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Birkon Mesorat HaRav: Essay on Birkat HaMazon Excerpted from Birkon Mesorat HaRav: The Wintman Edition, edited by Rabbi David Hellman with commentary from the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik
OU Birkon HaRav front cover

Birkat HaMazon: To Bless the Great and Holy Name

Birkat HaMazon, like our entire liturgy, exists on two planes. On the one hand, it is a standardized text instituted by the rabbis that we are obligated to recite after every meal. However, it is much more than a codified formulation; its specific words and language encapsulate ideas, themes, and concepts that we must extract, define, and elucidate. Fundamentally, we must ask, what is the telos of Birkat HaMazon and what religious experience does it capture? In other words, what is the essence of the mitzva that the Torah itself commands? To address these questions we must turn our attention to a few crucial Talmudic passages.

The Biblical Obligation

Before we can appreciate the theological and religious implications of Birkat HaMazon, we must clarify the di?erent views regarding its halakhic definition. It is quite clear that the Torah requires some sort of blessing after we eat: "You shall eat and be satisfied and shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deut. 8:10). However, when it comes to the specific blessings we recite there seem to be two contradictory Talmudic passages regarding their origin and authority. One source, a beraita (Berakhot 48b), sees allusions to the first three blessings of the Birkat HaMazon in the above quoted verse: "Our Rabbis taught: Where is the saying of grace intimated in the Torah? In the verse, 'You shall eat and be satisfied and shall bless' – this signifies Birkat HaZan [the first blessing]…'For the land' – this signifies Birkat HaAretz [the second blessing]. 'The good' – this signifies Boneh Yerushalayim [the third blessing]." This source implies that the first three blessings of Birkat HaMazon are all Biblical obligations. (The last blessing of HaTov VehaMeitiv was established in response to the burial of the victims of the Betar massacre, and is clearly Rabbinic in origin. See Reshimot, p. 209 .) Yet, the Talmud (ibid.) also quotes Rav Nahman as stating that these same three blessings were instituted by the courts of three di?erent generations: "Moses established for Israel the blessing of HaZan at the time when the manna fell for them; Joshua established for them the blessing of HaAretz when they entered the land; David and Solomon established the blessing of Boneh Yerushalayim." As opposed to the beraita, this second teaching implies that all of the blessings of Birkat HaMazon are only of Rabbinic origin.

Looking to the Rishonim (medieval authorities), we find two major approaches to harmonizing these sources. Rashba (Berakhot 48b) explains that the Biblical obligation requires expressing thanksgiving for the themes of the first three blessings: for sustenance, for the Land of Israel, and for Jerusalem. Every time one eats, he must acknowledge God who provided him with his food, and who gave the people of Israel the Land of Israel and her capital, Jerusalem. However, the Torah did not mandate a set formulation. Instead, each individual could express these motifs in whichever way he chose, using the language he found most fitting. Later, Moses, Joshua, and then David and Solomon instituted set texts for the nation to recite. Thus, the formulation and phrasing are a Rabbinic institution, but the themes and motifs of the first three blessings are all of Biblical origin.

Ritva and Shita Mekubetzet (ad loc.), following Rashba's approach, point out a parallel as well as a distinction between Birkat HaMazon and the obligation of tefilla. Like the commandment of Birkat HaMazon, the Biblical obligation to pray also has no required text; originally, one would pray in his own words. Only because of the displacements and chaos of the exile, explains Maimonides (Hilkhot Tefilla 1:4), did the Rabbis compose a standardized text of the Amida to facilitate prayer for those who wouldn't otherwise have the tools to express themselves properly. However, the di?erence between these two commandments is that the Biblical mitzva of tefilla does not require reciting any specific praises of God or making any specific requests. A person could recite any prayer to fulfill his obligation. In contrast, the Biblical blessing of Birkat HaMazon has a structure that requires the inclusion of three specific themes: that God has granted us sustenance, the Land of Israel, and the city of Jerusalem.

There is, though, another approach which understands that the Biblical commandment of Birkat HaMazon involves not three themes, but one simple, core idea. Nahmanides, in his glosses to Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot (Shoresh 1) discusses several di?erent commandments which are Biblical in nature, but for which the Rabbis codified a standardized text. Discussing Birkat HaMazon, Nahmanides says that although the commandment is clearly Biblical, "its text is not Biblical; rather, the Torah commanded us to recite a blessing after we eat, each person according to his understanding, as in the blessing of Benjamin the Shepherd who recited, 'Blessed is the Merciful One, Master of this bread' (Berakhot 40b)." This example of Benjamin the Shepherd proves that one can fulfill the obligation of Birkat HaMazon even with this simple blessing. Benjamin the Shepherd was not a scholar. He was a simple Jew who blessed God as best as he could, according to his meager understanding and capabilities. According to Rashba and his school, the Talmud means to say that Benjamin the Shepherd's simple blessing would fulfill the first of the three Biblically-mandated blessings, but it would not have fulfilled the Biblical obligation to mention the Land of Israel and Jerusalem. However, Nahmanides seems to imply that Benjamin the Shepherd's blessing would fulfill the total Biblical obligation. In other words, according to Nahmanides, the blessings for the Land of Israel and Jerusalem are Rabbinic in nature.

This opinion of Nahmanides would also appear to be the position of Maimonides, who opens the first chapter of the Hilkhot Berakhot stating simply, "There is a positive commandment to bless after eating food, as it says, 'You shall eat and be satisfied and bless the LORD, your God.'" In discussing the Biblical obligation, Maimonides makes no reference to the Land of Israel or Jerusalem; he mentions those ideas only in Chapter Two of Hilkhot Berakhot when he discusses the fixed text of Birkat HaMazon codified by the Rabbis. Like Nahmanides, according to Maimonides we fulfill the Biblical commandment of Birkat HaMazon by reciting any blessing for the food we have eaten, regardless of its specific form or content.

But how can Maimonides and Nahmanides maintain that there is no Biblical obligation to mention the Land of Israel when the verse states, "You shall bless the LORD your God for this good land that He gave you"? Seemingly, we find in this verse an explicit requirement to mention the Land of Israel. In fact, however, a dispute between the ancient translators on how to translate this verse will resolve this question.

Targum Onkelos translates the verse literally, that we are obligated to bless God "for the good land that He gave you." Accordingly, there is a clear Biblical obligation to thank God for the Land of Israel every time we eat, as is the opinion of Rashba and others. However, Targum Yonatan ben Uziel translates the relevant phrase as "for the fruit of the good land that He gave you." This reading sees the phrase "the good land" as an elliptical reference to the fruit of the land, and thus the Biblical commandment does not include an obligation to thank God for the land itself, but rather only for its fruit, i.e., the produce one has consumed. Thus the dispute between Rashba and his school, on the one hand, and Maimonides and his school, on the other, revolves around how one translates the words "for this good land." The halakhic argument was clearly formulated only in the days of the medieval authorities, but the disagreement regarding how to understand the verse dates back to the ancient Aramaic translators.

Remembering God and Recognizing His Mastery

Returning our focus to Nahmanides' position, that one can fulfill his Biblical obligation by stating "Blessed is the Merciful One, Master of this bread" – we will recognize that not only does this reduce the number of Biblical themes in Birkat HaMazon from three to one, but it also offers a fundamentally di?erent perspective on the mitzva. Intuitively, we would assume that Birkat HaMazon is a mitzva of hoda'ah, thanksgiving, of o?ering our appreciation for the food that we have just enjoyed. Yet Benjamin the Shepherd's formula contains no trace of thanksgiving – his blessing does not thank God for the food at all. Rather, it is a statement of God's mastery and kingship, that He is the master of this food and that I enjoy it only with His permission. According to Nahmanides, the Biblical commandment of Birkat HaMazon is not an obligation to praise or thank God for the kindness of providing us with food; it is an idea even more basic, a recognition even more fundamental to Judaism's worldview. Birkat HaMazon is a declaration of God's lordship over the world, and in particular, His mastery and ownership over the food we have consumed.

