

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

PARASHAT VAET'HANAN
Haftarah: Yeshayahu 40:1-26

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DEDICATION: Le'Refuah Shelemah Elisheva Bat Esther

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EDITORS NOTES FROM THE ARCHIVES JULY 2004

Sometimes we've really got to be persistent in life.
How persistent? As persistent as Moses was. The
Yalkut Shimoni brings the Midrash that Moshe
Rabbenu prayed 515 prayers, the numerical value of
the opening word of the parashah, "Va'ethanan."

And it's so interesting that we always read this
Perasha following Tisha BeAb and usually before the
15th day of the month of Ab.

The 15th day of Ab is a joyous day (see the end of the
newsletter for insight into Tu BeAv). We recall that
the Sin of the spies and the people crying the night
the spies made their report fell on the 9th of Ab. It
was decreed that the entire generation of the Midbar
would die in the desert. And year by year, the people
prepared their graves and some were taken and some
were spared. During the final year in the Midbar, on
the 9th of Ab, preparations were again made. But
nobody died. They figured they might have
calculated the day wrong and prepared again the next
night, but nobody died, and again the next night.
Until they came to the full moon of the 15th day of
the month when the people realized they could not
have miscalculated. Those remaining were granted a
reprieve and the day became a great holiday.

So where does the 15th day of Ab come into view in
this weeks Perasha? The Penei Yehoshua (Berachot
32a) offers a beautiful explanation of the significance
of this number 515. The Midrash says that after
Hashem informed Moshe of Benei Yisrael's
imminent victory over Sihon and Og, Moshe thought
that once he had remained alive for this battle he has
been granted permission to continue into Eress
Yisrael. Now Moshe received this prophecy of the

battle against Sihon and Og on the fifteenth of Av,
the same day on which the people celebrated the
reprieve. The death of the previous generation came
to an end. With that reprieve, might come another
reprieve.

With the joy surrounding the end of the decree came
the return of prophecy to Moshe Rabbenu, who hadn't
received any prophecy throughout the period of
punishment due to his sadness, which prevents
prophecy (see Baba Batra 121a).

So on the morning of the fifteenth of Av, Moshe
began praying three times a day, from that day til the
day of Moshe's passing, the seventh of Adar. This is a
total of two hundred days. However, this 200-day
period contained twenty-eight Shabbatot, and, as we
know, one may not offer private prayers for personal
needs on Shabbat. Therefore, we must deduct these
days from the total. He thus prayed on 171 and 2/3
days, which amounts to 515 prayers. Remember he
started on the morning of the 15th of Av, so Moshe
prayed only twice on that day and that's where we get
the 2/3.

On the one hand, it's a bit depressing. I would ask, "if
Moshe who is called the servant of Hashem, the most
faithful of Hashem's household, if that Moshe prayed
for 6 months straight, three times a day, with perfect
Kvanah and a static free direct connection, and still
the answer was 'no', what chance have I got?"

The Torah comes to teach, that the Al-mighty
answered Moshe: "Enough - do not speak to Me
anymore about this matter." Hazal explain that were
Moshe to have prayed one more time, the decree
would have been annulled. This serves as an
example of what the Gemara (Berachot 32b) says, "If
a person sees that he prayed but was not answered, he
should pray again, as it says, 'Wait for Hashem,
strengthen and embolden your heart, and wait for
Hashem.'" One tefilah after another, day after day,
month after month. Each tefilah adds something and
has an effect.

We have all heard many stories of people who prayed with their hearts day after day and miracles occurred.

I have heard stories of many people who went to Jerusalem and prayed every day at the Kotel for 40 days straight - not missing a single day - and their prayers were answered.

And if this is true, that asking again and again of Hashem, has a miraculous effect regarding tefilot of an individual, how much more so does it apply to those of the community at large.

I think Moshe should have been a bit upset with the nation. They should have been praying on his behalf. And imagine if they did. What effect would they have had on World History. Would everything have flipped? Would Moshe have been able to enter the land, build the Mikdash and begin the period of Mashiach? Well it wasn't meant to be.

Now the weight is on our shoulders. The tefilot of Yisrael, of all of Yisrael, are recited throughout the generations, three times a day, including Shabbat and Yom Tov. Everyone says that these are the days of the footsteps of Mashiach. Who knows which single tefilah for redemption, recited with the proper intention will bring it about?

If Moshe had prayed one more time, that would have been it.

