

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

The Preacher Who Stood On His Bible

I remember a street preacher who was sharing the gospel on a college campus. He attracted a large crowd of students with shocking insults directed at professors, minorities, gays, and women.

The crowd was heckling the preacher until he made an anti-Semitic remark. At that point, I decided to speak up. I pointed to his behavior as a reason to question his religious conviction. The

preacher immediately dropped his bible on the ground and stood on it, and shouted, “I stand of the word of the Lord.”

You could have heard a pin drop. Then, the silence was broken by a Christian student who told the preacher that his arrogance was a sin. Later that day, some Jewish students asked me to explain the Jewish view of arrogance. I began by quoting one of the greatest Jewish thinkers.

Moses ben Maimon, (1138–1204), commonly known as Maimonides or Rambam, was a renowned Torah sage, philosopher, astronomer, and physician to the Royal Court of Saladin.

In his code of Jewish law, known as the Mishnah Torah, Maimonides also discusses laws concerning idolatry. He traces the source of idolatry to men who mistakenly thought that God created stars and celestial objects so they may influence the world. Initially, men offered honor and praise to these “servants” of God. However, over time people attributed independent power to these objects and worshiped them rather than their Creator.

People can also mistakenly view themselves as more powerful than they are. Some mistakenly see themselves as independent of God and arrogantly say, “*I am, and there is nothing besides me*” (Isaiah 47:8). Pharaoh took this one step further and thought he was a god and proclaimed, “*The Nile River is mine; I made it for myself*” (Ezekiel 29:3).

No wonder our sages regarded arrogance as a form of idolatry (Sotah 5a), as it says, “*arrogance is like the wickedness of idolatry*” (1 Samuel 15:23).

The Torah repeatedly warns the Jewish people of the danger of arrogance and self-aggrandizement. In this week’s Torah portion Beshalach (Exodus 13:17-17:16), there are powerful reminders to avoid considering ourselves as all-powerful. Instead, we need to partner with God and trust that together, we will accomplish great things.

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The first reminder occurs after the tattered Jewish people escape the pursuing Egyptian army and are attacked by the mighty nation of Amalek. As the Jews waged war, Moses sat on a nearby hill, and *“whenever Moses raised his hands Israel would prevail, but, whenever he put his hands down Amalek would prevail”* (Exodus 17:11).

Moses’ action was not magic. Our sages (Talmud, Rosh Hashana 29a) say that when Moses pointed his hands toward heaven, he was reminding the Jews to look to heaven for God’s assistance to defeat their enemy. When they did so, they prevailed, and if they forgot about God and relied solely on themselves, the enemy would prevail.

We should apply this spiritual lesson to all aspects of life. For example, our sages warn doctors to remember that God is the ultimate healer (Kiddushin 82a), and the prophet urges us to acknowledge that God provides our livelihood (Malachi 3:10).

There is an important caveat. We must do our part, water a seed, visit a doctor and work for a living, and God will do his part; otherwise, we are left to our own efforts.

This message is also found in this week’s Torah reading that describes the Manna bread that God provided the Jewish people while in the desert. Each day, they collected just enough for their needs for that day. However, on the sixth day, God provided them a double portion (Exodus 16:29) for Friday and the Sabbath day of rest. This story teaches us that in addition to our endeavors, it is God who ultimately provides for our needs.

This lesson is so central to Judaism we commemorate it at each Shabbat meal by placed two loaves of Challah bread on our table.

Trusting in God counteracts arrogance and promotes humility, enabling us to fulfill the directive *“walk humbly with God”* (Micha 6:8). Humility also brings blessings as it says, *“the results of humility are fear of God, wealth, honor and life”* (Proverbs 22:4.)

Shabbat Shalom,

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