

Appellation vs Truth

This week a student contacted me after hearing ideas taught by his Rabbi, ideas which he felt were unreasonable. The Rabbi expressed belief in the notion that for the world to be created, God had to "contract" Himself, so as to "make room" for the universe - the notion of "tzimtzum." The Rabbi also felt that there are no such things as true arguments in Torah, that all views are ultimately true and harmonious. Of course I then wondered why this Rabbi felt my opposing views did not qualify as truths. The view of God "contracting Himself", has a clear and conclusive disproof, so well put by a Rabbi: There is no connection between God and the physical world. This is stated clearly by Maimonides in his 13 Principles. It also follows reason;

God created all physical matter, and is not subject to their governing laws which He created, i.e., spatial relationships. It is heretical to suggest that "God had to make room" for the universe, by contracting Himself. This error is most grave, and stems from the infantile need of man to fit God into man's limited understanding. It is a denial of God's true, unknowable nature. Regarding the Rabbi's other notion that all views in Torah are true, it is clear that if one opinion is mutually exclusive to another, either both, or one position must be false. Additionally, our Sages admitted by their very arguments on one another, that they were not subscribers to this contradictory view. We must always follow reason. This Rabbi has veered from using his.

ESTD
1997

JewishTimes

*Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification
of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices*

Volume II, No. 39...July 18, 2003

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Blessings after Bread & Prayer: Birchat HaMazone & Tefila

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The Talmud mentions many ideas concerning Birkat HaMazone – the blessing recited after eating bread. The Birkat HaMazone is comprised of four blessings. The Talmud in Berachot 48b teaches that Moses formulated the blessing which expresses gratitude for food when God provided the Jews with manna in the desert, Joshua formulated the blessing which praises God for allowing the Jews to enter into and dwell in the land of Israel, King David and King Solomon formulated the blessing which praises God for Jerusalem and the Temple, and the Sages of the Mishnaic period formulated the blessing praising God for the miracle He performed at Betar when He preserved the unattended bodies of the Jews who were slaughtered by the Romans. The Talmud then proceeds to teach that there is an order in which these blessings must be recited. Of interest is that the order which the Talmud proposes happens to coincide with the historical order mentioned in the previous teaching.

Before continuing we must ask several questions. The first question is: why must there be an "order" to the blessings of the Birkat HaMazone? The Talmud implies that a person who recites these blessings out of order does not fulfill his obligation, despite the fact that he verbalized the four requisite praises. The verse in the Torah from which the obligation for Birkat HaMazone is derived does, indeed, allude to this order. Perhaps this same verse is also the source for the order mentioned in the Talmud? Nevertheless, we must still ask: why is "order" essential? What would a person's Birkat HaMazone be lacking were he to recite the blessings out of order?

Another question arises upon examination of these laws in the Mishnah Torah. In Hilchot Berachot 2:1 Maimonides reverses the order of the teachings of the Talmud. He first mentions the requirement of "order" and only afterward mentions who instituted each particular blessing. Why did Maimonides deviate from the order of teachings mentioned in the Talmud?



The Talmud then poses the question: "we only have the source for the blessing after bread, but from where do we learn that one must bless before one eats?" In its response the Talmud utilizes one of the 13 Principles through which the Written Torah is expounded. The principle used by the Talmud is an "a fortiori" argument – a deduction from lesser to greater. The Talmud answers, "if one must bless God when he is full, he certainly must do so when he is hungry." What is the Talmud's reasoning? One could just as easily claim the opposite, that there is more to praise God for when one is full than when one is hungry. Furthermore, the Talmud seems to imply that the blessing before eating is

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Pinchas

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"Therefore, say that I give to him my covenant of peace." (BeMidbar 25:12)

The closing passages of Parshat Balak provide an introduction to our parasha. Women from the nations of Moav and Midyan enter

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Blessings after Bread

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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of primary importance, that there exists a greater need for a blessing before eating than a blessing after eating. But if it is true that a blessing prior to eating is primary in importance, why isn't there a separate verse from which this blessing is derived? Shouldn't the more primary blessing deserve its own mention as well?

Comparing the Birkat HaMazone to prayer, the Talmud teaches that a partial structure for the former is found in the words of the Torah, but we do not find any indication in Torah for the structure of prayer. Why would the Torah provide a structure for the Birkat HaMazone but neglect to provide a structure for prayer?

The Talmud teaches that there are other essential features to the Birkat HaMazone besides order. One must mention the Brit – God's treaty with the Jews – and Torah. What is the connection between Birkat HaMazone, Brit, and Torah? Brit and Torah are important concepts, but so are tefillin and mezuzah, yet they are not mentioned in these blessings after eating. What is special about Brit and Torah?

There is one final question that needs to be addressed. Moses knew the Torah's textual source for the blessing after eating. This verse includes not only a requirement to recite a blessing praising God for supplying food, but one must also bless God over the land of Israel, the Temple, and God's goodness (specifically, the miracle He performed at Betar). The question is: if Moses knew that these Divine acts of kindness demand praise, though they had not yet occurred, why did Moses omit them from his formulation? Why did he only formulate praise for food?

