



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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IS A MEDIUM RARE?

Robert Liberman from Atlanta, Georgia
< rhlberman@juno.com > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I recently saw a well-known medium, James Van Praag, on the Larry King TV show. He is supposedly able to communicate with the dead; he took several calls where he was able to relate very specific information about the deceased to the callers. As skeptical as I am about these sort of things, I was very impressed by his ability; he seemed very genuine. My question is this: The Torah specifically forbids communication with the dead. But, the mere fact that it is prohibited makes me wonder if it is, in fact, possible. Otherwise, why would Hashem mention it? Thanks!

Dear Robert Liberman,

Regarding your question, there's an apparent dispute between Maimonides [Rambam] and Nachmanides [Ramban].

Nachmanides indicates that certain occult practices can be effective, but that they are forbidden by the Torah. Hashem created a universe which follows an ordered structure called "nature." Nachmanides writes that sorcery and the occult "contradict" G-d's will because they act in opposition to the simple, plain structure and order of nature. The Torah forbids these things because G-d wants us to conduct ourselves in this world according to natural laws.

Maimonides indicates otherwise. Writing about occult practices such as communicating with the dead, Maimonides calls them "falsehood and deception" used by idolaters to deceive the masses and gain their loyalty. He writes that it's wrong for the Jews, who are extremely wise and rational, to think there's any benefit in these things.

This comment of Maimonides seems to contradict explicit passages in the Talmud and Midrash that refer to departed spirits communicating with the living and revealing things

about the past and future. Some commentators explain that Maimonides is referring to an ideal person who lives totally according to the truths of the Torah. Such a person will rise above all these practices, and from that exalted vantage point see that these practices have no reality. However, these forces of falsehood can indeed affect a person who has not yet reached this level.

Sources:

- Ramban, Deuteronomy 18:9-15
- Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry 11:16
- Tractate Berachot 18b

PYREX-MANIA

Benny Danon from Istanbul, Turkey
< ertantekstil@superonline.com > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I will ask something about Pyrex kitchen instruments. Is Pyrex considered glass or pottery? If it's non-kosher, can we make it kosher? (Note: I need a Sephardic answer.) Thanks for now. Shabbat Shalom.

Dear Benny Danon,

Sephardic Jews follow the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch which states that glass is non-absorbent. According to this, a glass utensil can never become non-kosher. Similarly, it can never be considered "dairy" or "meat," meaning that you can use it alternately for both milk and meat, cleaning it out well between use.

Pyrex is glass that is reinforced with other materials. This raises the question: Does Pyrex have the same halachic status as glass or not? While there is a dispute about this matter, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, *shlita*, rules that Pyrex has the same status as glass. Most Sephardic Jews follow this ruling. (Ashkenazic Jews follow the ruling of the Rema that glass can become non-kosher and cannot be made kosher again.)

Sources:

- Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 451:26
- Yechave Da'at 1:6

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General Editor: **Rabbi Moshe Newman**

Production Design: **Lev Seltzer**

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22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

info@ohr.org.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@aol.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

Somayach@MSN.com

FROG FEARS OR CROCODILE TEARS?

Yisrael < Lcjds@aol.com > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I would like to thank Ohr Somayach for the excellent and hard work done for the "Ask the Rabbi" column. I have learned much from your mailings. Speaking of which, I have a question. I understand that some commentaries interpret the word "tzfardeah" as "crocodile," and not like Rashi's interpretation of "frog." Who believes this way and why? Why has tzfardeah taken on the meaning of the word "frog" and not "crocodile?" Are there other places in the Tanach where the word tzfardeah appears? In what context? If applicable, does that word take on the meaning of "frog" or the meaning of "crocodile?"

Dear Yisrael,

The Abarbanel writes that *tzfardeah* means crocodile. There are two logical reasons to support this:

- The Egyptians worshipped a crocodile god. Therefore, in keeping with the purpose of the plagues — which was not only to punish but also to educate — the Egyptians were attacked by their very own god. This demonstrated Hashem's mastery over the Egyptian god.
- The verse in *Tehillim* says that Hashem sent "wild animals which consumed them, and *tzfardeah* which destroyed them." Frogs are not generally instruments of destruction, whereas crocodiles are.