Do we really want something from Hashem? Well if it's in our best interest Hashem wants to give it to us. But he wants us to ask for it. Praying makes us better people. We strive to be like Moses, now Moses in the weeks Perasha gives us another example to follow. We can't just want something, we can't just hope. We've got to be persistent!

Shabbat Shalom,

David Bibi

Rav Kook on the Perasha

Judaism's ultimate prayer is the Shema, our declaration of God's unity. And the ultimate word in the Shema is its concluding word — אֱחָד (echad) — "God is one."

The Sages provided detailed instructions how to carefully pronounce this critical word:

"All who prolong the word echad will have their days and years prolonged.

Rabbi Acha bar Ya'akov taught: One should prolong [the last letter in the word], the 'ט' (Dalet).

Rabbi Assi added: Provided one he does not slur over [the middle letter], the 'נ' (Chet)." (Berachot 13b)

Why should the word echad be stretched out? And what is the significance of the letters Dalet and Chet?

God's Reign Over All Events

The Talmud explains that one should pronounce the word echad long enough to draw a mental picture of God's reign over all that is above, all that is below, and the "four sides of the heavens."

When we proclaim God's unity in the Shema, we acknowledge God's unique control of the universe. While His absolute reign may be expressed in spatial terms — in all six directions — a deeper insight is that we should recognize God's providence in all events that occur in the world. We may divide up the universe into three functional categories:

The initial causes that place into motion all of the myriad actions and events in the world.

The final effects and goals that are the fulfillment of the original causes.

The various intermediate means that lead from the initial causes to the ultimate effects.

God's reign incorporates all three categories. He rules over the heavens — i.e., the initial causes. His control extends to the earth — the completion and fulfillment of each goal. And Divine rule also includes the diverse intermediate means and events. These means are referred to as the "four sides of the heavens," since they form an intermediate stage connecting the heavens (the initial causes) with the earth (the ultimate goals).

Why is God's oneness so significant? What is the principal message to be derived from the Shema?

By recognizing this underlying unity, we acknowledge that all of the various events in the world — even though they appear to be dispersed and disconnected, like the four sides of the heavens — are in fact directed towards one unified purpose, towards the goal of that which is good and elevated.

Emphasize the Dalet — But Remember the Chet

Why prolong the letter Dalet when saying the Shema? Dalet has the numerical value (Gematria) of four. It represents the four diverse directions, the

myriad intermediate means in the universe. By emphasizing the Dalet, we affirm the connection of these means to the unified goal of creation.

Still, the 'heavens' and the 'earth' should not be ignored. In order that we will be able to properly value the intermediate means, we must contemplate the lofty counsel which directs all events towards their purpose. And we should consider the value of the sublime goal, as it is attained and revealed in all its splendor.

Thus, the letter Chet needs to be articulated clearly. Chet has the numerical value of eight; it represents the seven levels of heaven (shiv'ah reki'im) together with the earth. These eight levels indicate the various stages, from the initial cause to its final, practical fulfillment. In addition, the number eight signifies the realm of time: the seven days of the week, and the eighth dimension, unlimited by the confines of time.

To "swallow up" the Chet would show an insensitivity to the value of the initial cause and the final goal. Then the intermediary events would lose their true significance.

(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I p. 71; Olat Re'iyah vol. I, p. 245)

Summary of the Perasha

Parasha va'etchanan includes the ten commandments. Among the 10 commandments is the commandment to keep the shabbat (perek 5, pesookim 13-15). Interestingly the pasook says the reason we rest on Shabbat is to remember that we were slaves in Mitsrayim and that Hashem took us out with a strong hand and outstretched arm. Elsewhere the Torah explains that we rest on shabbat also to remember creation and that Hashem rested on the 7th day, however, the question here remains how is resting on Shabbat a remembrance that we were freed from Mitsrayim. The Sefer ha'hinuch explains that resting on Shabbat is a remembrance that we were freed from Mitsrayim because when we were slaves we were not in control of our own time. We did not have the opportunity to rest when we wanted to. Thus, resting on Shabbat shows that because Hashem freed us we now can rest at a time when our creator commanded us to. So this is our kavana when keeping Shabbat. We are commemorating creation and being freed from Mitsrayim. And this is what we say in kidoosh Shabbat night; zikaron le'maaseh bereshit and zecher le'yetsiat mitrayim.

Va'etchanan - Moshe tells Benei Israel how to behave once they get into Israel. The 10 Commandments and Shema.