In order to answer these questions we must first address a question about blessings in general: why must one praise God for all the good He does? Though the answer may be obvious, I wish to articulate it here. Immediately following the injunction to bless God after satisfaction derived from food, the Torah warns us, "Take heed lest you forget Hashem, your God . . . lest you eat and be satisfied, and you build good houses and settle, and your cattle and sheep and goats increase, and you accumulate increased amounts of silver and gold for yourselves, and everything you have will increase – and your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem, your God" (Devarim 8:11-14). The Torah associates the fullness of one's stomach and subsequent wealth with the self absorption that causes us to forget God. Man has an innate tendency to abandon God when all is good. A friend of mine suggested that perhaps the institution of Birkat HaMazone address this human flaw. Man is commanded to direct his thoughts to God when in a state of satisfaction, lest he forget God. Perhaps man – even religious man – desires to flee from God. We are taught that "the Jews left Sinai like children leaving school." They viewed the Torah and its demanding system of commandments as a burden. A person with such an attitude demonstrates the fact that he has little or no appreciation for God's creation of man as an intellectual being, one who is equipped with the ability to perceive the wonders of God's creation. Such a person desires only money, possessions, homes, silver, gold, and cattle. In other words, man desires physical security. Why? So that he can secure his life, his continued physical existence. Man seeks assurance that he will continue to live. What daily activity gives him such assurance? The daily activity of eating. When man eats, he feels secure – his instinctual need is satisfied, and all of his other cravings temporarily subside. This quelling of desires, however, can be dangerous, as the Torah points out. God has another plan for us. He desires that we involve ourselves in knowledge. By commanding man to bless God after eating, man never encounters the pitfall of losing sight

of his Maker, of His Provider. Thus, we can now see how Birkat HaMazone aims to promote the greatest good for man.

What is the reasoning behind the Talmud's a fortiori argument that "if one who is full must bless, one who is hungry must certainly do so"? Before eating, man is in a state of pain – hunger. Perhaps the blessing before eating is more important because man has a greater obligation to bless God when in a state of pain than when he is in a state of pleasure – satiety. Thus, the Talmud is really saying, "if one whom God provides with a pleasure must bless, certainly one from whom God removes a pain must bless." Now the Talmud's reasoning makes sense.

Why did the Torah only provide a source for the blessing after eating? Perhaps the Torah mentioned the source for one type of blessing and omitted the source for the other in order to emphasize which blessing is the greatest praise of God. What is a greater praise, blessing God for the pleasure gained from eating an apple, or praising God for the miraculous act of sustaining 2.5 million Jews in the desert with manna, for Israel, the Temple, and the miracle of Betar? Perhaps the intent in omitting mention of a specific source for the blessing before eating was in order to emphasize that the blessing after eating is really the greatest praise of God.

The Talmud says that Moses, Joshua, King David, and King Solomon had formulated the four sections of the Birkat HaMazone, but only after the events occurred. Moses did not formulate the praise over the land because he had not conquered it – only Joshua was able to do so when he later conquered the land. But if Moses knew from the Torah's words that one is obligated to praise God for the land of Israel then why did he neglect to formulate the blessing over Israel? I believe the answer is that we must praise God for His continued providence over the Jewish nation. I believe this is the central principle behind the commandment of Birkat HaMazone. Reciting these four blessing out of order would remind us of God's kindness, but only that He performed acts of kindness at certain points in history. An out-of-order recitation would not bring to mind His "continued" providence. Such recognition can only be accomplished by reciting these blessings in the historical order in which they occurred. Thus, Moses fulfilled this goal through his recitation of the Birkat HaMazone, even though he didn't recite the blessings over Israel, the Temple, or the miracle at Betar – the blessing he recited was just as much a recognition of God's continual providence as the Birkat HaMazone we recite today. Perhaps this is also why Maimonides mentioned the requirement for order before mentioning the historical formulation of the Birkat HaMazone – the idea of "order" is essential to the idea of Birkat HaMazone whereas the historical order of formulation is only accidental.

I believe this is the underlying philosophy of blessing after eating. We do not only bless God for food, but for all of the good He has bestowed upon us. It is for this reason that we must also mention Brit and Torah. Man must verbalize a "complete" praise of God, which can only be accomplished by mentioning the concepts of Brit, Torah, and the land of Israel. Food alone is not and ends in itself, but only a means. This idea is demonstrated by the incorporation into Birkat HaMazone of God's primary goal for man – Torah study. Wisdom is God's primary goal for man, and food is only a means enable man to achieve that goal.

