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Moshe's Prayer

Rabbi Solomon Drillman zt"l - Written up by Rabbi Benjamin Kelsen

Chazal tell us in Maseches Berachos (26b) that Avraham Avinu established what we now know as Tefillas Shacharis. They refer to this prayer as “Amidah”, meaning to stand erect. The Gemara goes on to say that Yitzchok Avinu established Tefillas Mincha which they refer to as “Siach”, meaning a conversation. The Rav, zt”l, asked why the Gemara distinguishes between the terms used to describe the tefillos of the Avos? What is the difference between these two terms and why did the Torah not use the word “Amidah” when referring to Yitzchok’s tefillah?

In order to understand this question, we must turn our attention to a Gemara a few pages later in Maseches Berachos. There, on Daf 30b, we are taught that one who misses a prayer adds an additional Shemoneh Esrei to compensate for the missed tefillah. The question that remains thought is how much time one wait between these two Amidos?

In answer to this question we find in the Gemara two opinions, that of Rav Huna and that of Rav Chisda. According to the former, one must wait for as long a period as it takes until “Shetischoenen Da’ato”. According to the latter, one waits for as long as it takes “Shetischolel Da’ato”.

What is the difference between these two opinions? Grammatically, both terms derive from root of the word for prayer, the former from the same root as “Vaeschanan el Hashem”, and the latter from the same root as “va’Yichal Moshe”.

Yet, since both terms are derived from and mean a form of prayer, we are still presented with the difficulty of discerning the difference between the opinions of Rav Huna and Rav Chisda. The Rav, zt”l noted that there is a difference between the prayer of Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshas Ki Sisa (“Vayichal”) and his prayer in our parsha (“Vaeschanan”). In Parshas Ki Sisa, Moshe Rabbeinu

completed his entire tefillah without interruption from HKB”H. Furthermore, not only did Moshe Rabbeinu request forgiveness for Klal Yisroel from HKB”H, he actually demanded that the Ribbono Shel Olam forgive His people. According to the Medrash Rabbah, Moshe Rabbeinu “grabbed”, k’vayachol, the coat of Hashem, and refused to let go until Klal Yisroel were forgiven. With this understanding, The Rav, zt”l, explained that “va’yichal” refers to an boundless prayer within which demands can be made of HKB”H.

Looking at Parshas Vaeschanan, we find that Moshe Rabbeinu prays to HKB”H as a poor person begs for a favor from his wealthy patron. We find that during Moshe Rabbeinu’s tefillah he is told to stop, that he had prayed enough. With this we can now attempt to understand the necessity of both opinions cited by the Gemara. The difference that one must wait between the Amidah and the tefillah being said to make up for a missed prayer depends upon whether the tefillah is a Vayechal type prayer or a Vaeschanan type of prayer.

The tefillah recited by Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshas Ki Sisa was made on behalf of the tzibbur, the entire congregation of Knesses Yisroel. When one undertakes such a Tefillah it is boundless and completely unconfined in terms of time and length. However, the Tefillah recited by Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshas Vaeschanan was of a personal nature rather than of a communal nature. As such, the format of the Tefillah is more restricted in its format.

Therefore, according to The Rav, the nature of the machlokes between Rav Huna and Rav Chisda is based upon their understanding about the nature of the prayer for which the person is preparing. According to Rav Chisda a person must be able to pray like a poor person seeking a favor from his patron. This is a personal entreaty and, like the Tefillah of Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshas Vaeschanan, it is

limited in length and does not require long preparation.

According to Rav Huna, however, the “make-up” Tefilah is similar to that of Moshe Rabbeinu on Har Sinai following the Cheit HaEigel, and is unlimited in length and tone and, as such, requires a longer time for which to prepare.

If one examines the Rambam one will find that there are two distinct aspects to Tefilah. In Hilchos Tefilah we find that of Avodah She’b’lev which is the obligation upon man to pray each day while in Hilchos Ta’anis we find the concept of Tzeakah b’Eis Tzorah, a cry for help in time of crisis and need. This second idea is based upon the notion of v’hareiosem b’chatzotzros. The Avodah She’b’lev aspect of Tefilah limits Man’s daily prayers to thrice daily because by definition the individual’s prayer must be limited and finite. According to the Rambam in Hilchos Ta’anis (Ch. 1) the Tzeakah aspect of prayer permits Man to add an additional prayer, a Neilah, on a fast day. This additional prayer denotes that in times of crisis there is no restriction to how much prayer is allowed. We are obligated to blow the trumpets when the community is in peril, and to pray without limitation or restriction. This is the Tefilah of Moshe Rabbeinu on Har Sinai, the Tefilah of Vayichal.