- 1- Moshe recounts how he prayed to Hashem but was not allowed to enter Eretz Israel. Moshe tells Benei Israel of the mitsvot they will need to keep in order to merit staying in the land.
- 2- Moshe tells Benei Israel to remember and tell future generations how Hashem spoke to us at Sinai and did miracles in Mitsrayim so that we keep the laws and not stray after other Gods.
- 3- Moshe sets up cities of refuge in Jordan (where Reuben, Gad and half Menashe were to live).
- 4- Moshe reminds Benei Israel how they all heard Hashem speak directly to them at Sinai. The ten commandments are repeated here.
- 5- Moshe recounts how Hashem then related the hukim and mishpatim to him as an intermediary upon the request Benei Israel who was unable to withstand hearing from Hashem directly.
- 6- The parasha of Shema and Ve'ahavta is said here. Moshe then warns Benei Israel not to succumb to sin as a result of the prosperity they will experience in Israel.
- 7- Moshe says that when we get to the land we should destroy the 7 nations living there and take care not to show favor to them and inter-marry with them. Moshe tells again how Hashem loves us and warns us to follow in the ways of Hashem.

FROM THE RABBIS OF THE JERSEY SHORE

"Israel has no days as festive as the fifteenth of Ab and Yom Kippur." (Mishnah Taanit 4th Perek)

Few of us dread becoming wealthy, though all of us should recognize that wealth, like poverty, is a test.

In the past few years, initiatives have been undertaken in some communities to cut back on unnecessary expenditures when making a catered affair. Even among those communities that did not sign on to making official rules, there is a growing consensus that their time has come.

The 15th day of Ab is a day that the Sages call, along with Yom Kippur, the greatest of holidays. On this holy day, the daughters of Jerusalem would gather in the vineyards for the purpose of shidduchim (to get married). Each had borrowed a dress from another, though, so that the poor among them would not be embarrassed.

For much of the history of the Jewish people, the rich and the poor led very different lives. Often they resided in different parts of town. The children of the wealthy had their own private teachers. While a certain element of peer pressure always existed, it was a far cry from the situation we face today.

Nowadays, the young sons and daughters of the poor and the rich sit in the same classroom and are next-door neighbors.

Not being able to make ends meet was always a painful experience. But nowadays, unable to watch their children experience feelings of shame and stigma, parents are practically forced to go into debt by spending money they don't have on luxuries no one needs.

Teaching our children that there is nothing shameful about not having helps alleviate the problem, but ultimately a large part of the solution is for those who do have, to realize that cutting back is often a most noble way of giving.

The well-off individual who reduces his public expenditures so that those of a lesser means should not be embarrassed is a true hero, who will surely be rewarded from Above. Reuven Semah

"Why do You ignore us eternally, forsake us for so long. (Eichah 5:20)

Various gemarot discuss the reasons why the Temples were destroyed. Two of the reasons given are: baseless hatred amongst the Jewish people (Yoma 9b), and a general disrespect for Torah (Shabbat 119b). With this in mind, it is somewhat strange that on Tisha'ah B'Ab, the day we are commemorating the Temple's destruction, we are not permitted to greet people or speak in a friendly tone, which is behavior which increases friendship and love. We are also not permitted to learn Torah. Surely it would seem more appropriate to spend the day correcting the mistakes of our ancestors by increasing friendships and spending the day engrossed in Torah, showing our respect for it.

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick explains that the problem mentioned above is not only found in our ancestors. It is also found in us. The gemara explains that "every generation in which the Bet Hamikdash was not built is considered as if it was destroyed in its days. Since these problems can no longer only be attributed to our ancestors, we need to take a new approach to correct these sins within ourselves. In our generation, we are guilty of constantly looking for the "quick fix." When we see a problem, especially within ourselves, our natural instinct is to repair the damage and quickly move on. But after we "fix it," have we actually changed? If we spend the day sending gifts, like on Purim, or immersed in Torah, like on Shabuot, we will not have time to sit and cry over what we lost through our faults, and we will be too distracted to really make a permanent change.