Why did the Torah see fit to outline a structure for blessing after eating, but not for prayer? I believe the reason to be based on the very distinction between these two activities: Blessing after eating, which praises God's continued providence, is a blessing over that which God does for man. Therefore, the Torah must define what are those goods performed by God on our behalf. Prayer, however, is man's approach to God. Perhaps the Torah's omission of a structure for prayer alludes to the fact that prayer is an activity initiated by man. Man must be the one who comes before God with his own structured supplications. ■

Torah Adherence and the Arrival of the Messiah

Reader: On the surface of it, the above article, indeed its basis in the Torah, is quite impressive, i.e., there is a correlation between our observance of the commands, and G-d's "hashgacha" - His providence. However, this does not seem to occur in actual historic fact. There are 2 cases in recorded history where the entire people have been frum, and have done teshuva yet, this did not bring peace, redemption, or moshiach, rather the opposite, death, destruction, exile. These cases were Hezekiah, and Josiah. Now, why should, doing mitzvot today, without any prophets or kings, have any influence on matters? Many thanks, Ed

Mesora: Ed, there are two issues here, at the least, 1)When God decides to bring Moshiach, the Messiah, and, 2)Whether the Torah lifestyle the best life.

The answer to the latter is a most definite yes. This is not contingent on the Moshiach arriving. All our great sages and Rabbis throughout the generations adhered meticulously to the values and commands decreed by God in His Torah. They followed God, as God knows what is best for man's happiness. They saw the truths disclosed in the verses of Torah, Prophets, and Writings, as well as all of the Oral Law, the Mishna, Talmud and Rishonic and Acharonic writings. Theirs were lives dedicated in action, to what their minds told them is the best life. Their choice was independent of the arrival of the Moshiach.

Understand what the Rabbis taught, "There is no difference between now, and the era of the Messiah, except for the foreign nations' oppression." This means that even in the era of the Messiah, Torah study and adherence to the commands continue to reign supreme. The Rabbis would not be acting any different in the era of the Messiah. I don't know what all the Messianic fervor is about, expressed by those who do not study Torah, or by those who do study, but have fantasies about the era to be. What do they think will happen when Messiah arrives? Will Torah become null and void? Will miracles happen on a daily basis? Why don't we consult the Rabbis, "There is no difference between now and the era of the Messiah, except for the foreign nations' oppression." Torah is the greatest of all Torah commands, as discussed in the Talmud (Moade Katan 9a-b). Certainly the Messiah must be constantly involved in study, how else will he be chosen? How else will he teach the entire world? The Messiah will be one who exemplifies this Talmudic portion, par excellence. (The derivation of the proof that Torah study is the greatest command comes from the words of King Solomon, one of the wisest Torah scholars to have ever lived. This being the case, the Messiah's uninterrupted involvement in Torah study is derived from Torah, Talmud, and the actions of Judaism's greatest minds.)

"Not are my thoughts your thoughts, and not are your ways mine, so says God..." We cannot approach what God's considerations are for bringing the Messiah. He has already decided when he shall arrive. This event in no way mitigates our involvement in Torah study.

When God wishes, He will cause the Messiah to enter the world stage. Let us hope we are there to see this great event, may it happen soon, so we may learn even more of God's Torah wisdom. ■

Pinchas

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the camp of Bnai Yisrael. These women seduce members of Bnai Yisrael. The heathen women use these illicit relationships to lead their partners into idolatrous practices. Discipline and sexual restraint begin to break down. Ultimately, Zimri – a leader of Shevet Shimon – publicly enters into a romantic liaison with a woman from Midyan. The woman – Kazbi – is a princess of Midyan. Hashem strikes Bnai Yisrael with a plague. Pinchas, the son of Elazar the Kohen, takes action. He executes Zimri and Kazbi. In response to Pinchas' zealotness, the Almighty ends the plague.

Hashem acknowledges Pinchas' righteous zealotness. Hashem rewards Pinchas. Our pasuk relates one the rewards. Hashem enters into a covenant of peace with Pinchas.

What was this covenant of peace? Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra offers the simplest explanation. He explains that Pinchas placed himself in danger. He executed a leader of Shevet Shimon. Zimri's friends and followers would seek retribution. Hashem promised Pinchas that he would live in peace. Zimri's comrades would not succeed in disturbing Pinchas' life.[1]

Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel offers an alternative interpretation of this covenant of peace. He explains that Hashem promised to transform Pinchas into an angel. As an angel, he will be the harbinger of the Messiah.

This interpretation presents two problems. First, how can this interpretation be reconciled with the simple meaning of the passage? The pasuk states that the Almighty is entering into a covenant of peace with Pinchas. It makes no reference to Pinchas' transformation or the Messianic era!

Second, Hashem rewards are not arbitrary. They correspond to our actions. According to Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel, Pinchas would be transformed into an angel and assigned the distinction of announcing the Messianic era. How does this reward correspond with Pinchas' actions?

In order to answer these questions, we must reevaluate the events described above. The behaviors and experiences of Bnai Yisrael at the end of Parshat Balak mirror or presage the phenomenon of the Jewish people's exile. In exile we have been faced with two great threats – persecution and assimilation. These two threats are related. However, this relationship has sometimes been misunderstood.