Indeed, if we examine the first blessing of Birkat HaMazon, we come to the same startling conclusion: it too contains no elements of thanksgiving. In the first blessing we recognize God as the creator and sustainer of the natural world, the one who feeds all living creatures. Only with the second blessing, opening with "We thank you LORD, our God…" does the concept of thanksgiving enter Birkat HaMazon. According to Nahmanides, one fulfills the Biblical obligation of Birkat HaMazon even without expressing any sentiments of thanksgiving. The mitzva requires recognizing God's sovereignty, and no more. However, according to Rashba and his school, the themes of the first three blessings are all Biblical, and thus Birkat HaMazon includes both concepts, recognition of God's mastery over the world, and expression of thanksgiving for sustaining us. Targum Yonatan ben Uziel translates the verse as "you shall thank and bless," reflecting these two concepts, and in this regard, he parallels the position of Rashba.

In truth, when we look at the context of the verse, the approach of Nahmanides is almost explicit in the Bible itself. The Bible commands, "You will eat and be satisfied and bless the LORD your God." However, it continues, "Be careful lest you forget the LORD your God and not guard His commandments…Lest you eat and be satisfied…and your heart will grow haughty and you will forget the LORD your God…and you will think in your heart, my strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth" (Deut. 8:10-17). The Torah doesn't require man to thank God; rather, the Torah warns man lest he forget God. The purpose of Birkat HaMazon is to prevent the arrogance which creeps into a man's heart and causes him to forget that God is the Creator. Fundamentally, Birkat HaMazon is not an act of thanksgiving or praise, but an act of remembering God, a fulfillment of the constant command to remember and be cognizant of our Creator in every aspect of our life. As the Torah concludes the section, "Rather you shall remember the LORD your God who gives you the strength to be successful."

Thus, Birkat HaMazon is not simply a particular commandment regarding food and our satiation; it is instead an expression of the belief and commitment that underpins our entire religious life. Indeed, from the standpoint of the psychology of religion, the telos of Birkat HaMazon, to remember God, is the most important element in one's religious experience. To o?er praise before God is easy; to give thanks, one merely has to become sentimental. However, to remember God and ascribe everything to Him, to attribute the whole cosmic process of creation to God, and to know always that He is the Master, the LORD, and the Owner of everything, requires a mental discipline of the highest order, and it is in truth the fundamental religious experience.

Birkat HaMazon and All Other Blessings

Understanding Birkat HaMazon in this light – not as an expression of thanksgiving, but as an act of recognizing and remembering God's kingship – also allows us to explain several passages in Maimonides' Code that would otherwise be di?cult to understand. In the beginning of Hilkhot Berakhot, Maimonides, as usual, begins with the Biblical commandment: "There is a positive commandment from the Torah to bless God after eating." Maimonides then moves on to the Rabbinic obligations: "and there is a Rabbinic obligation to bless before a person enjoys any food…and to bless after anything a person eats or drinks." Maimonides means to say that these Rabbinic obligations are not independent concepts, but extensions of the Biblical idea of Birkat HaMazon. However, the blessings that we recite before we eat are not expressions of thanksgiving, as they simply state, "Blessed is the LORD…creator of the fruit of the tree." Moreover, the blessings before we eat couldn't be expressions of thanksgiving, as thanksgiving is only appropriate after we have benefited from God's kindness. Rather, the blessings that we recite before we eat are declarations of God's mastery over this world, recognition that the food before us belongs to Him and that we enjoy it only with His permission. If Birkat HaMazon would have been an act of thanksgiving, it could not have been the conceptual basis for the Rabbinic blessings that we recite before we eat. Only because Birkat HaMazon is an act of recognizing God's kingship and mastery over our possessions can it serve as the conceptual foundation for all blessings that we recite.

Maimonides continues, "Just as we recite blessings for all physical pleasures, so too we recite blessings before mitzvot and only then perform them. The Rabbis instituted many blessings as expressions of praise, thanksgiving, and request in order to constantly remember the Creator." Maimonides groups the blessings that we recite before the performance of mitzvot with the blessings that we recite before we eat, and he understands that all blessings are based upon the Biblical blessing of Birkat HaMazon. How does Birkat HaMazon serve as the conceptual source for the blessings recited before performing a mitzva? Based on what we have explained, it is because fundamentally all blessings are statements of God's authority. With birkot hanehenin we recognize His dominion over the natural order, and with birkot hamitzvot we similarly declare His dominion over the moral order. Just as He is the creator of the physical world and its laws, so too is He the author of the moral norm and the legislator of all religious laws. As Maimonides says explicitly, the common denominator of all blessings is to remember and fear the Creator.

We can now dispel a common misconception. Many believe that to bless God means to praise Him, and in fact, the English translation of berakha, benediction, comes from the Latin root words bene and diction, meaning to speak well of or praise. However, this understanding is simply incorrect. In Genesis we read "God blessed man, saying, 'You shall be fruitful and multiply.'" God didn't praise man; He blessed him: He instilled in him the ability to multiply, a new source of goodness and fortune in his life. So too, Rav Hayyim Volozhiner (Nefesh HaHayyim 2:2) and Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Ba'al HaTanya (Torah Or, Parashat Hayyei Sarah), both explain that the word "barukh" means expansion, and to bless God means to expand God's presence in this world. How can a mortal human being, a frail and finite creature, accomplish such a thing? The answer is that man has the unique ability to recognize and declare God's authority and mastery. By dispelling the mirage of nature's independence and declaring the true Creator, the influence of God's presence thereby increases in this world. Similarly, the Sefer HaHinnukh (Mitzva 430) writes in his discussion of Birkat HaMazon that when we say God is "blessed," we declare that all blessing and goodness flow from Him. The prayer that God

should be blessed is a wish that all people should recognize God as the source of goodness. All blessings, like Birkat HaMazon, are meant to forestall the natural human arrogance that makes man forget God. Blessing God is not an act of thanksgiving, but an act of remembering God, of declaring Him the true master of our world and its fullness, which is the very essence of Birkat HaMazon.

"His Great and Holy Name"

Finally, we can understand a cryptic phrase that Maimonides uses in the heading to Hilkhot Berakhot, where he writes that the Biblical obligation is "to bless the great (gadol) and holy (kadosh) name after we eat." What does Maimonides mean when he includes the divine discriptions "great and holy"? Maimonides is known for his precise language, and he should have simply written that we are obligated "to bless the name of God after we eat." Moreover, elsewhere Maimonides attaches di?erent attributes to the name of God. For example, regarding the prohibition to erase the name of God he writes (Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 6:1) that "anyone who destroys one of the holy and pure names of God is lashed," and similarly, in another context he writes (Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 2:1) that "there is an imperative to love and fear the honored and exalted God." Maimonides wrote with extraordinary precision, and he was even more careful in his use of divine attributes, as is evident by his discussions in the Guide for the Perplexed. If he uses "the great and holy name" to describe God in the context of Birkat HaMazon, it is because these two descriptions capture the essence of the commandment. How is this the case?

To understand Maimonides' choice of words, we must first understand what we mean by describing God as "great." We find this divine description in the Bible in the following verse: "For the LORD your God is God of gods, and LORD of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, who favors no person, and takes no bribe" (Deut. 10:17). In this verse we see that God's greatness flows from His mastery, because He is the master of all other powers. Thus, to recognize God as great is to recognize Him as the authority of our lives, the master of our world. The appellation "holy" means that God is absolutely above and beyond all of creation, that nothing in this world can be compared to Him. Thus, Maimonides defines the commandment of sanctifying God's name (Kiddush Hashem) as demonstrating our absolute commitment to God even to the point of loss of life – to publicize that we recognize no other authority and that no other person or force in the world could intimidate us to violate His will. It follows that when these two appellations are used together, the phrase "the great and holy God" means the God who is the absolute master and authority of all creation, totally unique and beyond all matters and powers of this world. It is in this sense that the prophet Ezekiel uses these descriptions when he writes that God declares that in the end of days, after the war of Gog and Magog, "I will make Myself great and holy, and I will make Myself known in the eyes of many nations, and they will know that I am the LORD." God will be great and holy when the whole world recognizes His dominion, that He is master of the world. The Tur (Orah Hayyim 56) writes that the opening phrase of Kaddish, "Let His name be made great and holy" ("yitgadel ve'yitkadesh"), is based on this verse in Ezekiel, and he explains that Kaddish is a prayer for that time when all nations will ultimately recognize the authority and kingship of the one true God.