Therefore our Sages determined that we should act in this way on Tish'ah B'Ab in order that we should have time to appreciate what we have lost,

and realize what we are truly missing. Rabbi Reuven Semah

"The matter was good in my eyes." (Debarim 1:23)

If Moshe said that the matter of sending the spies was good in his eyes, why did he list that incident here when he was enumerating things that the Israelites did wrong? Rashi explains with an analogy. This is similar to someone who asked his friend to sell him his donkey, and the person agreed. "Will you allow me to test it out?" the potential buyer asked his friend. "Of course I will," replied the seller. "Can I even try it out on hills and mountains?" the buyer asked. "Anywhere you wish," the seller confidently said. Once the buyer saw that the seller had total confidence in the strength and health of his donkey, he realized that he would not find any defects in it and said, "Take your money. I do not need to test out the animal any further." Similarly, Moshe really did not want them to send spies. However, he felt that as soon as they saw he was willing to allow them to send spies, they should have realized that the land was good and they had no need to send anyone to check on it.

There are two different attitudes someone can have when he consults a Rabbi about whether or not he should do something. One attitude is a serious will to do the right thing. Such a person wants to know what the opinion of the Rabbi really is and is willing to do exactly as the Rabbi feels he should do. On the other hand, there are people who consult with a Rabbi only to hear the reply that they want to hear. They will ask their question in such a manner as to get the answer they want. If at first they do not hear what they wish, they will persistently argue until they at least get tacit consent. Then they will tell others that they have the approval of the Rabbi. The people who took Moshe's saying that they could send spies as permission to actually send them should have asked him what he truly wanted them to do.

There are some people who do even worse. They could even know that the Rabbi does not want them to do something but they try to give others the impression that he agrees with them. Rabbi Simcha Wasserman related an instance where someone involved in communal matters did something that was very controversial. When asked how he could have done it, he replied that he had spoken the matter over with Rabbi Aharon Kotler. Most people were impressed with this and assumed that Rabbi Kotler had agreed that he could do it. Rav Simcha said to himself that it was impossible that Rabbi Kotler would agree. He then asked the person, "And what did Rabbi Kotler say?" "Well, he said that I should not do it," replied the man. Remember this incident and do not always accept at face value someone's saying

that he has the agreement of such and such a Rabbi. (Growth Through Torah)

Debt Factor

A good thought may be miles away from a good act.

It is hard to move when the laws of inertia state that a body at rest will remain at rest unless acted upon by an outside force. The human body enjoys basking in the sun, resting on the couch, or relaxing on an easy chair. It is truly happy when it is “a body at rest.”

Then you are interrupted by a request to help another. In order to do so, you must get up and go somewhere or do something. This is when psychological inertia sets in. The One Hundred Good Reasons Why You Can Do What Is Needed But Cannot Do It Now come to mind with digital speed. The thought of helping flits away, and the body at rest abides by the law (of inertia, of course).

A person is not an island and is certainly not isolated or self-sufficient. People help people and people give to others. This creates a cycle of debt. Such debt is not repaid with a note that can be cashed at a bank. It is simply a debt of appreciation and gratitude. You either owe something to the person who is asking a favor, or to one of his relatives, and/or to Hashem – who gave you everything that you have in the first place.

When you just can't seem to translate that good thought into a good deed, consider your potential action not as an act of giving, but, instead, as payment of a debt. Think of how the person in need – or someone related to that individual – may have helped you in the past. If that doesn't prompt action, consider that Hashem gave you the tools and the powers to help that person or to get that action done, and you owe it to Him to deliver.

You can really get going by seeing yourself not as a giver but as a debtor who is ready and willing to pay. (One Minute With Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

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Attitude Matters**

Parashat Vaethanan begins with Moshe recalling the impassioned prayer he prayed asking God to allow him to cross into Eretz Yisrael. God had decreed that Moshe would die across the Jordan River and not enter the Land of Israel together with the rest of the nation. Moshe prayed that the decree be annulled, but God declined his request. Our Sages teach that Moshe actually recited 515 prayers begging for permission to enter Eretz Yisrael, and God still

denied his request. Instead, He told Moshe that he should climb to the mountaintop overlooking Eretz Yisrael and take a good look at the special land which God would be giving to Beneh Yisrael.

At first glance, God's response to Moshe seems harsh, if not cruel. God of course had His reasons for denying Moshe's request, but why did He then instruct Moshe to gaze into the land? Wasn't this just a “tease”? Imagine after fasting an entire day somebody comes along and places a delicious, fresh pastry right in front of our eyes, and tells us we can only look at it. Wouldn't that be cruel? What purpose was there for Moshe to look into the land in which he so desperately wanted to live?

There is a concept in Judaism that a person can be credited for a Misva which he does not actually perform. If somebody truly wishes to do a certain Misva, but circumstances do not allow him to do so, he receives credit as though he performed that Misva. In light of the practical barrier that prevents him from doing the Misva, his sincere desire to fulfill the Misva suffices, and he is regarded as actually having done it.