It is sometimes assumed that assimilation prevents persecution. This theory maintains that persecution is directed against outsiders. The most effective method for avoiding persecution is assimilation into the host society. Jewish history seems to invalidate this theory. The Jewish people has not succeeded in stemming persecution through melting into its surroundings. In fact, attempts at assimilation have often been greeted with increased persecution.

The events at the end of Parshat Balak suggest an alternative relationship between assimilation and persecution. In this incident, Bnai Yisrael began to assimilate. The people joined in liaisons with the women of Moav and Midyan. They adopted their heathen practices. This behavior evoked Hashem's retribution. The nation was struck with a plague. Assimilation led to punishment. This suggests that persecution is a response to attempts to assimilate. In other words, assimilation does not prevent persecution. It invites persecution!

Now let us consider Pinchas' response. Pinchas recognized that the plague was a consequence of the nation's iniquity. He realized that the plague could only be arrested through a return to Torah. He acted energetically and zealously. He demanded that the nation change direction and return to Hashem.

Pinchas saved Bnai Yisrael. He also provided future generations with a model for responding to national tragedy. We must return to Torah. This is the only way to avoid persecution. This is the only means of survival in exile.

Based on this analysis, we can understand the relationship between Pinchas' reward and his behavior. He demonstrated the appropriate response to the national tragedy. He demonstrated the proper response to the experiences of exile. He provided guidance in dealing with the sorrows of our banishment. It is fitting that he should announce the end of exile and the advent of the Messianic era.

This interpretation of our passage is not inconsistent with the plain meaning of the words. Pinchas ended the plague. He negotiated a peace between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael.[2] Exile represents banishment from before Hashem. It is a disruption of the peace between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael. Pinchas is promised a covenant of peace. He will announce the Messianic era. He will proclaim the reestablishment of perfect peace between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael.

“And he and his descendants after him will have a covenant of permanent priesthood. This is because he was zealous for his G-d and atoned for Bnai Yisrael.” (BeMidbar 25:13)

Pinchas' behavior is discussed in the Talmud Yerushalmi. The Yerushalmi makes an amazing comment regarding the authority of the zealot and Pinchas' decision. The Talmud begins by establishing the basic law of the zealot. The zealot has the authority to act in this extreme case. One need not consult the court. However, the Talmud then adds that this behavior is not appropriate and is not completely approved by the Sages. In other words, the Sages would not encourage the zealot to execute this law. Furthermore, the Talmud explains that the Sages of Pinchas' time did not approve of his behavior! Our pasuk is Hashem's response to the Sages' disapproval. The Almighty rewards Pinchas for his zeal. He indicates that Pinchas acted properly and deserves praise.[3]

This discussion raises many questions. First, the Torah in this instance permits the zealot to execute the sinner. Why do the Sages discourage the zealot from performing this mission? If the Sages are correct in their policy, why did Hashem commend Pinchas? Finally, after the Torah endorsed Pinchas' decision why did the Sages not change their position?

Torah Temimah deals with these questions and offers a brilliant answer. He explains that the Torah only permitted a specific type of individual to act in this case. This is an individual motivated by zeal to protect the Torah. Any other individual is prohibited to act in this case.

This answers our questions. The Torah permits the zealot to execute the sinners. However, the Sages discouraged this behavior. They felt that it is difficult for a person to evaluate one's own motives. A person may confuse some personal motivation with authentic zeal. The Sages are not contradicting the Torah. They are merely recognizing the difficulty of meeting the requirements of the law.

The Sages did not feel that even Pinchas should have relied on his own assessment of his personal motivations. For this reason they did not immediately approve of his behavior. The Almighty rewarded Pinchas. This demonstrated that Pinchas had been motivated by authentic zeal.

“The Torah's endorsement on Pinchas' behavior did not alter the Sages' general position. True, Pinchas had acted appropriately. However, this does not mean that a lesser individual can be trusted to perform this personal assessment.[4]These are the children of Efraim according to their census – 32,500. These are the children of Yosef according to their families.” (BeMidbar 26:37)

Moshe and Elazar conduct a census of Bnai Yisrael. This census is performed in preparation

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of the dividing the land among the Shevatim – the tribes – and their individual members. The Torah provides a detailed report of the census. Some of the results deserve attention.

In order to appreciate one of these results, a brief introduction is necessary. Before his death Yaakov blessed Yosef. He told Yosef that his two sons – Efraim and Menashe – would be as Reuven and Shimon. This blessing has many implications. One of these implications is that the population of the shevatim of Efraim and Menashe would equal or exceed that of Reuven and Shimon. This is the second census recorded in Sefer BeMidbar. The sefer begins with a census. This first census was conducted at the beginning of Bnai Yisrael's sojourn in the wilderness. At the time of the first census in Sefer BeMidbar, this blessing had not yet been fulfilled.

Shevet	Population	Shevet	Population
Reuven	46,500	Efraim	40,500
Shimon	59,300	Menashe	32,200
Total	105,800	Total	72,700

Table 1

Table 1 compares the total population of Reuven and Shimon to that of Efraim and Menashe. These population statistics are from the first census in Sefer BeMidbar. As this table reveals, the population of the shevatim of Reuven and Shimon was substantially greater than that of Efraim and Menashe.