In defining the Biblical commandment as "to bless the great and holy name after eating," Maimonides underscores that by reciting Birkat HaMazon we acknowledge God's mastery of the world, and that He is the provider for the food we have just eaten, or as Benjamin the Shepherd put it, "Blessed is the Merciful One, Master of this bread." The mitzva of Birkat HaMazon is not to praise or o?er thanksgiving, but to remove from our hearts the arrogance of material success that leads man to forget God and to declare "my strength and the might of my hand produced this wealth" (Deut. 8:17). By reciting a blessing after we eat and are full and satiated, we a?rm that God is the source of our sustenance, of life, and of existence itself. The purpose of the blessing is to declare, as the whole world will in the end of days, that He is the one true "great and holy God."

* This essay is based primarily upon a shiur delivered by the Rav in Boston in 1961, as well as Shiurei HaRav al Inyanei Tefilla, pp. 269-287, and Reshimot Shiurim, Berakhot, pp. 516-519. The essay also incorporates material from a shiur delivered in 1969.

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The Spirituality of Listening Britain's Former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

It is one of the most important words in Judaism, and also one of the least understood. Its two most famous occurrences are in last week's parsha and this week's: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," and "It shall come to pass if you surely listen to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul" – the openings of the first and second paragraphs of the Shema. It also appears in the first line of the parsha: "It shall come to pass, if you listen to these laws."

The word, of course, is shema. I have argued elsewhere that it is fundamentally untranslatable into English since it means so many things: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise, to respond, to obey. It is one of the motif-words of the book of Devarim, where it appears no less than 92 times – more than in any other book of the Torah. Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, Shema: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what he wants from us. If you would only listen … Judaism is a religion of listening. This is one of its most original contributions to civilisation.

The twin foundations on which Western culture was built were ancient Greece and ancient Israel. They could not have been more different. Greece was a profoundly visual culture. Its greatest achievements had to do with the eye, with seeing. It produced some of the greatest art, sculpture and architecture the world has ever seen. Its most characteristic group events – theatrical performances and the Olympic games – were spectacles: performances that were watched. Plato thought of knowledge as a kind of depth vision, seeing beneath the surface to the true form of things.

This idea – that knowing is seeing – remains the dominant metaphor in the West even today. We speak of insight, foresight and hindsight. We offer an observation. We adopt a perspective. We illustrate. We illuminate. We shed light on an issue. When we understand something, we say, "I see."1

Judaism offered a radical alternative. It is faith in a God we cannot see, a God who cannot be represented visually. The very act of making a graven image – a visual symbol – is a form of idolatry. As Moses reminded the people in last week's parsha, when the Israelites had a direct encounter with God at Mount Sinai, "You heard the sound of words, but saw no image; there was only a voice." (Deut. 4:12). God communicates in sounds, not sights. He speaks. He commands. He calls. That is why the supreme religious act is Shema. When God speaks, we listen. When He commands, we try to obey.

Rabbi David Cohen (1887–1972), known as the Nazirite, a disciple of Rav Kook and the father of R. Shear-Yashuv Cohen, chief rabbi of Haifa, pointed out that in the Babylonian Talmud all the metaphors of understanding are based not on seeing but on hearing. Ta shema, "come and hear." Ka mashma lan, "It teaches us this." Shema mina, "Infer from this." Lo shemiyah lei, "He did not agree." A traditional teaching is called shamaytta, "that which was heard." And so on.2 All of these are variations on the word shema.3

This may seem like a small difference, but it is in fact a huge one. For the Greeks, the ideal form of knowledge involved detachment. There is the one who sees, the subject, and there is that which is seen, the object, and they belong to two different realms. A person who looks at a painting or a sculpture or a play in a theatre or the Olympic games is not himself part of the art or the drama or the athletic competition. He or she is a spectator, not a participant.

Speaking and listening are not forms of detachment. They are forms of engagement. They create a relationship. The Hebrew word for knowledge, da'at, implies involvement, closeness, intimacy. "And Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived and gave birth" (Gen. 4:1). That is knowing in the Hebrew sense, not the Greek. We can enter into a relationship with God, even though He is infinite and we are finite, because we are linked by words. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God. If you want to understand any relationship, between husband and wife, or parent and child, or employer and employee, pay close attention to how they speak and listen to one another. Ignore everything else.

The Greeks taught us the forms of knowledge that come from observing and inferring, namely science and philosophy. The first scientists and the first philosophers came from Greece from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE.

But not everything can be understood by seeing and appearances alone. There is a powerful story about this told in the first book of Samuel. Saul, Israel's first king, looked the part. He was tall. "From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people," (1 Sam. 9:2, 10:23). He was the image of a king. But morally, temperamentally, he was not a leader at all; he was a follower.

God then told Samuel to anoint another king in his place, and told him it would be one of the children of Yishai. Samuel went to Yishai and was struck by the appearance of one of his sons, Eliav. He thought he must be the one God meant. But God said to him, "Do not be impressed by his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not see as people do. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jews and Judaism taught that we cannot see God, but we can hear Him and He hears us. It is through the word – speaking and listening – that we can have an intimate relationship with God as our parent, our partner, our sovereign, the One who loves us and whom we love. We cannot demonstrate God scientifically. We cannot prove God logically. These are Greek, not Jewish, modes of thought. I believe that from a Jewish perspective, trying to prove the existence of God logically or scientifically is a mistaken enterprise.4 God is not an object but a subject. The Jewish mode is to relate to God in intimacy and love, as well as awe and reverence.

One fascinating modern example came from a Jew who, for much of his life, was estranged from Judaism, namely Sigmund Freud. He called psychoanalysis the "speaking cure", but it is better described as the "listening cure."5 It is based on the fact that active listening is in itself therapeutic. It was only after the spread of psychoanalysis, especially in America, that the phrase "I hear you" came into the English language as a way of communicating empathy.6

There is something profoundly spiritual about listening. It is the most effective form of conflict resolution I know. Many things can create conflict, but what sustains it is the feeling on the part of at least one of the parties that they have not been heard. They have not been listened to. We have not "heard their pain". There has been a failure of empathy. That is why the use of force – or for that matter, boycotts – to resolve conflict is so profoundly self-defeating. It may suppress it for a while, but it will return, often more intense than before. Job, who has suffered unjustly, is unmoved by the arguments of his comforters. It is not that he insists on being right: what he wants is to be heard. Not by accident does justice presuppose the rule of audi alteram partem, "Hear the other side."

Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his or her workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those he or she leads. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow.

In Judaism we believe that our relationship with God is an ongoing tutorial in our relationships with other people. How can we expect God to listen to us if we fail to listen to our spouse, our children, or those affected by our work? And how can we expect to encounter God if we have not learned to listen. On Mount Horeb, God taught Elijah that He was not in the whirlwind, the earthquake or the fire but in the kol demamah dakah, the "still, small voice"7 that I define as a voice you can only hear if you are listening.

Crowds are moved by great speakers, but lives are changed by great listeners. Whether between us and God or us and other people, listening is the prelude to love.

1 See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

2 This appears in the opening pages of his work, Kol Nevuah.

3 To be sure, the Zohar uses a visual term, ta chazi, "Come and see." There is a broad kinship between Jewish mysticism and Platonic or neo-Platonic thought. For both, knowing is a form of depth-seeing.