It is only with these ideas understood that we can distinguish between the Amidah of Avraham Avinu and the Siach of Yitzchok Avinu. Chazal teach us that each of the Avos had a specific Midah, characteristic which dominated

their essence. The descriptive Midah of Avraham Avinu was that of Chesed, of unparalleled kindness to others, which was focused towards the community at large. It is because his prayer was for the Tzibbur, for the Klal, that it is described as an Amidah, with Avraham Avinu standing tall and straight before HKB”H during the presentation of his Tefilah.

We are taught that the Midah of Yitzchok Avinu was Gevurah Tzimtzum, a hidden inner strength. Though Yitzchok Avinu was most certainly praying for the greater community, his prayer was mostly directed inward, for himself and his own needs. This type of inward focused prayer is most similar to the tefilah of the poor man, called by Chazal a Tefilah l’Ani Ki Ya’atof. The words Ki Yaatof mean that the poor man wraps himself in his Tallis. It also refers to the bending over of the body in supplication, as the poor person is so often stooped. The tefilah of Siach is the plea of a downtrodden man as he approaches The Ribbono Shel Olam with great trepidation.

The lesson of our parsha is that sometimes Man must pray to HKB”H from the standpoint of Tefilah l’Ani Ki Ya’atof v’Lifnei Hashem Yishpoch Sicho, like a poor man bent over in supplication. However, such a personal prayer is limited in nature is subject to HKB”H saying “Rav lach, al Tosif,” “Enough, do not continue” as Moshe Rabbeinu was told by HKB”H in Parshas Vaeschanan.

Six Days You Shall Work

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

Our parasha deals with, among other things, the Aseret HaDibrot. The fourth of the Aseret HaDibrot states: “*Sheishet yamim ta’avod v’asita kol melachtecha*, Six days shall you toil and do all your work” (Devarim 5:12). The Midrash Lekach Tov comments: “*Sheishet yamim ta’avod* – this is the mitzvah of Shabbat.” What is the connection between the work we do during the week and the mitzvah of Shabbat? Certainly a person can honor Shabbat during the week – if he comes across a nice cake, for example, he saves it for Shabbat, and if he finds a better one, he saves that one for Shabbat. But what does the Midrash Lekach Tov mean that the actual work one performs during the week in his office is the fulfillment of the mitzvah of Shabbat?

The mitzvah of Shabbat appears in the Torah fifteen

times. In Parashat Ki Tisa, the Torah says: “*V’shamru B’nei Yisrael et haShabbat la’asot et haShabbat*, And B’nei Yisrael shall keep the Shabbat, to make the Shabbat” (Shemot 31:16). What does it mean to make Shabbat? Shabbat is not dependent upon any action on our part – even if a person does absolutely nothing, at a certain point Shabbat begins automatically and at a certain point Shabbat ends automatically! How do we make Shabbat?

The gemara in Gitin (56a) tells the story of the Churban. The Roman army had laid siege to Yerushalayim, allowing no one into or out of the city. The thugs of Yerushalayim would not let anyone out of the city to attempt to make peace with the Roman army. The situation deteriorating rapidly, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai faked his own death and managed to get out of the city in a

coffin. He approached the head of the Roman army and told him that a messenger would soon arrive from Rome informing him that he had been elected Caesar. When the messenger arrived, the head of the Roman army, overcome with emotion, granted Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai three requests. The first thing he asked for was the city of Yavneh and its sages, because he realized that Yerushalayim would eventually be destroyed – if not now, in a few years – and that what needed to be done next was to build a bridge between churban and geulah. This bridge begins in Yavneh, because, as the gemara in Berachot 17a says, the rabbanim of Yavneh had a favorite teaching: “I am a person, and you are a person. I wake up to my job, and you wake up to your job. I am not involved in your work, and you are not involved in mine. Perhaps you might say that I do much and you do little. But this is not true, for we learned: Whether one does much or one does little, as long as the intent is l’sheim shamayim.” This teaching discusses two people – one who learns all day and one who works all day. You might think the life of the one who learns all day is worth more than the one who works all day or vice versa, therefore the rabbanim of Yavneh taught that they are equal, as every individual works in his particular field to increase kevod shamayim.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai understood that this is the key to the geulah. He learned this from Yeshayah haNavi, who says that in the future, HaKadosh Baruch Hu will build Yerushalayim with a stone called kodkod (54:12). The gemara in Bava Batra (75a) explains that this stone is actually a combination of two stones from the choshen – shoham (the stone of Yosef) and yashpeh (the stone of Binyamin). Yosef represents the world of business. Binyamin represents those who learn Torah. The future geulah will be the comfortable synthesis of these two worlds.