Let us now consider the population statistics for these shevatim reported on our parasha. This statistics are shown in Table 2.

Shevet	Population	Shevet	Population
Reuven	43,700	Efraim	32,500
Shimon	22,200	Menashe	52,700
Total	65,900	Total	85,200
Percentage change	-38%	Percentage change	17%

Table 2

Table 2 reveals that at the time of the census in our parasha, Yaakov's promise was fulfilled. The combined population of Efraim and Menashe exceeded that of Reuven and Menashe.

This table reveals another important statistic. In the period between the first and second census, the shevatim of Efraim and Menashe experienced remarkable population growth. During this period the overall population of the nation was virtually unchanged. These two shevatim grew at by 17%. This indicates that the population growth of these two shevatim exceeded that natural rate. In other words, the Almighty exercised His providence to assure the fulfillment of Yaakov's promise.[5] □

[1] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 25:12.

[2] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1998), p 141.

[3] Talmud Yerushalmi, Mesechet Sanhedrin 9:7.

[4] Rav Baruch HaLeyve Epstein, Torah Temimah on Sefer BeMidbar 25:13.

[5] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1998), pp. 143-144.

Chassidische Silver Rings II

A response to the Jewish Press

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The following was sent to the Jewish Press as a response to an article reprinted on July 11, 2003. In this article, the Jewish Press endorsed the ability of "Chassidische silver rings" to assist in fertility, health, and business success. The article cited many Rabbis who endorse these rings. The Jewish Press referred to a portion of the Talmud which condoned carrying certain amulets on Shabbos. The author, Rabbi Gershon Tannenbaum, sought to support his claims from Moses' brass serpent, and claimed that tefillin and mezuzah are "universally acknowledged as having powers of protection", a claim openly refuted by none other than Maimonides, as well as the Gilyon M'harsha in our Shulchan Aruch. The author claims that these rings cure Parkinson's disease, depression, banish evil thoughts, and cure other maladies. Certain rituals of immersion are "required" when making such rings - as is wearing white clothing - notions not mentioned by the Talmudic portion addressing amulets. The author also states that one must maintain ritual purity when wearing such rings, and they must not be brought into the bathroom, as the rings are "holy".

I wish to examine such claims, in light of what our Talmud, our Torah, and our Sages hold as Judaism's principles.

Do "Powers" Exist - other than G-d?

This question must be asked and answered by any religious-minded Jew. It forms a "yesode", and basic tenet of Judaism. If one remains ignorant to the answer of this question, one forfeits true knowledge of G-d. This is the gravest crime. A human does not have power over his own life, can he control another's life, even with objects? We do not rely on objects of any kind for protection. This is what G-d commanded, (Deut. 20:4) "Do not make for yourself a statue, and any form that is in the heavens above, and that is in the Earth below, and that is in the waters under the Earth." There is no exclusionary clause permitting objects which have Hebrew writing. Even Moshe himself broke the first set of the Ten Commandments, lest the people deify them, as they did the Golden Calf - and these had G-d's own writing on them. Nonetheless, Moshe destroyed objects of G-d's own writing, lest the people assume powers to exist in them. G-d told Moshe he acted properly.

One rightfully asks how amulets were permitted by the Talmud, as your article quoted. I will address this shortly. For now, allow me to support my claim by the words of the Torah and Rishonim. Each day we recite, "Ki hu livad po-ale g'vuros", "For He (G-d) alone works might". Our prayers attest to man's incapability to perform wonders, or the like. This is clear. This discounts powers in any object.

I understand, many may be awed by the reputation of those endorsing these silver Chassidische rings. However, just as the Rishonim did not follow people, rather, they followed ideas, arrived at only through critical, rational analysis, we too must follow this method of study. We must engage our Tzelem Elokim, our G-d-given intelligence, and choose a view not based on an author, but based on the validity of its content - its compliance with Torah. The Talmud teaches, "I would not follow (that view) had even Joshua said it". (Talmud Chulin 124a, at the very bottom). The Rabbis of the Talmud paid no respect to reputation, not even to one as great Joshua,

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Silver Rings II

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Moshe's prized pupil. Ramban didn't simply follow Maimonides due to the fame of the latter. Reputation played no role in Ramban's Torah adherence or Torah reasoning. We don't find Ramban arguing with Maimonides, yet saying Maimonides is also right. This is absurd and against reason. Celebrity endorsements play no role in the validity of reality, and Torah.