4 To be sure, many of the great medieval Jewish philosophers did just that. They did so under the influence of neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian thought, itself mediated by the great philosophers of Islam. The exception was Judah Halevi in The Kuzari.

5 See Adam Philips, Equals, London, Faber and Faber, 2002, xii. See also Salman Akhtar, Listening to Others: Developmental and Clinical Aspects of Empathy and Attunement. Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2007.

6 Note that there is a difference between empathy and sympathy. Saying "I hear you" is a way of indicating – sincerely or otherwise – that I take note of your feelings, not that I necessarily agree with them or you.

7 I Kings 19.

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from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org> date: Thu, Aug 25, 2016 at 9:56 PM

Who's the Stranger? Rabbi Eliyahu Safran I´m a stranger in a strange land. – Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

In Parshat Ekev, we are confronted with one of the most compelling – and counter-intuitive – obligations in all Torah. "You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10:19) This mitzvah actually appears thirty-six times, double chai, in Torah. We have heard it so often and referred to it so regularly that we often lose sight of its power and unsettling demand. We do so at our peril and diminishment.

Too often, we have "tamed" this mitzvah to fit our needs rather than confront the profound – and gracious – imposition that it places upon us. But listen to this command with fresh ears, with the ears of our ancestors, with the ears of a people and a world for whom communal identity was fundamental to self and existence. This command tells us to go against everything that our instincts teach us. It tells us to look beyond the familiar and the safe and to see in the one who is different and alien the same fundamental goodness and holiness that God bestows upon all His creatures.

Astonishing!

Why should we look beyond our safe and familiar boundaries and welcome this alien into our embrace? Because his experience and his status is understandable to us. After all, we were gerim in the land of Egypt. We too know what it means to be the alien, the "other", the feared and the reprehensible. That experience should inform our understanding of the plight of others.

Too often, it does not.

Even knowing, as Ramban teaches, that we are commanded to love the ger because Hashem loves him. We know this because Hashem certainly loves us and we were strangers too. Our experience, of pain, our sense of disassociation teaches us that God loves the stranger. And, if God loves the stranger so should we.

Sefer HaChinuch tells us that when someone leaves his family and his country of origin to become a "stranger" in a new environment, it is a very difficult adjustment. To survive and to thrive, the stranger needs help and support. We are obligated to provide it.

Our understanding of the ger and this mitzvah must be rooted in our Mitzrayim experience. For we all must experience the pain and angst of the galut, of the wilderness of our souls; none of us can be born redeemed. It is only in our wandering and our wrestling with our lives and our experience that we appreciate redemption and the grace God affords us. Without galut there is no grace and redemption. Without the ger there is no citizen.

Our destiny is bound in the success of the ger. Just as our own experience as strangers brought us to the foot of Sinai, we must recognize that in every ger is the potential for a Sinai experience. It is our obligation to help, not hinder; to open our hearts, not harden them.

This mitzvah asks us, demands of us, to challenge the very heart of who we are, to be willing – no, to be more than willing, to actively pursue – embracing the experience of the ger, to care for the ger.

For we were gerim…

* * *

Such a powerful command. Is it any wonder that so many seek to shirk it? Even the most "religious" among us seek to wrestle from this command its essential demand. How? By defining the "ger" in comfortable and familiar terms.

This mitzvah challenges each and every Jew to go beyond, to reach out, to extend a hand, to develop relationships – beyond one's familiar "turf". Yet,

many observant Jews are inclined to look at gerim with crossed eyes. What? Me? Who? Many observant Jews avoid any possibility of crossing paths with the ger. Most turn a blind eye, telling themselves, "I have enough with our own." They view the ba'al teshuva with even greater scorn than they do the ger. Who would want to marry into a ba'al teshuva family? Who needs the hassle? After all, "if you aren't born with it, you can never catch up…"

This perspective dims the consideration to other gerim. The divorced. The older, single person. The widow.

There is always a "reasonable" excuse. "I can't handle that." "That's not for me." "I can't handle those tears at my Shabbos table."

"What am I, a social worker? I'm just a simple Jew."

What about that OTD person? Oye! God spare me from him. Keep him away from my chevra. Keep him away from my community, my shul. After all, I can't be responsible for every failure out there.

Can I?

"You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20).

* * *

In Ekev, God tells us that we are responsible for the ger.

But who is the ger?

I posed this question to my son, Nathan. He responded with a thoughtful answer which demands our attention. "People think that the admonition not to mistreat gerim is a directive at a specific group of people who have unique circumstances that qualify them as 'gerim'. I think the directive is different. I think anyone in any social situation can feel like a ger. The new kid in class. The new guy at the office. In fact, in any social situation there is likely to be someone that feels like a ger—doesn't have to be a new situation, it's just the inevitability of a social dynamics."

With this thoughtful reply, he enlarges the understanding of what it means to be a ger to those whose place in life makes them feel like a ger! Even the one who is part of the community can sometimes feel like a stranger.

Haven't we all experienced that feeling?

This understanding of the mitzvah encourages us to look for the ger in every situation and respond supportively and caringly to them, it encourages us to see in the eyes of the estranged divorced men and women who have lost their home, Shabbos table, dignity, and confidence, that stranger that we were once in the land of Egypt!

The teens who have become estranged from their homes, yeshivas, shuls, and communities? These OTD? Gerim. To be treated not with scorn but loving kindness.

Why? Because we were gerim in the land of Egypt. Now they are gerim in their own mitzrayim (narrow, tight place). They are boxed in. Lost. And God commands that we treat them with respect, loving kindness, decency. God commands that we treat them in a way that makes clear that redemption is just ahead.

* * *

We invest so much of our lives to belonging, to being part of our community. Our sense of self, of decency and dignity come from how we see ourselves reflected in the eyes of those closest to us, the eyes of those who we number amongst the "we" of our lives. We are taught from a young age to fear the stranger.

"Do not talk to strangers!"

The "other" is a threat to everything we hold dear; to everything we invest our time and efforts to preserve. In English, "strange" and "stranger" is derived from the root ejhs. The derivation gives rise to such terms and ideas as "out of the ordinary", "unusual", "striking".

These terms, and what they imply cause us to shiver, fearing the damaging potential they represent.

We are seeing the rawness of these emotions played out in the current political atmosphere, in which immigrants and people of color are feared as "the other". They diminish us. They rob our jobs, our resources, our land.

Strangers.

According to some, they are criminals, rapists, gang members. They are, in short, anything but human, anything but God's creatures currently in the galut but in search of their coming redemption.

God does not accept our fear, our incendiary words, our hateful speech and behavior. "You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20).

When we stood at the foot of Sinai, perhaps we had already forgotten the fear and shame of being gerim. God demands that we remember, not for ourselves but for others who still feel those demeaning emotions even as we bask in the light of grace.

Who is the ger?

We all are.

Who is in galut?

We all are.

Who stands at the foot of Sinai?

We all do.

Together.

Rabbi Reisman – Parshas Eikev 5775

Parshas Eikev contains in 8:14 the reference to the bad Midah of Gaivah not in the sense of a Lo Sasei but as an expression of (וְרָם, לְבָבֶךָ; וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ). It is telling us that haughtiness causes a person to forget Hashem. The Gemara in Maseches Sotah 4b (10 lines from the bottom) says that this is the Torah's reference to Midas HaGaivah. I'd like to share with you an incredible insight into Middas HaGaivah from the Yad Hamelech (one of the earlier Meforshim from the 1700's). He is a Meforeish on the Rambam. To do so I have to begin with a Stiras Harambam.