The Gemara teaches that Moshe yearned to enter Eretz Yisrael not to enjoy its material benefits, but to fulfill the special Misvot that can be performed only there. And this might explain why God told Moshe to look into the land. Gazing into Eretz Yisrael would increase Moshe's desire to go there and fulfill the Misvot. God wanted Moshe to feel such a genuine longing for the Misvot of Eretz Yisrael that he would be credited with having done them, even though he would not be entering the land. This was not cruel; to the contrary, it was to Moshe's benefit.

It occasionally happens that a person is about to leave for an important Misva – such as Minyan, a Shiur, to help a friend, or to help out in a community event – and then something unexpected comes up. Maybe the car doesn't start, an urgent problem came up in the office, something breaks at home, etc. A person can nevertheless be credited with the Misva if he or she genuinely feels disappointed. If we truly wish we could do the Misva, then we receive the credit even if practically it does not work out.

When it comes to Misvot, attitude matters at least as much as the bottom-line performance. What's important is not just how much we accomplish, but how much we want and try to accomplish. And this desire comes from an appreciation of the inestimable value of Misvot, a realization of just how precious each and every Misva is. If we bear in mind the worth and significance of every Misva, then we will be

sincerely driven to accomplish more – and we will then be credited even for the Misvot we are unable to perform.

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

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**Rabbi Wein
FAKE RELIGION**

One of the many troublesome trends existing in our societies is the elevation of issues that are basically political and even monetary, to the level of religious faith and practice. The current struggle, mainly in the media and not so much on the ground itself, regarding the installation of metal detectors on the Temple Mount, is an example of making a security and political issue into a matter of holy war and belief.

It is ironic that the Saudis have been able to install such security measures in the heart of the great mosque of Mecca without apparently violating any religious principles of Islam. Yet, when Israel attempts to do so on the Temple Mount, after terrorists committed murder in its precincts, it is pressured and criticized for having the temerity to install such security measures on territory that it governs.

Anyone with a rational view of the matter would realize that there is no religious issue present here at all. Nevertheless, the Arab propaganda machine has raised the matter in the eyes of many in the Moslem world to the level of holy war and a violation of the sanctity of the site. The cynical use of religion and faith in regard to what is essentially a political and completely secular issue is unfortunately an all too common tactic and occurrence throughout the world today.

Once something becomes a matter of religious faith there can be no logical argument or marshaling of facts that will be able to overcome that belief. And eventually this can only lead to further misunderstanding, distrust and even violence.

Sadly, this type of fake religion is also alive and well within certain sections of the Jewish community in Israel and throughout the world. The issue of the assignment of space for worship at the Western Wall, which is basically an issue of practicality, security and political reality, has been raised by all sides to the dispute to the level of a religious holy war.

There is currently space assigned to those who wish to pray there in an egalitarian fashion. My personal observation and anecdotal evidence also indicates that this area is sparsely used, if at all. Except for the politicians and heads of the religious factions, there is no groundswell of interest in the issue amongst the great masses of the Jewish people.

It is just fake religion being used in the name of tolerance and other noble ideas to achieve what is essentially only a political end. The opposition of certain groups of Jews to the existence and the success of the State of Israel is no longer a political issue as it once was. It has now become a wholly religious issue that leads to fanaticism and terribly shameful behavior. Again we are witness to the elevation of a political disagreement to the status of an uncompromising holy war. When the line between faith issues and political ones is erased then sadness and disaster inevitably follow.

Almost all of the terrible religious wars that took place in Europe for centuries were based more on politics than on faith, even though they were all presented as wars of religion and belief. The toll of those wars ran into millions of dead and maimed. All religious principles were not settled nor were the faithful rewarded in any physical or spiritual fashion. This is because these were essentially political, dynastic and nationalistic struggles fought under the banner of fake religion.

The scars from those wars still exist even until our day. Fake remains fake even when it comes to matters of religion and faith. The attempt of the Moslem world to elevate their dispute with Israel over territory and existence into a matter of jihad and holy war has left the world, including the Moslem world itself, vulnerable to fanaticism and unending violence.

All of this is founded on baseless beliefs and so called facts long disproven by realism and pragmatism. The Torah warns us against beliefs in magical solutions and super savants. We fall victim to this type of fake religion that undermines our true faith and eventually weakens our beliefs and actions.