Unfortunately, today, many are impressed with reputation, not chochma (wisdom). Our communities echo with sentiments like, "who am I to argue with so and so?" People abandon the use of their own minds if someone with a great reputation makes a philosophical statement. People feel if someone is a Rabbi, he must be right and "who am I to argue?" In Jewish law, yes, we look for psak - a ruling, but not in hashkafa. Simple reasoning shows the fallacy of this argument. If there are for example, two Rabbis who argue on a philosophical point, by definition, they cannot both be correct. Astonishingly, I have even heard people say they can both be right. How far we are from honesty. The Ramban showed both he and Maimonides cannot both be right when they argue. So how do people hold such self-contradictory positions? They evidently are not following reason. The Chovas HaLavavos says we must do just the opposite. (See below)

The same way we look to the words of the Chumash to determine what is Torah Shebicsav, (Written Torah) we also look to the Rishonim for Torah She'bal Peh (Oral Torah). Torah has at its core the system of the Mesora, the Oral Tradition, which originated with Moshe (Moses) and which was passed down through generations. We must limit our sources to these to determine what falls within the pale of Judaism, and what does not. This is our sole barometer.

The Torah View on Objects, and their Connection to Changes in Nature

Amulets may have been accepted by certain individuals, but keep in mind, they are "mutar", permissible, not obligatory. This teaches that their existence in limited forms is tolerable, not a suggested practice. What exactly were these amulets, as recorded in Talmud Shabbos 61b? We must be precise and true to the Talmud's words. Amulets were simple writings, or roots of certain plants. They were not scriptural verses, "holy" names or angels' names. They were not written to endow women with fertility, or to make one successful in business. The Talmud clearly understands that an amulet has no power. Its only function was healing one who was sick. So how did it heal? If the amulet was a root, it had real medicinal value, such a strong chest rub. If the amulet was text, it functioned to ease one's mind and enabled one to recuperate faster. Today, doctors teach that good feelings actually assist in better health. Conversely, stress decreases our health. G-d's natural laws - science - and Torah are not at odds. They are both created by G-d, and therefore, must be consistent and complimentary in the wisdom they contain. But there were no other effects of these amulets. So how do people today suggest silver Chassidishe rings make women fertile, or men successful in business? Such ideas are not sanctioned by the Talmud, or by reason.

We must not endorse amulets as they are falsely understood today as having powers. This is clearly false, against reason, and against our Tfilos. Additionally, the Talmud does not say any amulet maker immersed in a ritual bath, or immersed his amulets in such a bath. A ritual bath - a mikvah - has its scope of laws clearly outlined in their appropriate areas of Jewish Law. Amulets is not one of them. Therefore, the attempted ritualization of silver rings by association with a mikvah, distorts where and when mikvah is to be used. If the makers of silver rings suggest that any immersion is essential to the creation of these rings, I fear this superimposing of mikvah

laws borders on a further error of adding to halacha.

You cited the case of Moshe creating a copper serpent. When Moshe was commanded to place a serpent on a pole, the serpent possessed no powers. The serpent was made of copper, an inanimate substance. However, when the Jews gazed at the serpent, they became mindful of their evil speech (reminiscent of the serpent during Adam's time). They realized their sin, repented, and G-d healed them. This is what the verses in the Torah state. (This copper serpent was commanded by G-d Himself and therefore not Avoda Zara - idolatry. Chazal already explained that the serpent didn't heal, but G-d did the healing. The serpent had no powers.)

Did Men Ever Possess Powers?

Not a single account in Torah, nor in our Talmud by any of our Rabbis, accepts that there are any powers possessed by objects on Earth, not even in a mezuzah, and not by man. When Moshe raised his staff in Egypt, it was not Moshe who caused the hail, the locusts or any other plague. Moshe is a human being, as all men are. People are created things. God alone controls nature, as He alone created it. Moshe's involvement in the miracles was ordered by G-d so as to imbue others with the truth that the G-d of the Israelites was effectuating change in nature, and that G-d selected the Jews as His people. This also teaches that G-d relates to man. G-d's reward and punishment are realities. Pharaoh confessed to this first hand, (Exod. 9:27) "G-d is righteous, I and my people are wicked." All is empowered by G-d Himself, as we say in our prayers each day, "He alone works might". Prior to the splitting of the sea, Moshe said the Jews would witness G-d's salvation. Not his own. When our prophet Elisha (Kings II, 4:34) laid upon the boy and placed "his mouth on the boy's mouth, his eyes on the boy's eyes, his hands on the boy's hands..." and the boy returned to life, the commentaries clearly state this was done so as to concentrate on his prayer to G-d. The prophet had no powers to revive one who is dead. This praise we direct exclusively to G-d three times each day.

Reward and Punishment

It is crucial to understand that assuming silver rings to contain power, denies G-d's unshakeable laws of Reward and Punishment, discussed throughout the Torah, and so clearly in Yeshiah, chapter 18. G-d teaches us that a wicked person is punished, and a righteous person rewarded. According to this view of "rings", someone deserving a punishment from G-d will not receive punishment if he wears one of these rings. Someone deserving infertility by G-d's hand, is said to become fertile by wearing a silver ring. So what is mightier, these rings or G-d's laws of Reward and Punishment? If people will respond that G-d still punishes a wicked person, even while wearing these rings, and He rewards the righteous even when they don't wear these rings as we see throughout the Chumash, then these rings do not effect any change. We have now proved conclusively that silver, Chassidishe rings have no powers. This applies to any object.

