



VA'ERA

THE ELUSIVE FIFTH ELEMENT

Going the Extra Mile Makes All the Difference

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Va'era

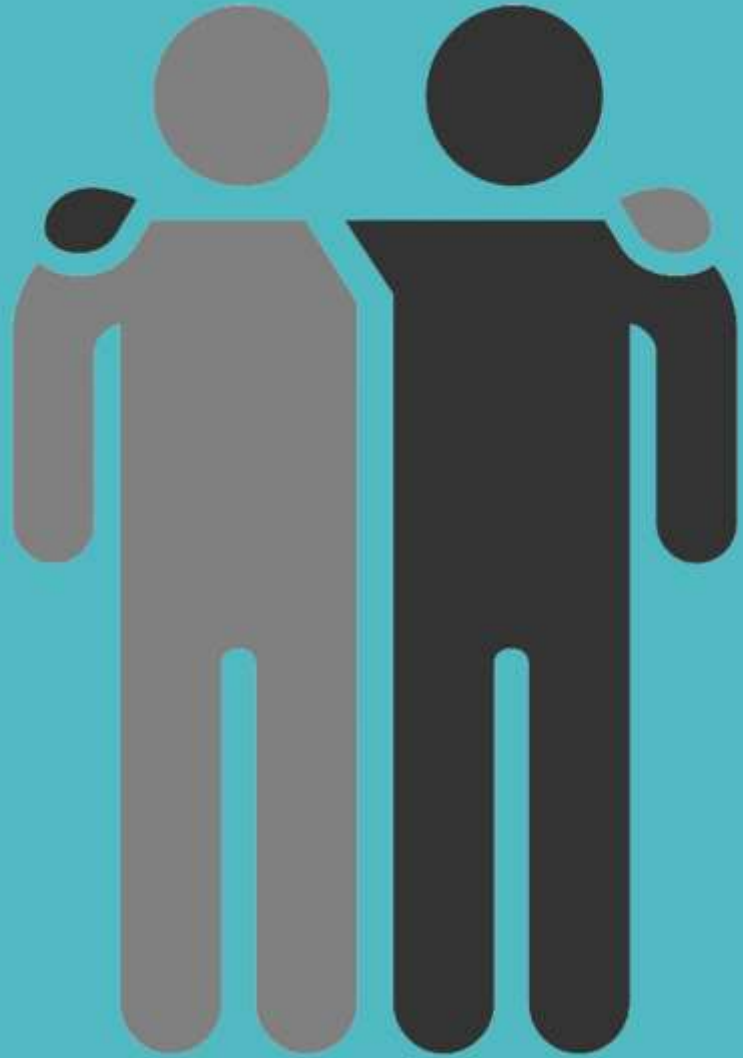
G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the “four expressions of redemption,” He promises to take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the Land He promised to the patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the

wilderness.” Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron’s staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians.

The waters of the Nile turn to blood, swarms of frogs overrun the land, and lice infest all humans and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities, a pestilence kills the domestic animals, and painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as

a devastating hail. Still, “the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses.”



If you had to choose, which would you say is the key element that would keep you coming back? Delicious food, a friendly, cheerful service, or an establishment that is willing to go the extra mile to make you happy?

QUESTION 1

Why must *chametz* be destroyed before Passover? What distinguishes this prohibition from other prohibitions in Jewish life that we are not required to destroy?

TEXT 1

*Maimonides,
Mishneh Torah, Laws
of the Fundamentals
of Torah 4:1*

ארבעה גופים הללו שהם אש ורוח ומים וארץ - הם יסודות כל הנבראים למטה
מן הרקיע, וכל שיהיה מאדם ומבהמה ועוף ורמש ודג, וצמח ומתכת ואבנים
טובות ומרגליות ושאר אבני בנין, והרים וגושי עפר - הכל גולמן מחובר
מארבעה יסודות הללו.

These four bodies—fire, wind, water, and earth—are the fundamental elements of all that was created under the sky. The body of everything that exists—be it human, beast, fowl, crawling creature, fish, plant, metal, precious stone, pearl, building stone, mountain, or lump of earth—is a combination of these four fundamental elements.