Fear of God

Rabbi David Horwitz

Deuteronomy 6:13 states:
Revere only the L-RD your God and worship Him alone, and swear only by His name.

Rambam in Sefer Ha-Mitzvot derives three different fundamental biblical commandments from this verse. The first one entails the admonition to fear God. How is this expressed? As words play such an important part in human behavior, endeavor and communication, the

This is the meaning of the Midrash Lekach Tov as well. “Sheishet yamim ta’avod is the mitzvah of Shabbat” – going to work is not a bedieved lifestyle. A person whose task in this world is to work – in whatever field – must understand that his life is equal in value to the life of one who learns Torah, as it is incumbent upon each of us to increase kevod shamayim. In fact, it is the one who works during the week and ceases his work in honor of Shabbat that truly makes Shabbat. One who does not work during the week is shomer Shabbat, but does not make Shabbat. This is what Rabbeinu Bechaye writes in Parashat Yitro: “Six days you shall serve Hashem through your work and dedicate the seventh day completely to Hashem, your L-rd.” Rashi, commenting on the passuk, “Re’eh chayim im isha asher ahavta, Enjoy life with the woman you love” (Kohellet 9:9), explains that one must learn a profession to go hand-in-hand with his Torah learning. While certainly anyone with the proper ability to teach Torah or to be a dayan should do so – Am Yisrael needs them – one who works is not living a bedieved life. The gemara in Chagigah (5b) says that Hashem sheds a tear every day for one who could teach Torah, but doesn’t, and for one who is meant to work in a certain field, but instead sits and learns Torah. Therefore, a person who is drawn to a certain profession shouldn’t think for a moment that his life is worth less or a double life if he learns Torah; if anything, it is a broad life, as R’ Yitzchak Hutner, zatzal, Rosh Yeshivat Chaim Berlin, writes in Igeret 94.

This is the first Shabbat after Tisha b’Av – we must take this opportunity to lay another stone on the bridge between churban and geulah. If we truly work to increase kevod shamayim through everything we do – every person in his field – we will b’ezrat Hashem merit to see the rebuilding of Yerushalayim, the nation, and the land, completely and speedily.

first step in establishing fear of God entails not glibly or flippantly mentioning the Name of God. Rambam utilizes a hypothetical Talmudic position that is actually rejected by the Gemara to fortify his case. Although Rambam recognizes (and indeed states) that the specific Talmudic hypothesis he cites is rejected, its fundamental premise, i.e., the overriding importance of establishing the Fear of God as a basic Jewish principle, remains. This Maimonidean

passage is quite difficult, both in the original and certainly in English translation. It entails the Rambam shifting back and forth from citations of the stages of a relevant Talmudic passage, and providing interpretations of the points that underlie each of the stages.

Rambam's words (Positive Commandment #4: Fear of God) speak for themselves. (My translation comes from Charles B. Chavel [trans.], Moses ben Maimon: The Commandments [London, Jerusalem and New York, 1967], Vol. I [Positive Commandments], p. 5, with modifications.) Rambam writes:

By this injunction we are commanded to believe in the fear and awe of God (exalted be He), and not to be at ease and self-confident but to expect His punishment at all times. This injunction is contained in His words Revere (only) the L-RD your God (Deut. 6:13; 10:20).

The Gemara of Tractate Sanhedrin (56a) discusses the verse (Leviticus 24:16) If he blasphemes (Hebrew, nokeb) the name of the L-RD, he shall be put to death. (The Talmud raises a hypothetical question, asking) "Perhaps the word nokeb should be taken to mean "pronounced" (rather than blasphemed), as we find elsewhere (Numbers 1:17) The men that were pronounced [=designated] by name. [And in that case] the requisite admonition [for such a punishment] would be derived from the verse Revere only the L-RD your God."