Rambam (Sefer Hamada, Hilchos Deos, Perek 2). The Rambam establishes what has become known as the golden mean. The idea regarding virtually all Middos, that the middle of the road is the best way to go regarding Middos. For example, regarding Taivah, desire, it is not good to be extreme in either direction. A Baal Taivah (someone who has extreme desires) naturally will end up doing a lot of different Aveiros. He will do things that are wrong. Even the extreme desires are by themselves something which is damaging to a human being. On the other hand, to want nothing is also not a proper behavior for a normal person. Therefore, the Rambam says in 2:2 that the (לדרך האמצעית ילך בה כל ימיו) that the middle road is the best way for a person to act in regard to many of the different Middos. In Perek 2, Halacha 3 the Rambam says (ויש דעות שאסור לו לאדם לנהוג בהן בבינונית אלא יתרחק מן הקצה האחד עד הקצה האחר) that there is an exception to this and that a person is not permitted to go the Middle road when it comes to Gaivah. A person needs to act with extreme humility and distance himself to the utmost from Gaivah. There is no middle road when it comes to Gaivah. That is the Rambam's rule and I think that it is well known. What is not so well known is that the Lechem Mishna (Perek 1 Hilchos Deos) asks a Stiras HaRambam. The Rambam in Hilchos Deos, Perek 1, Halacha 5 says regarding Middas HaGaivah that someone who acts in the middle road is the right way to go. He says so quite clearly. He says someone who behaves in the middle road when it comes to Gaivah (נקרא חכם וזו היא מדת חכמה) is a Chacham and someone who distances himself from Gaivah in an extreme way is acting with a Midas Chasidus. The question is why does the Rambam in Perek 2 say that a person should not behave in the middle way with the Midah of Gaivah but in Perek 1 says that he should?

The Yad Hamelech answers this Stirah in the Rambam and gives us an extraordinary insight into our human nature and the way we work and behave. When it comes to most Middos, a person recognizes his shortcomings. Perhaps he doesn't recognize them adequately but he recognizes them. A Baal Taivah, someone who eats too much, will recognize the fact that he eats too much. He may rationalize it and say it is not so terrible but he will recognize the fact. Someone who takes Nekamah can rationalize that he is doing it because the other person deserves it but knows he is taking Nekamah. When it comes to most Midddos a person has the potential to recognize his shortcomings. When it comes to the Midda of Gaivah it is not that way. A Baal Gaiva by definition sees himself on a different level and thinks that on the level that he is on the things that he wants are normal. He may feel he is deserving of a certain Kibud and he may feel that his children, wife and friends do not give him enough respect, but that is only because he feel he is deserving of such respect. Therefore, a Baal Gaiva doesn't recognize where he is at.

Says the Yad Hamelech, in the Rambam Perek 1 he is stating rules and is saying that every Midah should be dealt with the Derech Ha'emtzai (in the middle road) and that rule is that a person should be in the middle road as it is the Derech of the Chochom. In Perek 2, the Rambam is telling people how to behave in practical terms. He is saying that if you want to know how to behave you should distance yourself from Gaivah as far as possible, because you don't even realize that you are acting with Gaivah. If you will choose to go down the middle road you will certainly be off and be behaving in too haughty a way, demanding too much respect, demanding too much honor because every person doesn't realize where he is really at.

For example, Gaivah is of course the most dangerous thing in a spousal relationship where a husband or wife feel they should be listened to more. Very often it is related to Gaivah. Because every person feels that whatever he is doing is right. Let me give you an example. Let's say people are driving and a husband says we need to make a right turn and the wife says it needs to be a left turn and he turns right and is correct. Does he feel that he gave in? Of course he didn't give in. He was right. It was a right turn, it is a fact. Ok that is understandable.

Let's go to the home now. There is a question of behavior whether to buy something or not buy something. Whether to use paper plates or not. Whether to have carpeting on the floor or a hard floor. The husband and wife have a disagreement. The husband insists that carpeting makes more sense or the wife insists that carpeting makes more sense and the other person gives in. You don't feel the other person gave in. When it comes to a matter of opinion Gaiva causes a person to assume that his way is the right way. It is always that way. Even if you are going to give in you feel that you are giving in because you are being a Tzadik but you are really right. Of course that is not true. This is because you are not really right. There are two ways to look at things. You don't realize it. When people go into marriage thinking that it should be 50/50. What kind of 50/50 are you talking about? You don't realize the 50 % that your wife gives in or even notice it. You are not even aware of it. Therefore, when it comes to Gaiva you have to have the attitude not of 50/50, you have to have the attitude of maybe 80/20 or giving in all the time. You don't realize when the other person gives in. therefore, when it comes to behavior, the Rambam says the truth. The Rambam whispers in our ears that to get to 50/50 you have to work (עד הקצה האחרון). What a lesson! Gaiva destroys. Gaiva is what causes people to raise their voices in anger, to be frustrated when someone doesn't listen to them. Middas HaGaiva.

Thanks to hamelaket@gmail.com for collecting the following items:

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subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Weekly Parsha EKEV Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Torah reading of this week continues the long, final oration of Moshe to the Jewish people, as he prepares for his own mortal demise. It is important to note that throughout the words of Moshe here in the final book of the Chumash, there is, mixed together, the requirement of the memory of the past – the distant and immediate past – with the vision of the future, again the far future and the immediate future. There are those amongst us who live pretty much in the memory of our long, eventful and holy past. Being suffused with nostalgia, they paint for themselves a picture that is many times more fantasy than reality. And since the reality of the past never is portrayed, any attempt to learn from that past is futile. We see so often in the words of Moshe how frank and honest is his recollection and recitation of the events of the past. He spares no one and no event. His love for the Jewish people, that shines forth from every verse and word of this book, in no way forces him to color the past and sanitize the events that occur. It is the honesty of his oration and presentation that gives it such power and eternity. The person who has to climb a hill will oftentimes in the middle of the climb look back to see how much has already been accomplished. In order to continue the climb, psychologically that is an enormous aid. So too, on the eve of the entry of the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, Moshe reminds them of the past and of the climb that they already achieved and experienced – the travails of our ancestors, the slavery in Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, the disasters of the desert – in order to prepare them for the rest of the climb before them. But he also portrays the vision of their future in the Land of Israel and in the diaspora. There again Moshe is honest and candid with his words of prophecy. He promises no rose garden, nor an easy path towards the ultimate redemption and return of the Jewish people to their homeland, to their faith and ultimately to their Creator. Just as Jews were and are prone to fantasize about our past, so too, perhaps even to a greater extent, are we susceptible to creating a picture of an unrealistic and unsustainable future. We see in the Talmud the opinion that promises us a rather bland messianic era. Maimonides adopts this viewpoint as well. However because of the length of the exile and of the enormous tragedies that have been our lot in that exile, many Jews have upped the ante for the messianic era. By so doing, we are disappointed with what has already been achieved and make it more difficult than ever to have a realistic view of what our policies and expectations for the future should be. For a balanced picture of the holy vision regarding the Jewish people, past and present, one need only study and remember the final words of Moshe as they appear before us in the Torah readings of these weeks. Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

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Since parshas Eikev teaches that "all Hashem wants from us is to fear Him," it is an opportune time to discuss:

Under the Big Top By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

"Why do some people wear big yarmulkes that cover their entire head?"

"How large must my yarmulke be?"

"Is there a halachic difference between going bareheaded indoors versus outdoors?"

"Why don't we clip a waterproof yarmulke to our heads while we swim?"

"May one swear an oath, using G-d's Name, while bareheaded?"

Answer: All of the above questions concern the laws regarding covering one's head and walking bareheaded, a topic mentioned several times in the Gemara. For example:

"Rabbi Huna, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua, did not walk four amos (about seven feet) with an uncovered head, saying 'The Shechinah is above my head'" (Kiddushin 31a). Similarly, the Gemara says elsewhere that Rabbi Huna the son of Rabbi Yehoshua said about himself "I will be rewarded, because I never walked four amos with an uncovered head" (Shabbos 118b).

