cancer, all people will find the happiest life with the same religious system.

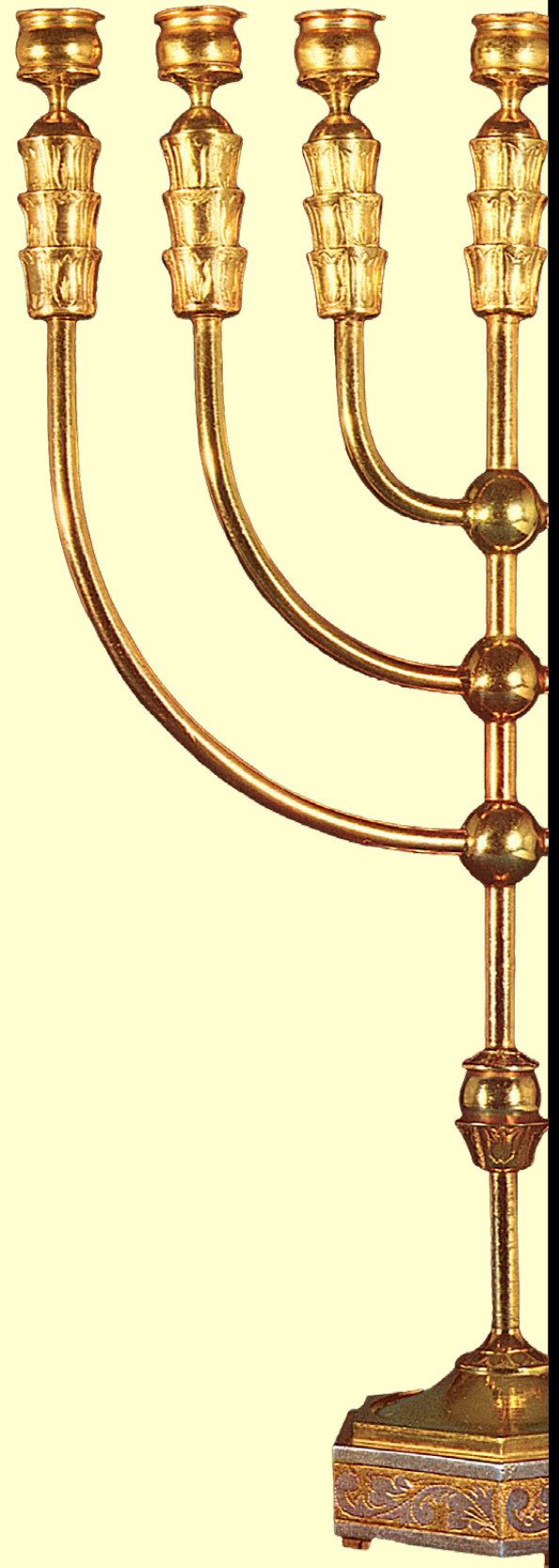
Judaism is also unique in its intellectual and brilliant design, in its basis in reason and proof, and its in full compliance with human nature, offering real happiness and no conflict with human nature. Judaism is founded on principles which are rational and comply with man's nature as a philosophical and psychological being. Not one law in all of Judaism goes against man's nature. Unlike Catholicism which frowns upon divorce and praises celibacy, Judaism embraces the need at times for couples to divorce if they will be happier that way, and Judaism also embraces man's need for sexual happiness and children. These are just two examples of how Judaism approaches life honestly. Catholicism makes man into a mystical and infallible saint or an angel, one who is above actual human drives and emotions. This opposes Judaism, and true human nature. Judaism accepts that man's happiness must stem from his being in line with his nature. And Judaism doesn't hide our leaders' sins. We have no saints, all men sin: "For man is not wholly righteous on Earth who does what is good and doesn't err" (Koheles 7:20).

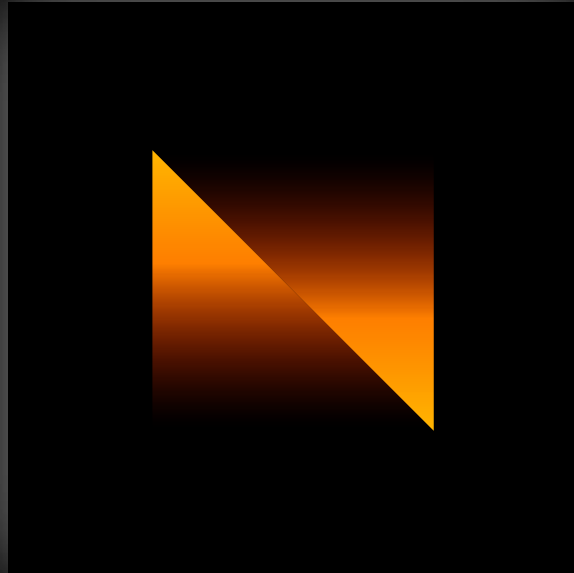
Judaism realizes that besides man satisfying his psychological needs, he has a much higher part which must be addressed: his soul. By man ignoring this essential part of his nature, he will never reach his ultimate, Divine mission of approaching God. Man achieves this mission and ultimate happiness by his immersion in study of creation and Torah, actualizing his true goal and purpose in an appreciation of the Creator. Torah, Prophets and Writings, along with the Talmud, were written in a highly stylized format which takes years to master. Their style is such, that as one delves deeper and deeper, he or she finds more profound ideas. This analysis and search satisfies man in its very process, as well as through enlightenment of new insights. As God possesses infinite wisdom, man will always see new insights, provided he has toiled under the tutelage of those before him trained in the method of Talmudic and Biblical exegesis, teamed with the essential modes of interpretations only found in the Oral Law, which God also communicated to Moses on Sinai.