Religion may be everything but not everything should be classified as being religion. Struggles over dress, language, army service and voting for and in the Knesset, are all political and social in nature and origin. Making them matters of religious faith only serves to eventually demean religion and increase social division.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks Philosophy or Prophecy?

What was the first commandment? On this there are two fascinating disagreements in Judaism. One was between Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) and the author of the Halakhot Gedolot, written in the period of the Gaonim, probably by R. Shimon Kayyara (eighth century), that for the first time enumerated in a systematic way the 613 commands. The other was between Maimonides and the poet and thinker Judah Halevi (c. 1080-c.1145). These were two different arguments, and they touched, as we will see, on fundamentals of faith.

The first is simply this. Maimonides counts the opening line of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery," as a positive command, to believe in God.[1] The Halakhot Gedolot does not count it as a command at all. Why not?

Nahmanides (1194-1270), in defence of the Halakhot Gedolot,[2] speculates that its author counted among the 613 commands only the specific laws enjoining us to do this or avoid doing that. The commands are rules of behaviour, not items of faith. Faith in the existence of God, or acceptance of the kingship of God, is not itself a command but a prelude to and presupposition of the commands. He quotes a passage from the Mekhilta:

"You shall have no other gods besides me." Why is this said? Because it says, "I am the Lord your God." To explain this by way of 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 Nahmanides, the Halakhot Gedolot must have believed that the verse, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" is not itself a command, but a statement of 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 the archeological discoveries about which I wrote in the previous Covenant and Conversation, we now know that the biblical covenant has the same literary structure as ancient near eastern political treaties. 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, summarising the past relationship between the parties, and [3] the stipulations, namely the terms and conditions of the covenant.

Seen in this context, 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. If so, then the Halakhot Gedolot as understood by Nahmanides was correct in seeing the verse as an introduction to the commands, not a command in its own right. That is the first disagreement.

The second was between Maimonides and Judah Halevi. For Maimonides, 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).[3]

Judah Halevi disagreed. Halevi was not only the greatest of medieval Hebrew poets, he also wrote one of Judaism's theological 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 circumcised, had synagogues and rabbis, studied the

Torah and Talmud, and observed the Jewish festivals.

The Kuzari is Judah Halevi's overarching account of Judaism, cast in the form of an imagined conversation between the King and a rabbi that led to the King's conversion. In it, Halevi draws a portrait diametrically opposed to Maimonides' account. Judaism, for Halevi, is not philosophical but counter-philosophical. It's not about abstract concepts but about concrete experiences: the taste of slavery, the feeling of liberation, the realisation on the part of the people that God had heard their cry and set them free. The God of Abraham is not the God of Aristotle. The prophets were not philosophers. Philosophers found God in physics and metaphysics, but the prophets found God in history. This is how Halevi's rabbi explains his faith to the king of the Khazars:

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, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Kuzari I:25). The covenant God made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai was not rooted in the ancient past of creation but in the recent past of the exodus.

What is at stake in this difference of opinion between Maimonides and Halevi? At the heart of Judaism is a twofold understanding of the nature of God and His relationship to the universe. On the one hand 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. 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.

But there is a quite different aspect of God which predominates throughout most of Tanakh. This is God as He is involved in the fate of one family, one

nation: the children of Israel. He intervened in their history. He made 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: it involved a mere seven commands. The Sinai covenant, by contrast, is highly articulated, covering almost every aspect of life. This aspect of God is signalled by the use of the four-letter name for which we traditionally substitute the word Hashem.[4]

Maimonides, the philosopher, emphasised the universal, metaphysical aspect of Judaism and the eternal, unchanging existence of God. Judah Halevi, the poet, was more attuned to the particularistic and prophetic dimension of Judaism: the role of God in the historical drama of the Jewish people.

Maimonides was the greatest halakhist and philosopher of the Middle Ages, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that here, at least, the Halakhot Gedolot and Judah Halevi were closer to the plain sense of the text. Even the greatest thinker is not right all the time, which is why Judaism remains a conversation scored for many voices, each with its own insight into the infinite inflections of the Divine word.

[1] Maimonides, Sefer haMitzvot, positive command 1.

[2] Nahmanides, Hasagot to Sefer haMitzvot, ad loc. This is not Nahmanides' own position. In his Commentary to the Torah (to Ex. 20:2), he counts the first verse of the Decalogue as a commandment in its own right, adopting a view similar to that of Maimonides.

[3] Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah, 1:1-5.

[4] On the two aspects and names, see Kuzari IV:1-3; and Ramban to Exodus 3:13.