What is the Created, is not the Creator

All else but G-d alone are "created" things. This means that all that we see, all matter, is assigned a given design, from which, it cannot deviate. A tree cannot produce offspring of a cow. A cow cannot be planted and produce branches. All matter follows the design given to it by the Creator. A ring cannot "effect" change. Its is inanimate. If a silver ring cannot make itself become gold, so how can one suggest that it can help impregnate or fertilize one who is barren, by G-d's hand at that?

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Authentic Sources

I will quote our authentic sources - not for the sake of endorsement, but for the sake of showing the Mesora:

Torah (Genesis) When Rachel asked Yaakov for children, Yaakov said, "Am I in G-d's stead?". Yaakov attested to the fact that he had no power to give her children. If people have powers, why did Jacob respond this way? It is clear that Jacob understood that no one is able to do what G-d does. Those were his very words, "Am I in G-d's stead?" Additionally, when Yaakov said, according to Rashi, "G-d has withheld children from you and not me", he was not acting viciously. He meant to say, "You have the need, not me, and G-d has not answered you. You must then be the one to pray, as prayer enables you to reflect on your needs, hopefully directing you to your flaws, and then repenting from whatever character trait prevents you from childbearing."

Navi (Prophets) When Naaman requested Elisha to rid him of his leprosy, Elisha did not leave the house, but rather, he sent a messenger to instruct Naaman to bathe, and this would remove his ailment. Naaman was upset with Elisha, that he did not come out, call upon G-d's name, and "wave his hand over the place of the leprosy and remove it". A friend suggested wisely, that Elisha desired that G-d alone retain the grandeur for such a miracle. Therefore, Elisha did not leave the house. He avoided the spotlight, as Elisha knew that G-d was the performer of all miracles, and did not want to mislead Naaman. Elisha was aware that people desire to believe in man as a miracle worker. Elisha therefore avoided at all cost, taking any credit for that which man has no connection with.

Tosefta Shabbos Sabbath, (Chapter 7)

The wearing of red threads on fingers is considered "ways of the Emorites". Against Judaism. (This directly denounces 'red bendels'.)

Maimonides Mishneh Torah (Laws of Tefilin 5:4)

"...but these (people) who write on the inside of the mezuzah the names of angels or sanctified names or passages or seals, they are in the category of those who have no world to come. Because it is not enough that these fools have taken a command and nullified it, but they rendered a great command - the Unity of G-d, the love of Him and the worship of Him - as if it's an amulet for personal benefit and they assume in their foolish hearts that this will give them pleasure in their futilities of this world."

Gilyon M'harsha, Yoreh Daah, 289, (page 113 on the bottom)

"If one affixes the mezuzah for the reason of fulfilling the command, one may consider that as reward for doing so he will be watched by G-d. But, if one affixes the mezuzah solely for protective reasons, it in fact has no guidance, and the mezuzah will be as knives in his eyes".

Ibn Ezra - Parshas Kedoshim (Lev. 19:31)

"..the brainless people say if it wasn't for the fact that the Ovos (idolatry) and also the witchcraft worked, the Torah would not have prohibited them. But I say opposite their words, as the Torah doesn't

prohibit what is truth, but rather, (it prohibits only that) which is false. And the proof is (the prohibition) against "elilim" and "psilim" (statues of idolatry which all attest to their inability to do anything). If it weren't that I do not desire to go into this at length, I would bring clear proofs against Ove".

Maimonides - Peirush Mishnayos (Avoda Zara 55a)

"...the good and pious of our own (Jewish) nation feel 'there is truth to idolatry, but they are prohibited only from the Torah'. But they don't know that they are futile and lies, and we are commanded by the Torah not to do them, as we are warned in the Torah not to lie."

Saadia Gaon - "Emunos v'Daos"

"I say also that it was for this very reason that G-d made the prophets equal to all other human beings in so far as death was concerned, lest man get the idea that just as these prophets were capable of living forever, in contradistinction to them, so were they also able to perform marvels in contradistinction to them."

"For if G-d would have done that (allowed prophets existence without food or drink) men would have ascribed this fact to some peculiarity in the constitution of the prophets wherein they deviated from the rules applying to all other men. They would have said that just as the prophet necessarily deviated [from the character of the rest of humanity] in this respect so too it was a forgone conclusion that they be able to do what we cannot."

"G-d did not allow the prophets to commit miracles at all times nor permit them always to know the secrets of the future, lest the uneducated masses think that they were possessed of some peculiarity as a matter of course. He rather permitted them to perform these miracles at certain stated occasions and to obtain that knowledge at certain times so that it might thereby become clear that all this was conferred upon them by the Creator and that it was not brought about by themselves." (This denounces any distinction given to kabbalists or rabbis feigning to have powers. If they defend themselves by stating they do nothing without G-d's intervention, they border on being false prophets.)