That is to say, (The Rambam interjects his own words here) the verse If he blasphemes (Hebrew, nokeb) the name of the L-RD, he shall be put to death might be understood as meaning that one who merely mentions the Name of the L-RD, without committing blasphemy [would be put to death]! If you ask, "What sin is there in that?" we reply that such a one abandons the fear of the L-RD, for it is part of the fear of the L-RD not to pronounce His Name in vain.

The Sages (in the following passage at Sanhedrin 56a) answer this question, and refute the view involved in it, as follows: "First, in order to constitute blasphemy [that would incur the death penalty] the Name [of the L-RD] must be used [in such a way that it might be represented as both the agent and the object of the blasphemy], and in this instance [of merely pronouncing the Name of the L-RD] the condition is absent."

That is to say, (the Rambam himself interjects again and continues), [to incur the death penalty, the accused] must be guilty of blaspheming the Name [of the L-RD] in His own Name, just as the Sages say, [by substitution of a

human name for God's Name]: let Jose smite Jose.

Moreover, (the Rambam now cites the conclusion of the passage in Sanhedrin), the admonition that you cite is in the form of a Positive commandment, and it is an accepted principle [of Jewish law] that such an admonition is invalid.

That is to say (once again the Rambam now is speaking in his own voice), your suggestion that a prohibition against the mere pronouncing of the Name of God can be indeed derived from the verse Revere only the L-RD your God is inadmissible, because that verse in a Positive Commandment, and a prohibition cannot be based upon a Positive commandment.

The Rambam concludes: Thus it has been made clear to you that the words Revere only the L-RD your God lay down a Positive commandment.

Oftentimes, the conceptual substructure of a Talmudic passage is illuminated precisely by an opinion that is rejected, albeit for technical reasons. This might be the case here as well. To be sure, the point of the Gemara's discussion on one level is simply to claim that positive language of Revere only the L-RD your God cannot be the source of a negative prohibition (in this case, one that would have incurred the death penalty). But on a more fundamental level, the very fact that the Talmud was willing to even consider this shows the overriding importance of the fear of God as entailing repercussions in our verbal expressions, and the supreme value of the concept of Fear of God in general. This might be another reason why the Rambam included the technical discussion of the Gemara in Sanhedrin in his remarks.

As the author of the early fourteenth century popular work Sefer Ha-Hinukh noted (cited by Rabbi Chavel in his comments), not only the first three commandments (to know that there is a God, to affirm the Unity [=absolute Oneness] of God and to love God) are binding for all time, and are subject to no limitations whatsoever as to time, occasion place or person, the fourth commandment, to fear God, is absolutely unlimited as well. In the secular, throwaway, superficial, artificial culture of the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is often hard to attain a sincere and profound fear of God. The first step is to recognize its universality of scope in the life of a Jew. I have set the L-RD always before me (Psalms 16:8). The operative word is always. We must all try as hard as we can to attain that goal during our lives.

Baal Tosif

Rabbi Beinish Ginsburg

In Parshas Va'eschanan the Torah mentions the Issurim, the prohibitions, of Bal Tosif and Bal Tigra (4,2).

One is not allowed to add to the Torah, and one is not allowed to diminish and take away from the Torah. In the next posuk, the Torah mentions the terrible aveirah of Ba'al Peor, where Am Yisrael succumbed to one of the most disgusting forms of Avodah Zarah. The linkage is striking, the pesukim flow immediately from Bal Tigra and Bal Tosif to Avodah Zarah. The meforshim discuss the connection. I want to share Rav Hirsch's approach to the connection between the pesukim.

Rav Hirsch writes:

The immediate transition from Bal Tosif and Bal Tigra to the warning reference, to the annihilation of idol worshipers seems highly didactic. It proclaims the fact that every denial of the inviolable Divinity of the Torah, even regarding one single mitzvah, setting man's opinion as being equal to the Mitzvos of Hashem, is equivalent to a general defection to polytheism

The idea (I think) is as follows^[i]. Once a person says 'I can change the Torah,' add a mitzvah or take away a mitzvah, then the person is basically saying that the mitzvos depend on my own thinking, whatever I believe in. If a person decides one mitzvah is not for him, then it turns out the other 612 mitzvos that he is doing is only because they make sense to him. So really, he is not really serving Hashem, he is actually serving himself! He is going through life doing whatever he thinks makes sense. And this leads to dropping other mitzvos, and this can eventually lead to Avodah Zarah.