QUESTION 2

In contrast to the modern periodic table with 118 elements, Maimonides only lists four. Is Maimonides's teaching still relevant today if it doesn't align with modern scientific discoveries?



TEXT 2

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 38, p. 184*

יסודות שבדברי רבותינו זכרונם לברכה - אין פירושה שאי אפשר לחלקם ולפוצצם, אלא שהם החלקים היסודיים, שכל דבר מורכב מהם. ואין זה שייך למספר של elements אשר בchemistry.

ויש מפרשים קדמונים בדרשות רבותינו זכרונם לברכה יסודות - שהכוונה לתכונות שלהם: קור, ולח, חם, ויבש וכו', ואין כאן מקומו. ולכן נקראו במדרש "טבעים" (במדבר רבה יד, יב).

The elements that our sages addressed are not foundational in the sense of being indestructible and indivisible. They are foundational in the sense that everything that exists is comprised of them. They are [also] irrelevant to the chemical elements.

There are those who understand these elements as characteristics such as cold, wet, hot, dry, etc. This is why our sages called them [characteristics of] nature (Midrash, *Bamidbar Rabah* 14:12).



ANSWER 2

The four elements listed by Maimonides are foundational in the sense that everything in this world that exists is comprised of them.

TEXT 3

*Maimonides, Guide
for the Perplexed 1:72*

וחומר זה הגשם החמישי בכללו, המתנועע בסיבוב -
אינו כחומר גשמי הארבעה יסודות אשר בתוכו.

[Then there is] a fifth generic element that encompasses all four elements. Unlike the four elements that emerge from it, the fifth element has no physical definition.

The fifth element is intangible and serves as the source from which the other four elements originate.



Three Prohibitions:

1. Not *eating* anything unkosher.
2. Not *benefiting* from something that is forbidden.
3. Not even *possessing* forbidden items.

TEXT 4

Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, Tanya,
Likutei Amarim, ch. 8

ועוד זאת במאכלות אסורות, שלכך נקראים בשם "איסור", מפני שאף
מי שאכל מאכל איסור בלא הודע – לשם שמים, לעבוד ה' בכם אכילה
היא, וגם פעל ועשה כן, וקרא והתפלל בכם אכילה היא, אין הסיות
שבה עולה ומתלבשת בתיבות התורה והתפלה כמו הקיטר, מפני איסורה
בידי הסטרא אקרא משלש קליפות הטמאות.

Forbidden foods are called *asur*—tied down. If someone eats
some erroneously for the sake of Heaven—intending to use its
nourishment to study Torah or pray—the nourishment does not
attach to the words of Torah and prayer. It can't become holy. It
is tied down to unholiness.

TEXT 5A

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 16, p. 88*

די שייכות פון אכילה (ואיסורה) מיטן דבר הנאכל איז מיט זיין "צורה",
ווי ער (דער דבר הנאכל) שטייט אין א ציור גמור (ביז צו זיין ראוי
לאכילה), און ניט מיט זיין "חומר" ווי ער איז בפני עצמו, מיטן עצם
המציאות פון דבר מאכל.

די הנאה (ואיסורה) פון א זאך איז פארבונדן (אויך) מיט דעם עצם.

When we eat something, we benefit from its finished form—the edible form. We don't interact with the elements that form the food.

When we derive benefit from something, we interact with the elements that form it.

TEXT 5B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, ibid.*

איסור אכילה מיינט אז דער רע איז נאר אין צורת וחיצוניות הדבר (דאס
וואס מאכט עם ראוי לאכילה), און דעריבער איז עס מותר בהנאה, ווייל
אין דעם חומר ועצם הדבר (וואס איז שייך צו הנאה) איז ניטא קיין רע.

Foods that are forbidden to eat are tied down to unholiness.
[However, it's crucial to recognize that] this unholiness pertains
only to the outer surface or the finished form of the food, which
renders it unsuitable for consumption. The individual elements
that constitute the food item, those associated with potential
benefit, are not inherently unholy. Consequently, we may derive
benefit from these elements.