Rabbi Bachya - "Chovas Halavavos"

"Whoever has the intellectual capacity to verify what he receives from tradition, and yet is prevented from doing so by his own laziness, or because he takes lightly G-d's commandments and Torah, he will be punished for this and held accountable for negligence."

"If, however, you possess intelligence and insight, and through these faculties you are capable of verifying the fundamentals of the religion and the foundations of the commandments which you have received from the sages in the name of the prophets, then it is your duty to use these faculties until you understand the subject, so that you are certain of it - both by tradition and by force of reason. If you disregard and neglect this duty, you fall short in the fulfillment of what you owe your Creator."

Devarim (17:8-10) "If a case should prove too difficult for you in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, between (leprous) mark and mark, or other matters of dispute in your courts,you must act in accordance with what they tell you." Regarding

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this passage, Rabbi Bachya states: "the verse does not say,.....simply accept them on the authority of Torah sages,....and rely exclusively on their tradition. Rather, (Scripture) says that you should reflect on your own mind, and use your intellect in these matters. First learn them from tradition - which covers all the commandments in the Torah, their principles and details - and then examine them with your own mind, understanding, and judgment, until the truth become clear to you, and falsehood rejected, as it is written: "Understand today and reflect on it in your heart, G-d is the G-d in the heavens above, and on the Earth below, there is no other". (Ibid, 4:39)

Additional Arguments Against Powers in Objects

Rabbi Gershon Tannenbaum attempts to support his claim by quoting the Copper Serpent incident. A friend reminded me of our Sages' comments noted in Talmud Rosh Hashannah 29a, "...did the (copper) serpent kill or did the serpent make live? Rather, when the Jews would gaze heavenward, and made their hearts subservient to their Father in heaven, they would gain strength." Rabbi Tannenbaum made a gross error, ignoring what an open Mishna states. The Mishna says openly that the Rabbis denied any powers to the serpent.

I wonder, can these rings can cause an amputee to regrow that limb? These rings have no such ability. Then what is the system by which the ring may cause certain miracles to occur, but not others? If followers hold of miraculous cures produced by these rings, why do the ring makers not hold that all miracles can be performed by these rings?

The phenomenon which ring makers say are caused by these rings, are natural, and for which, man cannot pinpoint the cause. Since there is no way - in their minds - of proving these rings didn't cause the phenomena, they will give credit to the rings. People do heal in time, make fortunes, find psychological ease from stress, all without these rings. All that is occurring when one wears the rings is the maker takes credit for natural phenomena which will happen anyway. Had the successful business man not worked for months, he would not have made a fortune just sitting at home wearing these rings. But these ring makers still maintain the rings caused the fortune. If a sickly person wears the rings without taking medicine, he will die. I don't think any of these Rabbis quoted would - if sick - abandon medicine in favor of wearing metal rings on their fingers. If they would, they are foolish. Maimonides never prescribed such nonsense, he worked within the confines of natural science, and prayer.

The Talmud states (Avoda Zara 55a) that Zunin, a Jew, asked Rabbi Akiva, "We both know that there is nothing to idolatry, so why is it that I see a sick heathen enter a church, and then see him leave all healed? Rabbi Akiva responded, 'Diseases have a duration, they would have left his body at this time anyway, so just because this fool chose to enter a Church at the precise moment his illness was to leave, should the illness remain and oppose natural law because of this fool?'

This gemara teaches that people will always try to view a phenomena as "cause" for events, if such relationships fit a person's fantasies. In this section of gemara, the heathen undoubtedly felt his prayers to his idols caused his health to return. A chochom such as Rabbi Akiva, saw the truth. Unfortunately, these ring makers are falling sway to the same idolatrous emotion as this heathen, as they fabricate relationships between the wearing of these rings and the found success or health. When confronted with such


stories, the gemara is what we follow. We don't follow present day stories and throw out the Talmud. We must be honest, learn the Talmud, and realize the truths contained. Even if it opposes a majority of people.

Authentic Torah principles are those which sit well with man, they are of ease to his mind and jive with his G-d-made intellect. Yes, there are Chukim, but this does not mean they are bereft of reason. Even Shlomo Hamelech knew the reasons for all except one. This means that for all other Chukim, King Solomon understood their reasons.

To arrive at a clear hashkafa, (philosophy) I urge you, read the Torah, see Chazal (the commentators), and understand clearly the precise laws and principles which G-d wishes we understand. Follow G-d's word in the T'Nach and Talmud, not current views which differ. What will you do when two Rabbis argue in philosophy? You cannot hold they are both right. You must use your own mind to determine the truth, and without Torah knowledge, you will have no tools to do so. Philosophy has no psak (ruling), so study Torah carefully and accurately. Think for yourself, arrive at conclusions only when matters are clear to you.

You are living your life for yourself, and only once. Take great care during your one chance here. Learn what G-d has placed before you to discern. G-d designed each of us with reason. We each have the ability to determine what makes sense, and what is false. Don't be afraid to do so.

It is G-d's will that each person use their own mind, as He has given each of us intelligence, and free choice. □



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