Rav Hirsch refers to the episode (Shmuel 1 Perek 15) where Shaul did not fully follow Hashem's command regarding Amalek, and Shmuel gives him mussar and tochacha. Rav Hirsch explains that instead of Shaul 'strictly fulfilling the command which lay clear and definitely before him', he allowed himself to do both more and less than he was commanded. Less in that he did not execute Agag and more in that he kept some of the best animals to offer to Hashem, as if that is better than what Hashem commanded him, to wipe them all out. 'So that Shaul had definitely transgressed the warnings of Bal Tosif and Bal Tigra.' Shmuel then gives Shaul the following mussar:

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice. To pay attention is more than the fat of rams. For disobedience is the sin of

witchcraft and pressing your own arbitrary powers forward is the cult of idolatry...

Rav Hirsch explains disobedience, which leaves Hashem's command unfulfilled because it, in your opinion, does not fit with some other factor is, at its base, no other sin other than allowing sorcery to decide whether to do an act commanded or approved by Hashem.

This is really a major yesod in Torah hashkafa. We have to constantly remind ourselves that we do the mitzvos because Hashem commanded them. We sometimes do not understand a mitzvah or a mitzvah might be difficult for us, but we have to do it anyway. Sometimes a person says to himself, r"l,

'This mitzvah is not for me. I do not understand it, it does not make sense, so I am not going to do it.'

One has to understand that this is a very serious, grievous error. We can not pick and choose the mitzvos. When one picks and chooses the mitzvos, he is putting himself at the center. He is the decider, and then in essence, he is doing what he wants, as opposed to fulfilling the command of Hashem.

I once heard the following mashal from my rebbe Rav Ahron Lichtenstein shli"ta. He was contrasting Avodas Hashem to shopping. Avodas Hashem, he said, is a theocentric activity, where Hashem is at the center. Man responds to the Call of Hashem; that is the essence of yahadus. Shopping, on the other hand, is a homocentric activity; man is at the center. Each person decides he wants this shirt and not that shirt, this skirt and not that skirt. And Rav Ahron said very sharply, "Judaism is not a department store, you can't pick and choose the mitzvos."

That is exactly the message of Bal Tosif and Bal Tigra. And the Torah is warning us that if one violates this message, then there are terrible, terrible consequences it can lead to.

We all have to work on being mekabel on ourselves to do the mitzvos of Hashem that He commanded, and we have to avoid choosing our own way against what Hashem commanded.

[i] Rav Hirsch himself develops another idea as well regarding the link to Avodah Zarah.

Behold the Beauty of the Land

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's parasha, parashat Va'etchanan, opens with Moses recalling his heartfelt plea to the Almighty, and its rejection, that he be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

In Deuteronomy 3:25, Moses reiterates the words of his supplication: "Eh'eh'brah nah v'ehr'eh eht ha'ah'retz ha'tovah ah'sher b'ay'ver ha'Yar'dayn, ha'har ha'tov ha'zeh, v'hahl'vah'nohn," Please, allow me now to cross and see the good land, that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and the Lebanon.

Rabbi Meyuchas explains that in the non-homiletic, literal sense, the words "good mountain" refer to a mountain range that is located at the center of Israel, across from the part of the Jordan where Moses stood at the time. "Lebanon" here means the country's northern mountains.

However, Rashi explains that the words "good mountain," refer to the city of Jerusalem, which is located in a mountainous region of Judea. The Gur Arye (supercommentary on Rashi, authored by Rabbi Judah Lowe, 1526-1609, the Maharal of Prague) explains further that Jerusalem is called a mountain, because the city's elevated spiritual status is as clear as the physical elevation of a mountain.

Rashi further asserts that the words "the Lebanon," referred to in the verse, allude to the Beit Hamikdash—the Holy Temple. This interpretation is based on the fact that the Hebrew word "Levanon" is derived from the word "Lavan," white. The Temple, of course, serves to whiten, or atone for, Israel's sins.

The Ha'amek Davar explains that the words "good land" refer to the Torah. The Ha'amek Davar notes, that since the Torah has a special ability to take root in Israel, the main purpose of Moses' petition and prayer was to strengthen the peoples' commitment to Torah learning in the land of Israel. Similarly, a "good mountain," according to the Ha'amek Davar, refers to Jerusalem, the city that is especially receptive to the intense study of Torah. "Lebanon" is the Temple, that has the special ability to direct truth to the place that G-d chooses.