TEXT 6

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, ibid.*

ביי חמץ אבער קומט צו דער איסור, אז ער טאר זיך ניט געפינען אין רשות פון א אידן, אפילו אן וועלכן ס'איז שימוש מיטן חמץ.

דאס הייסט, אז דער איסור האט דורכגענומען דעם חומר ועצם הדבר ווי ער איז אויסגעטאן פון איזה צורה שתהיה, וואס דערפאר, איז דער "ימצא", די עצם פאראנענקייט פון דעם חמץ אין זיין רשות אסור.

Chametz may not be found in our possession even if we make absolutely no use of it [and derive no benefit from it].

This means that the entire object, even the very core that's divested of all form, is tied down to unholiness. This is why ownership of its very existence is forbidden.

ANSWER 1

The reason why ownership of *Chametz* is prohibited is because *Chametz* at its core is unholy and cannot be elevated.

TEXT 7

Passover Haggadah

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר: מִנֵּיִן לְשָׁלַח מַכָּה וּמַכָּה
שֶׁהֵבִיא הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל הַמַּצֵּרִים
בְּמַצָּרִים הֵיטָה לְשֵׁל אַרְבַּע מַכּוֹת?

שְׁנַאֲמַר: "יִשְׁלַח בָּם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ,
עֲבָרָה וְזַעַם וְצָרָה, מִשְׁלַחַת מַלְאָכָי
רָעִים" (תְּהִלִּים עח, מט). "עֲבָרָה",
אַחַת. "וְזַעַם", שְׁתֵּי. "וְצָרָה", שְׁלֹשׁ.
"מִשְׁלַחַת מַלְאָכָי רָעִים". אַרְבַּע.

אָמַר מֵעַתָּה, בְּמַצָּרִים לָקוּ אַרְבָּעִים
מַכּוֹת וְעַל הַיָּם לָקוּ מְאֹתַיִם מַכּוֹת.

Rabbi Eliezer said: How do we know that each plague that G-d brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt consisted of four plagues?

The passage states, "He sent against them His fierce anger: (a) fury, (b) and indignation, (c) and trouble, (d) [and] a discharge of messengers of evil" (Psalms 78:49). "Fury" is one. "Indignation" makes two. "Trouble" makes three. "Discharge of messengers of evil" makes four.

Thus, you know that in Egypt, they were struck by forty plagues, and at the sea, they were struck by 200 plagues.



TEXT 7

Passover Haggadah

רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אָמַר: מַגִּין שְׁכָל מַכָּה וּמַכָּה
שֶׁהֵבִיא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל הַמִּצְרִים
בְּמִצְרַיִם הֵיטָה נֶשֶׁל תְּמִשׁ מִכּוֹת?

שְׁנַאֲמַר: "יִשְׁלַח בָּם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ, עֲבָרָה
וְזַעַם וְצָרָה, מִשְׁלַחַת מַלְאֲכֵי רָעִים"
(שָׁם). "חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ", אַחַת. "עֲבָרָה",
שְׁתַּיִם. "וְזַעַם", שְׁלֹשׁ. "וְצָרָה", אַרְבַּע.
"מִשְׁלַחַת מַלְאֲכֵי רָעִים". תְּמִשׁ.

אָמַר מַעֲתָהּ, בְּמִצְרַיִם לָקוּ תְּמִשִּׁים מִכּוֹת
וְעַל הַיָּם לָקוּ תְּמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֲתַיִם מִכּוֹת.

Rabbi Akiva said: How do we know that each plague that G-d brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt consisted of five plagues?

The passage states, "He sent against them (a) His fierce anger, (b) [and] fury, (c) and indignation, (d) and trouble, (e) [and] a discharge of messengers of evil." "His fierce anger" is one. "Fury" makes two. "Indignation" makes three; "trouble" makes four. "Discharge of messengers of evil" makes five.

Thus, you know that in Egypt, they were struck by fifty plagues, and at the sea, they were struck by 250 plagues.

