

Parashat Bo, 5773, 2013:

*The Ramban's (Nachmanides') Theological Manifesto*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Idol worship (*Avodat Kochavim*) appears to most of us as a strange and nearly inexplicable phenomenon. Yet, it began in the earliest moments of mankind and persists, in a variety of forms, until our own historical epoch. We must ask, however, how did it originate when Adam, the progenitor of all mankind, communed with the Creator in nearly the same manner as *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moses)? According to the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), *Avodat Kochavim* actually began two generations later with Adam's grandson, Enosh:

During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred. Their mistake was as follows: They said G-d created stars and spheres with which to control the world. He placed them on high and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and to treat them with honor. [They perceived] this to be the will of G-d, blessed be He, that they magnify and honor those whom He magnified and honored, just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored. Indeed, doing so is an expression of honor to the king. After conceiving of this notion, they began to construct temples to the stars and offer sacrifices to them. They would praise and glorify them with words, and prostrate themselves before them, because by doing so, they would - according to their false conception - be fulfilling the will of G-d. This was the essence of the worship of false gods, and this was the rationale of those who worshiped them. They would not say that there is no other god except for this star. This message was conveyed by Jeremiah, who declared (10:7-8): "Who will not fear You, King of the nations, for to You it is fitting. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You. They have one foolish and senseless [notion. They conceive of their] empty teachings as wood;" i.e., all know that You alone are G-d. Their foolish error consists of conceiving of this emptiness as Your will.

After many years passed, there arose people - false prophets - who told [their nations] that G-d had commanded them to say: Serve this star - or all the stars - sacrifice to it, offer libations to it, build a temple for it and make an image of it so that all people - including the women, the children, and the common people - could bow to it... (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Hamada, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 1:1-2, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, underlining my own)

The Rambam's insightful analysis gives us a window into the soulless world of idol worship. He carefully explains that mankind's descent into spiritual darkness was an incremental process that was masterminded by "the wise men of those generations that gave thoughtless counsel," and by false prophets pursuing their own erroneous agendas.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) builds upon these ideas in his exegetical comments that appear at the end of our *parasha* (Torah portion). He begins (s.v., "*v'atah omare lecha klal b'ta'am mitzvot rabot*") by examining the varieties of fallacious theological beliefs that have swayed people's minds throughout the generations. Allow me to summarize them:

1. The world has always existed; therefore, there was no Creator or Creation.
2. G-d exists, yet He has no knowledge of the world and all that is contained therein.
3. G-d, in fact, has knowledge of the people and events of our world, yet He has no involvement (*hashgacha*) with mankind or Nature. "Like the fish of the sea, man has no connection or involvement with Hashem."
4. There are no rewards or punishments, since G-d has "abandoned the world" to its own devices.

The Ramban notes that Hashem's *modus operandi* for repudiating these specious notions was to perform wonders and miracles for both groups and individuals. This, in turn, reinforced the validity of both the Torah and the Prophets:

When an individual or a group found favor in the L-rd's "eyes," He would perform a sign for them that would manifest a fundamental change in the world and its very nature. At that point, it would become evident to all that all of these deviant musings about G-d are

patently false and without merit. Beyond a doubt, the miraculous wonder that was performed by G-d proved to everyone that it is Hashem that is eternal [and not the world] and that He created the world anew [out of total complete nothingness]. Moreover, it bears stark testimony that He is knowledgeable of all occurrences in the earthly realm, He is all-powerful, and His presence is immanent in our lives. Moreover, when a prophet prophesized that this miracle would take place, the truth of his prophecy became even more discernible to the rest of mankind. This also showed that G-d would speak to man and reveal His secrets to His servants, the Prophets. By doing so, G-d strengthened the veracity of the entire Torah in the thoughts of mankind... Therefore, the great signs and wonders were true witnesses for faith in the Creator and the entire Torah. (Translation and brackets my own)

The Ramban's next task is to note that we live in an age typified by the cessation of explicit miracles, i.e. "the Age of *Hester Panim*." He therefore focuses upon the following question: "If the Holy One blessed be He no longer provides us with incontrovertible public signs and wonders, what educative device(s) do we have to overcome theological deviancy?" His answer is clear and direct: the Mitzvot. As we shall see, while his answer is short in words, it speaks volumes about the rationale inherent in many of the commandments:

Given that the Holy One blessed be He does not perform signs and wonders that are visible to the evil ones or to those that reject His presence out-of-hand, He commanded us to constantly perform actions that will serve as visible reminders and signs [of His immanence]. We are further obligated to instill these matters in our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren and so on. [It is clear that] Hashem was extremely punctilious in this matter (*v'hechmir ma'od*), [as is illustrated by the following representative examples:] the punishment of excision for eating leavened products (*chametz*) on Passover, and the purposeful failure to offer the Paschal lamb (*korban Pesach*). Therefore, the Torah mandates the performance of these, and other, visible commandments so that they may serve as manifestations of G-d's signs and wonders. By way of illustration: Tefilin on our arms and above the center of our foreheads and the obligation to write the relevant miraculous passages in a mezuzah and permanently post it on our doorways, ...as well as the construction of, [and dwelling in,] a succah year after year.

At this juncture, the Ramban proceeds to explain the significance of the oft-quoted phrase, "*zacher l'yetziat mitzrayim*" ("a commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt"), and its relevance to our lives today:

So, too, in the case of many mitzvot do we find the phrase, “*zacher l’yetziat mitzrayim.*” Each instance of the phrase [and its accompanying commandment] serves as testimony regarding the explicit miracles of the past in order that they will not be forgotten. In this way, there will be no opening for a rejecter (*kofer*) of Hashem to dispute belief in the L-rd.

The Ramban underscores his last point by noting the efficacy of the mezuzah for creating and maintaining an authentic faith-posture:

One who purchases a mezuzah for one *zuz*, affixes it to his doorpost, and focuses upon its inherent meaning, by definition accepts the creation of the world, the existence of Hashem, and that G-d has knowledge of, and is immanent in, our world. Moreover, he recognizes the veracity of Prophecy and believes in all aspects of the Torah. Additionally, he acknowledges that G-d’s kindness is exceedingly great toward those who fulfill His will as was demonstrated by His taking us from the state of abject servitude to boundless freedom...

The Ramban moves toward concluding his theological manifesto by emphasizing the importance of secret miracles (*nissim nistarim*) in our lives. In doing so, he underscores an essential precept of our faith: Our lives are not controlled by Nature and the normal everyday routines of the world, i.e. there are no accidents:

And among the great and famous miracles [that exist and have existed], one must recognize the secret miracles since they are a fundamental underpinning of the entire Torah. [In truth,] a person does not have the slightest portion in the Torah of our teacher Moshe until he believes that all matters and occurrences that we experience are, in fact, miracles beyond the standard rules of Nature, and the manner in which the world normally operates – whether they occur publicly or privately.

Lastly, the Ramban focuses upon the concept of reward and punishment:

If one will perform the Mitzvot, he will surely be rewarded; conversely, if one will violate the Commandments [in a purposive manner], his punishment will be palpably evident. Everything is a decree of the Most High [yet, free will remains intact in the moral realm]...

Beyond a doubt, these passages provide us with a great many salient thoughts and ideas, and give us a road map to navigate the twists and turns of our existence. May the Ramban continue to guide us on our path of authentic Torah observance, and on our unending journey of discovery of Hashem’s wondrous Torah. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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