Those who are sensitive to the words of the Hebrew text and the rapt fervor conveyed in Moses's words, cannot help but appreciate the depths and intensity of his plea. He begs, beseeches and pleads with G-d to allow him to see the land, a land, that although he has never seen in his life,

he is, nevertheless, deeply in love with.

"Please let me pass through, to see the good land," cries Moses, ironically referring to the exact same land that the scouts had seen, but about which they could not bring themselves to report a single good word. As opposed to the scouts, Moses only sees the "good land," and all the good in the land.

Rabbi Menachem HaKohen, notes that Moses' vision was far larger than subsequent reality. Moses' passion for the land allowed him to survey with the gaze of his eyes, more than Joshua or his successors who would actually reach the land and dwell in it.

Rabbi J.H. Hertz writes that all of Hebrew scripture is filled with a deep love for the mountains and mountain scenery. Mountains are so highly regarded in Jewish tradition that the rabbis even introduced a special blessing to be recited upon beholding lofty mountains.

The prophet Isaiah predicts that when redemption comes in the end of days, nature itself will respond enthusiastically to its arrival. Isaiah 55:12 states, "Kee v'simcha tay'tzay'oo, oov'shalom too'vah'loon," [At the time of redemption], you will go out in gladness, and in peace shall you arrive. The mountains and the hills will break out in glad song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

Those who are familiar with contemporary Israel know that there is a passionate and powerful, ethereal, love that native Israelis feel for their land. They take special pride in touring the land, and walking the land—crossing the wadis and the streams, the forests and the wilderness. The landscape of Israel is so improbably diverse, that tourists, within a few kilometers, can visit a variety of "countries." The lowest spot on the world's surface is found in Israel, at the Dead Sea. The majestic mountains of Judea, the famed River Jordan and the legendary Kineret Lake, the northern Galilee and the Mediterranean, are all to be found in this unique geographical environment.

And yet, despite all the wondrous endowments of the Land of Israel, for some reason, the scouts saw only (Numbers 13:32) "a land that devours its inhabitants." How sad that the people's representatives could not appreciate the land's supernal beauty.

Referring to the idols, the Psalmist, 115:5-7 says, "A mouth they have but speak not, eyes they have but see

not. Ears they have but hear not ... Hands they have, but feel not." So it is with those who are inured to the special qualities of the Promised Land. That is why, Moses, who saw the land only from the distant mountains, was able to see more beauty than the ten scouts, who physically traversed the land.

When the eye of the beholder is willfully blind, there is no way to envision or appreciate beauty.

The Fewest of all Peoples

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

One of the most profound disagreements in Judaism is that between Moses Maimonides and Judah Halevi on the meaning of the first of the Ten Commandments.

For Maimonides (1135-1204), the first command is to believe in God, creator of heaven and earth:

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realise that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If however it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist ... To acknowledge this truth is a positive command, as it is said: "I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:2, Deut 5:7). (Yesodei ha-Torah, 1: 1-5)

Judah Halevi (c. 1080-c.1145) disagreed. The greatest of medieval Hebrew poets, Halevi also wrote one of Judaism's philosophical masterpieces, *The Kuzari*. It is framed as a dialogue between a rabbi and the King of the Khazars. Historically, the Khazars were a Turkish people who, between the seventh and eleventh centuries, ruled a considerable area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, including southern Russia, northern Caucasus, eastern Ukraine, Western Kazakhstan, and northwestern Uzbekistan.

Many Jewish traders and refugees lived there, and in 838 the Khazar King Bulan converted to Judaism, after supposedly holding a debate between representatives of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. The Arabic writer Dimashqi writes that the Khazars, having encountered the Jewish faith, "found it better than their own and accepted it". Khazaria thus became, spiritually as well as geographically, an independent third force between the Muslim Caliphate and the Christian Byzantine Empire. After their conversion, the Khazar people used Jewish personal names, spoke and wrote in Hebrew, were

This is the challenge of contemporary times as well, to not only see beauty in the land, but to see the beauty in the values of the people and the values of the Torah that the people have imbibed. If we ever hope to make a difference in the world, it is this that we must acknowledge.

The call of the hour, especially in the week that Tisha B'Av is observed, is to see this beauty, embrace it, make it part of our innermost selves, and share it with the world.

circumcised, had synagogues and rabbis, studied the Torah and Talmud, and observed the Jewish festivals.