Most commentaries disagree with this interpretation for several reasons:

- In describing the *tzfardeah*, the Torah writes that "they will come into your houses, your bedrooms and your beds..." The verse implies that the *presence* of the *tzfardeah* was the only source of the suffering. If it is was a crocodile plague, the suffering would consist of much more than the fact they filled the houses.
- The *tzfardeah* are described as "swarming." This word usually implies small creatures.
- Our Sages say that one aspect of the plague of *tzfardeah* was the incessant, maddening croaking noise. Frogs croak, whereas crocodiles smile.

Sources:

- Abarbanel Commentary to the Torah
- Shemot 7:28, Tehillim 105:30.
- Tehillim 78:45
- Rashi Shemot 8:17 citing Midrash Tanchuma

RACE TRACE

Tyrone < tknibbs@swri.ja.dswa.mil > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I have read somewhere that all the different races of the world are all descendants from The Twelve Tribes of

Israel. Is there any truth to this and if yes, can you please explain?

Dear Tyrone,

This is certainly not true. The Twelve Tribes of Israel are ancestors of the Jewish people. In fact at the time that they were born different races already existed (early Bronze Age), so they could not have been descended from them.

HASHEM'S ATTRIBUTES

Asher Kassel from Rehovot, Israel < asher@mami.co.il > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

How do we know that the directive to emulate Hashem's attributes is limited only to the so-called "good" attributes of Hashem (the 13 midot)? What about attributes such as anger, vengeance, etc.?

Dear Asher Kassel,

Actually, we are supposed to emulate *all* of Hashem's attributes. There is a time and place for anger, such as Pinchas's attack on Zimri and Cozbi. There is even a place for revenge, such as Jacob's sons' revenge against Shechem, and the Jewish People's revenge against Midian.

However, these attributes must only be used according to the dictates of halacha. We're not omniscient, so we don't always know all the relevant factors and consequences. Therefore, we need extreme caution and Torah guidance in these matters.

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked:

A neighbor asked me the following riddle: *Shemoneh Esrei* consists of 19 blessings. Who, when, where and in what situation does a person say 21 blessings during the repetition of the *Shemoneh Esrei*?

Avraham Rosenthal < rosentha@netmedia.net.il >

Answer: A *kohen* in Jerusalem leading the service on a fast day. On a fast day, the one leading the service adds the "*aneinu*" blessing during the repetition of the morning and afternoon *Shemoneh Esrei*. If he is a *kohen*, he will also say a blessing before *bircat kohanim*, the priestly blessings. (In Jerusalem, and many other places in Israel, *bircat kohanim* is said every day.)

Sources:

- Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 566:1

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features.

Re: "Kabbalah-Wannabee" (Ask the Rabbi #174)

I greatly appreciated your recent response regarding the book *Raziel Hamalach*. I was always fascinated by it, and I did graduate work on it a couple of years ago. Rav Eliezer Rokeach MiGermiza, one of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, wrote a book called *Sodei Razaya*, and about half of it is quoted in the book *Raziel Hamalach*. The rest of *Raziel Hamalach* contains various other sources written in different times and places, and at least one of them is of an extremely questionable nature. No less a source than Rav Nachman of Breslov stated that the book *Raziel Hamalach* today has nothing to do with the one mentioned in the Zohar, and that it does not protect against fire. ("Tzaddik" paragraph 478, Breslov Research Institute)

Scott K <scottk@mail.netvision.net.il>

Re: Why we still say "I'shana haba'ah b'Yerushalayim — Next year in Jerusalem" (Ask the Rabbi #175):

It is worth it to mention that many add the word "habenuyah" — "the rebuilt" at the end. This addition clearly answers the question by implying that we wish to be in a rebuilt Jerusalem, namely the city the way it will be in the time of the Mashiach.

Daniel I Mark <treas@juno.com>

Re: Yiddle Riddle "Who was the first person to die after the Great Flood (mabul)?" (Ask the Rabbi #176)

Canaan, son of Cham. He was cursed to be a slave, and since the property of a slave belongs to his master, a slave should be considered property-less, i.e., poor. Chazal say that a poor person is "like" he is dead. Therefore Canaan was the first person to "die" after the mabul.

Rabbi Yehuda Albin, Chicago Illinois
<OrSomayach@aol.com>



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☎ 22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

☎ 972-2-581-2890

✉ info@ohr.org.il

☎ 38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 1-212-213-3100

☎ 1-212-213-8717

✉ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@aol.com

☎ 613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 1-905-886-5730

☎ 1-905-886-6065

✉ Somayach@MSN.com