The system of Jewish law—halacha—is also a major component of Judaism. It guides man's every action from waking and prayers, to blessings over food, ethical and moral conduct, business practices, social relationships, and Holidays. All areas of life are always placed in check as man judges each of his actions for Torah compliance prior to commencement. This process engages man's mind throughout his days when he is not involved in study, which must comprise the majority of his waking hours.

In truth, there is no comparison between the Divinely designed system of Judaism and man made religions for the precise reason that there is no comparison between God and man: man made all other religions. God made Judaism, the Bible.

This of course is a very small glimpse into Judaism. A more encompassing appreciation of God's wisdom is only possible through much more study. ■





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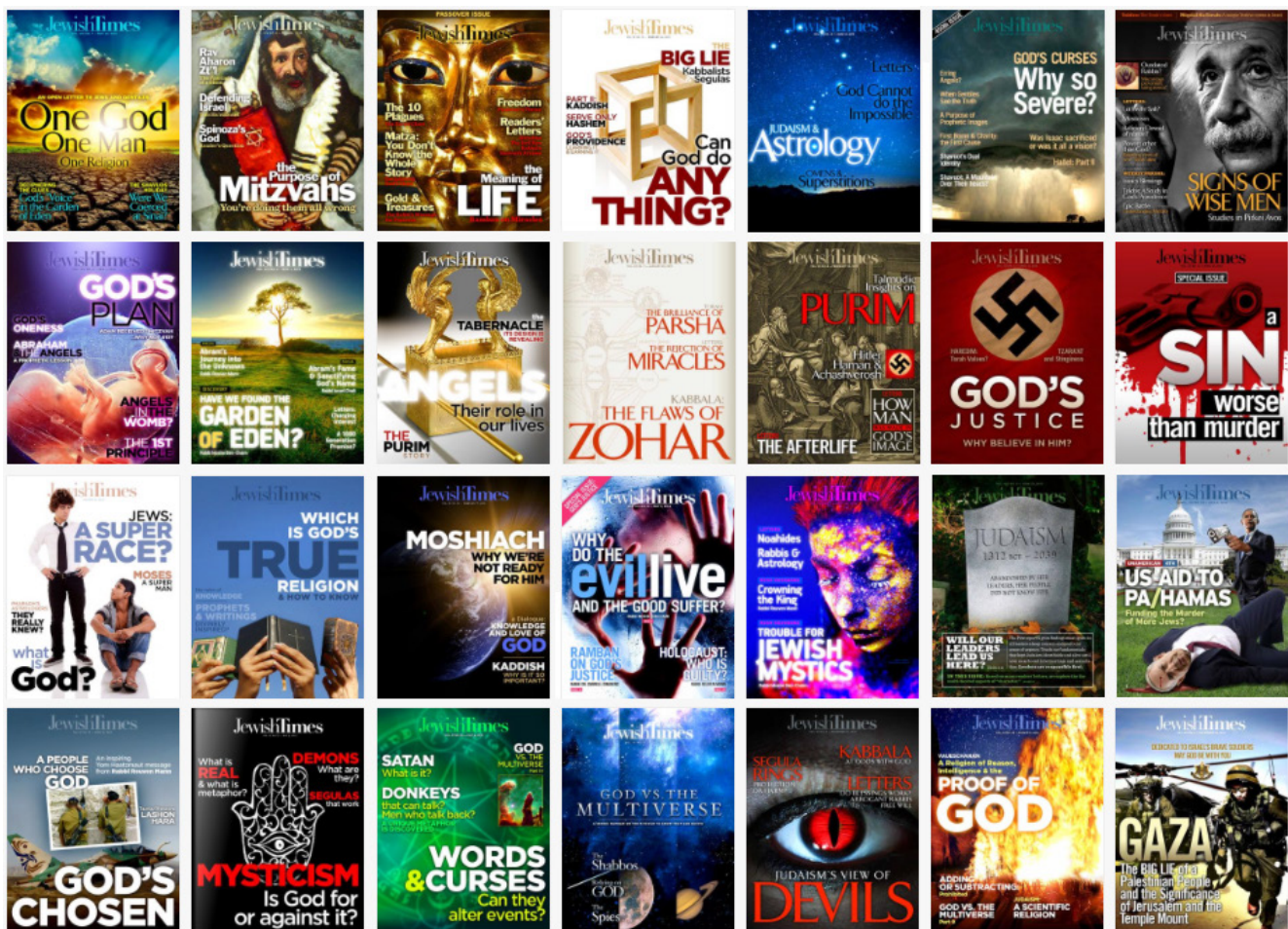
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