"Ravina was sitting in front of Rav Yirmiyah of Difti, when a man passed by and did not cover his head. Ravina said to Rav Yirmiyah of Difti, 'How arrogant is this man (for walking bareheaded in the presence of Torah scholars)?' Rav Yirmiyah responded, 'Perhaps he comes from the town of Mechasya, where the people are so familiar with talmidei chachamim (that in their presence the townspeople do not cover their heads)" (Kiddushin 33a).

"An astrologer told the mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak: 'Your son will be a thief.' To avoid this from happening, she made sure that his head was always covered, and cautioned him: 'Cover your head, so that you will always be in fear of Heaven and always pray for Divine assistance in serving Hashem.' Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak was unaware of the reason behind her instructions, but always followed them meticulously, from his youth and on into adulthood, when he became a great Torah scholar. One day, he was studying Torah under a date palm that was not his, when his head covering fell off. Raising his eyes, he saw the dates, and his yetzer hora overwhelmed him. It was so powerful that he snapped off dates with his teeth, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the astrologer" (Shabbos 156b).

Mesechta Sofrim, which is a collection of beraisos, or halachic teachings of the tanna'im not included in the Mishnah, quotes a dispute whether someone whose head is uncovered may lead the services by being poreis al shema, which means to recite kaddish and borchu that follow the pesukei dezimra. (There are various opinions as to how much of the prayer is included in poreis al shema, a topic beyond the scope of this article.) The first opinion, mentioned anonymously, permits someone bareheaded to lead the services, whereas the second opinion prohibits doing so, because one may not say Hashem's name with an uncovered head (Sofrim 14:15). In a dispute of this nature, the general rule is that we follow the first opinion, although, in this particular dispute, we find authorities who rule according to the second opinion.

The Rambam about being bareheaded The Rambam prohibits praying the shemoneh esrei bareheaded (Hilchos Tefillah 5:5), and he also states that it is appropriate for a talmid chacham to cover his head at all times (Hilchos Dei'os 5:6). Thus, in the dispute of Mesechta Sofrim quoted above, he follows the first opinion.

Interpreting the Talmudic sources Based on the above sources, most, but not all, halachic authorities contend that, in Talmudic times, covering one's head was performed on special occasions, such as when praying, reciting blessings, and in the presence of a Torah scholar, but

was not always otherwise observed (Tur, Orach Chayim 8, as explained by Darkei Moshe; Shu"t Maharshal #72; Gra on Orach Chayim 8:2). These rulings imply that someone other than a talmid chacham is not required to cover his head, except when davening. As we will soon see, most authorities conclude that, today, one is required to cover one's head, because of reasons that did not apply in the time of the Gemara.

A minority opinion We must note that one prominent late authority, Rav Shlomo Kluger, understands the Talmudic sources in a different way. He contends that, even in earlier times, it was forbidden to leave one's head completely uncovered. In his opinion, the passages that imply that a person may go bareheaded are, in fact, allowing him to have his head partially covered. (Shu"t Ha'elef Lecha Shlomo #3). I will soon explain the practical ramifications of this dispute.

Protecting from sin According to all opinions, covering one's head helps achieve yiras shamayim, being in constant recognition and awe of G-d's presence, as borne out by the anecdote of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak that I quoted above. Let us understand this story in its context, which concerns the topic of ein mazal leYisroel.

Ein mazal leYisroel Hashem set up the world in such a way that the events that transpire in one's life, and even one's personality and tendencies, are influenced by one's mazal. However, because of the principle of ein mazal leYisroel, one can override this preordained fortune through prayer. Recognizing that Hashem is The Source of all, and praying to Him for help and assistance, can change one's situation.

We now understand what Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak's mother did. The astrologer understood the mazalos and knew that her son was born under a mazal that would influence him to steal. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak's mother knew that although mazalos have a strong influence on a person, their power is not absolute. Therefore, she understood, correctly, that the astrologer's diagnosis presented her with a reason to treat her son in a special way. Since prayer and being careful about mitzvah observance can offset the influence of mazalos, this is what she taught him, knowing that covering one's head provides a strong influence. She was proven correct, because her son developed into a great Torah scholar and yarei shamayim, despite the influences of his personal mazalos. Still, only when he remained on guard and kept his head covered was he able to combat his tremendous drive to steal. The moment his head became uncovered, the temptation to steal overwhelmed him. He now knew that, in spite of his tremendous accomplishments in ruchniyus, he could not relax his guard, even for a second. We also understand why the custom developed that people cover their heads at all times, even though the Gemara did not require it.

Responsum of the Maharshal With this background, we can understand the following responsum, penned by the sixteenth-century halachic luminary, Rav Shlomo Luria, known as the Maharshal. "I am unaware of a prohibition to recite a brocha without a cover on one's head, although the Terumas Hadeshen was certain that it is prohibited to mention G-d's Name without one's head being covered, I am unaware of the source of this ruling. He writes that it is a dispute in Mesechta Sofrim, and, furthermore, Rabbeinu Yerucham writes that it is prohibited to recite a brocha bareheaded. Even though I do not dispute the earlier authorities unless I find a major scholar on my side of the dispute, I am inclined to be lenient in ruling that one may recite a brocha and even recite keri'as shema bareheaded. I can prove this from a Midrash Rabbah that states that a human king requires people to rise and uncover their heads in respect, prior to reading a declaration that he has issued, which they then read with great awe and trepidation. Hakadosh Baruch Hu told the Jews that when you read My declaration, the shema, you are not required to stand while doing so, nor are you required to expose your heads." The Maharshal notes that this midrash implies that uncovering one's head while reciting shema is not required, and it is certainly not prohibited.

The Maharshal continues: "Despite my own proofs to the contrary, what can I do that people consider being bareheaded to be prohibited? However, I am astonished at the custom of treating uncovering one's head as a prohibited activity, even when not praying, and I have no idea where they got this from, since the only source that we find about having one's head uncovered is regarding to a woman, and it is only a midas chasidus (exemplary conduct) to be careful not to walk four amos bareheaded -- but this midas chasidus applies only to walking four amos and not one who walks for a shorter distance, as is implied by the statement of Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshua… . Furthermore, I found written that being bareheaded is a concern only when one is outdoors… . Avoiding reciting G-d's Name with an exposed head is a midas chasidus, just as is avoiding walking four amos bareheaded. However, the Rif wrote that we should protest someone's entering a shul bareheaded, and the Tur wrote that one should not pray bareheaded, but did not prohibit reciting shema bareheaded."

The Maharshal then concludes: "I am powerless to change this approach. Since people are in the practice of not being bareheaded anywhere, I may not be lenient in their presence. I heard of a talmid chacham who used to study Torah bareheaded, saying that the covering bothered him. Nevertheless, although, technically, there is nothing wrong with being bareheaded, provided one is not saying G-d's Name, even from a perspective of exemplary conduct (midas chasidus), nevertheless, a talmid chacham should be careful not to do this, since people may think that he is not serious about his observance of Torah and mitzvos. Therefore, a talmid chacham should not study Torah bareheaded, even in the privacy of his own home, lest someone see him and, as a result, treat him without the proper respect he is due."

In his conclusion, the Maharshal rules that a talmid chacham is required to cover his head. He also contends that one may recite a brocha by placing his hand over his head, despite the rule that one part of the body cannot cover another part (see Brachos 24b and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 74:1). The Maharshal reasons that since, in his opinion, halacha does not require one to cover one's head when saying Hashem's Name, and the reason one needs to cover his head is only so that people not consider him to be someone who does not take the Torah seriously, it is sufficient to place one's hand over one's head to fulfill this concern.

Other authorities Although the Gra (on Orach Chayim 8:2) echoes the Maharshal's approach to the subject at hand, other early poskim follow a more stringent approach. The Terumas Hadeshen (1:10), the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 91:3, 4) and the Rema (Orach Chayim 74:2) rule that it is prohibited to say Hashem's Name bareheaded, following the second opinion of Mesechta Sofrim. As a result, they conclude that a person may not recite a brocha with only his hand on top of his head, although the Shulchan Aruch permits reciting a brocha with someone else's hand covering your head. As I will explain shortly, the Taz agrees that one may not recite a brocha with only one's hand on top of his head, but he permits standing or walking four amos with one's hand on top of his head.