The *Kuzari* is Judah Halevi's philosophy of Judaism, cast in the form of the imagined conversation between the King and a rabbi that led to the King's conversion. In it, Halevi draws a portrait that is diametrically opposed to what would later become Maimonides' account. Judaism, for Halevi, is not Aristotelian but counter-Aristotelian. The God of the prophets, says Halevi, is not the God of the philosophers. The key difference is that whereas the philosophers found God in metaphysics, the prophets found God in history.

This is how Halevi's rabbi states his faith:

I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land, after having brought them through the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way ... (Kuzari I: 11)

He goes on to emphasise that God's opening words in the revelation at Mount Sinai were not, "I am the Lord your God, creator of heaven and earth" but "I am the Lord your God "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (*Kuzari I: 25*).

Halevi lived before Maimonides. Nachmanides (R. Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270) lived after, but he too disagreed with Maimonides' interpretation of the opening verse of the Ten Commandments. His objection is based on a passage in the *Mekhilta*:

"You shall have no other gods besides me." Why is this said? Because it says, "I am the Lord your God." To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province. His servants said to him, "Issue decrees for the people." He, however, told them, "No. When they accept my sovereignty, I will issue decrees. For if they do not accept my sovereignty, how will they carry out my decrees?"

According to Nachmanides the verse, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” is not a command, but a preliminary to the commands. It explains why the Israelites should be bound by the will of God. He had rescued them, liberated them, and brought them to safety. The first verse of the Decalogue is not a law but a statement of fact, a reason why the Israelites should accept God’s sovereignty.

Thanks to a series of archeological discoveries in the twentieth century, we now know that Nahmanides was right. The biblical covenant has the same literary structure as ancient near eastern political treaties, of which the oldest known are the “Stele of the Vultures” (before 2500 BCE), recording the victory of Eannatum, king of Lagash, over the people of Umma, both in southern Mesopotamia, and the treaty of Naram-Sin, king of Kish and Akkad, with the people of Elam (c. 2280 BCE). Other, later treaties have also been discovered, involving Hittites, Arameans and Assyrians. One details a pact between the Hittite king Hattusilis III and the Pharaoh Rameses II, regarded by some scholars as the Pharaoh of the exodus.

These treaties usually follow a six-part pattern, of which the first three elements were [1] the preamble, identifying the initiator of the treaty, [2] a historical review, summarizing the past relationship between the parties, and [3] the stipulations, namely the terms and conditions of the covenant. The first verse of the Ten Commandments is a highly abridged form of [1] and [2]. “I am the Lord your God” is the preamble. “Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” is the historical review. The verses that follow are the stipulations, or as we would call them, the commands. Nachmanides and the Midrash are therefore correct in seeing the verse as an introduction, not a command.

What is at stake in this difference of opinion between Maimonides on the one hand, Judah Halevi and Nachmanides on the other? At the heart of Judaism is a twofold understanding of the nature of God and

His relationship to the universe. God is creator of the universe and the maker of the human person “in His image”. This aspect of God is universal. It is accessible to anyone, Jew or gentile. Aristotle arrived at it through logic and metaphysics. For him, God was the “prime mover” who set the universe into motion. Today, many people reach the same conclusion through science: the universe is too finely tuned for the emergence of life to have come into being through chance (this is sometimes called the anthropic principle). Some arrive at it not through logic or science but through a simple sense of awe and wonder (“Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical” said Wittgenstein). This aspect of God is called by the Torah, Elokim.

There is, however, a quite different aspect of God which predominates throughout most of Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. This is God as He is involved in the fate of one family, one nation: the children of Israel. He intervenes in their history. He makes a highly specific covenant with them at Sinai – not at all like the general one He made with Noah and all humanity after the Flood. The Noahide covenant is simple and basic. The sages said it involved a mere seven commands. The Sinai covenant, by contrast, is highly articulated, covering almost every conceivable aspect of life. This aspect of God is signaled by the use of the four-letter name for which we traditionally substitute (since the word itself is holy and could only be pronounced by the High Priest) the word Hashem (on the two aspects and names, see Kuzari IV: 1-3; and Ramban to Exodus 3: 13).

Maimonides, the philosopher, emphasized the universal, metaphysical aspect of Judaism and the eternal, unchanging existence of God. Judah Halevi and Nachmanides, the one a poet, the other a mystic, were more sensitive to the particularistic and prophetic dimension of Judaism: the role of God in the historical drama of the covenant. Both are true and valid, but in this case, Halevi and Nachmanides are closer to the meaning of the biblical text.