The Bach (comments to Tur Orach Chayim, Chapter 2) takes issue with a different lenient ruling of the Maharshal, contending that it is forbidden to walk even less than four amos bareheaded.

The Taz's approach Although the Maharshal concluded that the only reason one should not go bareheaded is because people will look at him askance, the Taz (Orach Chayim 8:3) concludes that, in our day, it is halachically prohibited to be bareheaded. In his opinion, since the gentiles of the western world are meticulous to uncover their heads upon entering a building, being bareheaded violates the law of bechukoseihem lo seileichu (Vayikra 18:3), one may not follow the practices of the gentiles. This lo saaseh of the Torah is often called chukos akum. There are many opinions among the rishonim and the poskim as to the exact definition of what is included under chukos akum. The Taz explains that since the gentiles consider it unacceptable to have one's head covered indoors, uncovering one's head violates this prohibition.

Thus, according to the Taz, there are two different reasons to have one's head covered: to encourage one's yiras shamayim, and because of chukos akum. Placing one's hand over one's head is sufficient to avoid chukos akum, since this shows that one does not want to sit bareheaded, but it is not sufficient to allow one to recite a brocha.

Bareheaded indoors Based on the Maharshal, the Be'er Heiteiv (Orach Chayim 2:6) rules that, under extenuating circumstances, one is permitted to have one's head exposed while indoors. However, the Bechor Shor (Shabbos 118b) opposes this ruling, contending that having one's head exposed indoors is a more serious violation of chukos akum than outdoors, since the practice of the gentiles is deliberately to be bareheaded indoors.

At this point, we can refer to one of our original questions: "Is there a halachic difference between going bareheaded indoors versus outdoors?"

According to the Maharshal and the Be'er Heiteiv, although, under normal circumstances, one should cover one's head in both venues, walking bareheaded outdoors is of greater concern. Under extenuating circumstances, the Be'er Heiteiv permitted walking indoors bareheaded. However, the Bechor Shor considers walking bareheaded indoors to be a bigger violation of halacha, since it violates chukos akum, whereas walking outdoors with one's head exposed violates only the minhag Yisroel.

Livelihood Although Rav Moshe Feinstein rules according to the Taz that one is required to cover one's head whether indoors or outdoors, he concludes that when one's employment or livelihood may be jeopardized, it is permitted to work bareheaded. This lenient ruling applies only while someone is at his place of work, but once he leaves his place of employment, he must cover his head, since his livelihood is no longer jeopardized (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:1 and 4:2; Choshen Mishpat 1:93). (Those interested in seeing two very different approaches to this question are encouraged to compare Shu"t Nachalas Binyamin #30 and Shu"t Melamed Leho'il, Yoreh Deah, #56.)

Different gentiles Some authorities note that the Taz's reason should apply only in western countries and other places where the gentiles have a specific practice to uncover their heads. However, in places where the gentiles have no such concerns, such as in Moslem countries, there is no prohibition of chukos akum in leaving one's head uncovered (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 1:1). It may still be prohibited because of Jewish custom.

Swearing bareheaded At this point, let us examine one of our opening questions: "May one swear an oath, using G-d's Name, while bareheaded?" Is it not forbidden to recite Hashem's Name with one's head uncovered?

This question returns us to the dispute in Mesechta Sofrim that I quoted earlier, whether one may recite Hashem's Name bareheaded. According to the Rambam, the Gra and the other halachic authorities who rule like the first tanna, there is nothing technically wrong with reciting Hashem's Name bareheaded. Even among those authorities, such as the Terumas Hadeshen (1:10), who rule like the second tanna who prohibits enunciating Hashem's Name bareheaded, many, including the Terumas Hadeshen himself (2:203), rule that one may recite an oath

bareheaded. For example, the Beis Lechem Yehudah (Yoreh Deah 157:5) rules that, when no other option exists, it is permitted to swear an oath while bareheaded.

Under the big top At this point, we can examine two of our opening questions:

"Why do some people where big yarmulkes that cover their entire head?"

"How large must my yarmulke be?"

In the above-quoted responsum of Rav Shlomo Kluger, he ruled that one is required to cover one's head completely when walking outdoors four amos or more. When walking less than this distance, or when walking indoors, one must cover one's head, but it does not need to be covered completely. This explains why some people wear big yarmulkes that cover their entire head.

However, this ruling is not universally accepted. Rav Moshe Feinstein was asked how can people walk in the street wearing only a yarmulke, when Rav Shlomoh Kluger required covering one's entire head? Rav Moshe demonstrates that all the major authorities disagreed with Rav Kluger's ruling. Rav Moshe concludes that even a small yarmulke meets the halachic requirements, but that individuals who would like to follow the more stringent opinion of Rav Kluger as regards walking outside should cover their heads in a way that covers more than half the top of the head.

Swimming bareheaded Previously, I quoted the following question: "Why don't we clip a waterproof yarmulke to our heads while we swim?"

One of the authorities mentioned above, the Bechor Shor, rules that there is no requirement to cover your head while swimming or while walking from the changing room to the mikveh, not even as a midas chasidus. He demonstrates from passages of the Gemara that midas chasidus does not include covering your head in the mikveh, and also notes that swimming bareheaded does not violate chukas akum, since it is obvious that the uncovered head is not because one is trying to mimic gentile practice.

Conclusion We see from the halachic sources that covering one's head was a highly respected practice that assisted a person's growth in yiras shamayim. With time, covering one's head became part of the "uniform" of the Jewish man. In addition, there are other halachic reasons to keep one's head covered, such as chukos akum. When donning a yarmulke or other head covering, one should avail himself of the opportunity to think about our Father in Heaven.

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Based on the Torah of Rav Yochanan Zweig
IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT

Therefore it shall come to pass, if you fulfill these laws, and keep, and do them, then Hashem your God shall keep with you the covenant and the kindness which he swore to your fathers (7:12).

This week's parsha begins with outlining the basis of our relationship with Hashem; if we keep the mitzvos Hashem will keep the covenant and kindnesses promised to our forefathers. Rashi (ad loc), surprisingly, says that the mitzvos that are being referred to here are those that we trample underfoot - in other words, this refers to mitzvos that we feel are insignificant. Mizrachi (ad loc) wonders why Rashi is limiting the fulfillment in the verse to those types of mitzvos. In fact, it seems contrary to the simple reading of the verse! What compelled Rashi to explain the possuk in this manner? Imagine for a moment, that you received a call from your neighbor at two in the morning begging you to come over because his wife had unexpectedly gone into labor and they need someone to come over right away to stay in the house with the other young children. Undoubtedly, you, like most people, would respond in the affirmative and immediately make your way over there. Now imagine receiving a call at two in the morning from this very same neighbor, but instead he asks you to go to Walgreens to pick up a jar of pickles and then go to 7-11 to get some ice cream for his wife who suddenly has an intense craving for pickles and ice cream. In this scenario you would hardly be as accommodating. You might just begin to wonder whether or not your friend has lost his mind, and you would surely question the long term viability of this friendship. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, a wife has no qualms about asking her husband to get out of bed at two in the morning and pick up items that would satisfy her cravings. Why? The answer, of course, lies in the nature of the relationship. When you are closely connected to someone you might ask things of them that seem insignificant because they know if the situation were reversed you would do the same for them. This applies to our relationship with Hashem as well, and particularly in how we fulfill the mitzvos. Obviously it is crucially important to fast on Yom Kippur, but does that really comment on the strength of the bond as it relates to fulfilling all that Hashem desires of us? Not really. In fact, there are many marginally connected Jews that fast on Yom Kippur, but otherwise do very little else that Hashem asks of us throughout the year. Observing, in particular, the mitzvos that one would tend to see as trivial are the real indicators of the strength of our bond with Hashem. That is why it is the observance of these mitzvos that guarantee that Hashem will fulfill the covenant that he promised our forefathers

LIVING FOR MARTYRDOM?

And it will come to be, if you diligently listen to my commandments which I command you this day, to love Hashem your G-d... (11:13) Rashi (ad loc), quoting the Sifri, explains that the rewards bestowed upon one who follows all of the mitzvos come as a result of loving Hashem. In other words, one is not supposed to do the mitzvos in order to receive reward, but rather to fulfill the mitzvos out of love for Hashem. Rashi continues, "One should not say 'I will study Torah in order to become rich; I will study in order to be called a Rav; I will study in order to receive reward...' but rather all that one does should be done out of love." Rashi is clearly articulating that we do the mitzvos because we have a relationship with Hashem, not because of the reward. This is akin to what Chazal teach in Pirkei Avos (1:3), "Antignos of Socho used to say: 'Do not be as servants who serve the Master to receive reward. Rather, be as servants who serve the Master not to receive reward.'" The trouble is that Rashi ends his comment on this verse with a very perplexing statement, "and in the end the honor will surely come..." Therefore, even though one isn't supposed to focus on the reward for doing the mitzvos, one shouldn't worry as the reward will surely follow. Rashi is seemingly undoing the lesson that he just taught! It's almost as if we are supposed to do all the mitzvos "altruistically" - wink, wink - knowing all the while that, ultimately, we really are receiving reward. If we aren't supposed to do the mitzvos in order to receive reward, then what's the point of making assurances that in the end you will receive reward? Aren't we supposed to grow to the level where you aren't doing the mitzvos for the reward? The answer lies in understanding why people commit acts of martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Why, to a lesser extent, do so many people practice hero worship, create fan clubs, and walk around dressed as comic or movie characters? The answer is they all seek recognition. There is a gnawing emptiness in their lives that they seek to fill, and being recognized in such a way gives meaning to their lives. True, this meaning is pretty shallow, but it does create a fleeting moment where the person feels relevant. In an extreme situation, one may actually commit self-destructive acts to fill this void. In fact, the more seemingly altruistic and self-sacrificial the act is, the more recognition they receive. Paradoxically, it seems that it is the survival instinct that drives this bizarre behavior. In other words, how does someone become immortal and live forever in the hearts and minds of others? By becoming a sacrifice for the cause.

Judaism abhors this behavior (a clear reason why Christianity was a nonstarter alternative). Our whole understanding of why the world was created is based on the bestowal of good on mankind. The highest level of good is an immortal relationship with the Almighty. Therefore, everything that we do is out of love for Hashem, not out of compulsion to achieve recognition for ourselves. The word korban is commonly translated as sacrifice, but this is not really an accurate translation. The word korban comes from the root word "karov" - to be close. Meaning, the highest level of service to Hashem was a way to achieve a closer relationship. How does one know that we are in a relationship with Hashem and that it isn't merely a master ordering his slaves to be obedient? How do we know that Hashem doesn't want us to act in a self-sacrificing way? Because, as Rashi points out, the motivation for the mitzvos must be our love for Hashem. Still, you might ask, but who's to say that this is a two way relationship, perhaps it is like idol worship which is entirely one way? Because, Hashem assures us that the reward is going to come in the end. Just like in a healthy marriage we (hopefully) don't act in a quid pro quo way, that is, we don't expect the wife to make dinner for her husband because he did the shopping and now she feels obligated. We all want our spouses to do things for us out of love, not obligation. That is why Rashi finishes with "in the end the reward will come." Knowing that Hashem is interested in rewarding us tells us we are in a loving relationship, and not in an altruistic self-sacrificial one.

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ravkooktorah.org Rav Kook Torah Eikev: What Does God Want of You?

The Torah expects us to feel both love and awe — Ahavah and Yirah — for God:

"כִּי אִם לְיִרְאָה אֶת ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו, וְלַאֲהֳבָה אֹתוֹ ... וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל — מָה ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ שֹׁאֵל מֵעִמָּךְ?"

"And now, Israel, what does God want of you? Only that you be in awe of the Eternal your God, following in all His paths and loving Him...." (Deut. 10:12)

What is awe of God? Why is this trait so important? Two Types of Awe There are different levels of Yirah. There is Yirat Shamayim — awe of Heaven. And there is Yirat Cheit — literally, "fear of sin," but better translated as "repulsion from sin." These two forms of Yirah share the same root of awe and reverence. Yirat Shamayim is a mindset, expressed in our thoughts and feelings. Yirat Cheit, on the other hand, is more practical, expressed in deed and action. As a result of our perception of God's infinite greatness, we feel reverence towards God — Yirat Shamayim — and are acutely aware of the repugnance of sin — Yirat Cheit. (There is a third type of fear, Yirat Onesh — "fear of punishment." However, this trait reflects a weak personality. It is not a beneficial trait that should be emulated.) Love and Awe Love and Awe are opposite traits. Our attraction to good and holiness — the positive quality of Ahavah — inevitably leads us to wisdom and love. Our revulsion from all that is evil and defiling — the inverse quality of Yirah — helps purify our thoughts and actions. They are converse traits, yet they are interconnected. Because of our attraction to good, we are repelled by evil. And by avoiding evil, we remain on the path of life, directed towards beneficial aspirations and yearnings. The Sages disagreed on the basic question: which is the more important trait? Which quality is greater — love of God, or awe of Heaven? The Talmud (Shabbat 31b) quotes a discussion between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Simon. The two rabbis were sitting together when a third scholar passed by. Rabbi Elazar turned to Rabbi Simon. "Let us stand up out of respect for this God-fearing individual." Rabbi Simon replied, "Let us stand up for this great scholar of Torah!" Rabbi Elazar did not back down. "I mentioned his greater quality — that he is God-fearing — and you insist on emphasizing a lesser quality!" Rabbi Elazar felt that awe of Heaven is the more fundamental trait. He would often say, "The Holy One has only awe of Heaven in His world." He further declared that awe of God is the basis of all wisdom; in fact, it is the only true wisdom in the world. What does this mean? The True Foundation Rabbi Elazar calls our attention to God's purpose in creating the universe. This is in fact a riddle of sorts. We cannot solve this conundrum by pointing out some advantage gained by creating the world. To posit that creation enabled some positive gain implies that this process brought about improvement and advance. Yet, the height of perfection already existed before creation, with God's sole existence. What gain could there be in creating the world and its inhabitants? The benefit in creating the world can only be understood from a negative perspective — in the intended creation of a limited, finite world. That which is finite is naturally drawn towards the infinite. The very limitation of all things in their value and purpose is the ultimate good that the universe receives from its Creator. The loftiest relationship to God is found in this awe-inspiring sense of our distance and insignificance. It is from these feelings of awe that all positive yearnings and love are developed. When we acquire this form of wisdom, by contemplating the Infinite in order to experience awe and reverence, a lofty Yirat Shamayim makes its mark on the soul. These feelings of awe will generate an intense love for God, a longing to contemplate God's light and ways, His mitzvot and His Torah. This is the meaning of Rabbi Elazar's statement, "The Holy One has only awe of Heaven in His world." Besides awe, nothing else needs to exist. Nothing else can exist. When the mind's inner image of reverence expresses itself in the realm of action, it produces a revulsion of sin. By avoiding all obstacles, we may ascend the path towards the elevated light from the Source of life. This profound image, secreted in the recesses of the mind, identifies the finite nature of the universe as the primary force in both Creation and practical ethical behavior. "Behold, awe of God — that is wisdom!" (Job 28:28). Awe of God is the only true wisdom; it is the foundation for all other studies. Thus Rabbi Elazar pronounced the trait of Yirat Shamayim to be the most fundamental and inclusive trait. And he honored the passing scholar for possessing this crucial quality. *(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. III, p. 157)*