Rabbi Eliezer:



$$10 \times 4 = 40$$



$$40 \times 5 = 200$$

Rabbi Akiva:



$$10 \times 5 = 50$$



$$50 \times 5 = 250$$

TEXT 8

*Rabbi Yomtov
Asevilli on the
Haggadah*

ורבי אליעזר שדורש כל מכה היתה של ארבע מכות, בדרך הפשט הוא שלקו בה ד' יסודות.

ורבי עקיבא שדורש של חמש מכות, מונה מכת ההיולי, הוא היסוד הכולל.

Rabbi Eliezer, who maintains that each plague consisted of four plagues, is of the opinion that the plagues infiltrated [not just the completed form but also its] four constituent elements.

Rabbi Akiva, who maintains that each plague consisted of five plagues, is of the opinion that each plague attacked [not only the elements but also] the generic state from which they emerged.

QUESTION 3

How deeply did the sins of the Egyptians impact their possessions? Did their sins contaminate only their base elements, or even infiltrate their original generic state?

ANSWER 3

The purpose of the plagues was not just to punish but also to cleanse. Therefore, the plagues had to drill down to each layer that was contaminated by sin.

Rabbi Eliezer argues that the impurity only reached the constituent elements, while Rabbi Akiva says it reached down to the generic state of the elements.



We can either be tied down to unholiness or tied up to G-d, but we can't be both.

TEXT 9

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman
of Liadi, Likutei Torah,
Bamidbar, p. 80B*

שבבחינת ישראל יש ד' בחינות . . .

שהן ג' בחינות, מחשבה דיבור ומעשה . . .

בחינה רביעית, והוא בחינת רצון עליון שלמעלה מעלה מבחינת מחשבה דיבור ומעשה. והוא הנמשך ומתגלה בנפש על ידי מעשה המצות.

There are four dimensions in the Jewish soul: . . .

They are thought, speech, and action. . . .

The fourth is the supernal will of G-d that transcends thought, speech, and action. This is drawn down and exposed in this world by performing a mitzvah.

The Four Basic Elements of the Human Experience:



Thought



Speech



Action



Desire



TEXT 10

*Doug Fisher, "What Is Most Important in a Restaurant: Food, Service, or Atmosphere?"
www.foodserviceandhospitality.com*

What is most important in a restaurant: food, service, or atmosphere?

This is a loaded question. While I believe that all three need to be executed to the highest standard, whether in quick-service restaurants, casual, or fine-dining operations, I also believe that service and atmosphere are the two most important ingredients in making a restaurant successful. (I apologize in advance to all the chefs who are going to complain about this comment).

This is not to say that the food quality and consistency are not also important; they are, but they are really secondary.



TEXT 10

*Doug Fisher, “What Is Most Important in a Restaurant: Food, Service, or Atmosphere?”
www.foodserviceandhospitality.com*

The reality is that for the most part, people go out to either “fill up,” “spend time with friends,” or “dine out.” It is only in . . . two percent of . . . restaurants that people go to “dine out,” to experience the chef’s creation, in which food would, in my world, need to be as good as the service. But in the end, service is what the hospitality business is all about. Great food does not make up for mediocre service; however, great service can offset mediocre food. In fact, it does at almost every quick-service. . . , family, and casual chain out there. Those restaurants make up the vast majority of our industry and are the most popular with customers as well.

Focus first on great service; then make sure the atmosphere reflects the environment you want your customers to enjoy; and then put out the best food that you can.

Serving G-d with
enthusiasm and
desire makes our
service complete.



TEXT 11A

*Maimonides,
Mishneh Torah, Laws
of Shofar and Sukkah
and Lulav 8:15*

הַשְּׂמִיחָה שֶׁיִּשְׂמַח אָדָם בְּעֲשֵׂיית הַמִּצְוָה וּבְאַהֲבַת הַקָּל
נִשְׂחָה בָּהֶן - עֲבוּדָה גְּדוּלָה הִיא.

It is a great service when we rejoice in the fulfillment of G-d's commandments and [demonstrate our] love for He Who commanded them.

TEXT 11B

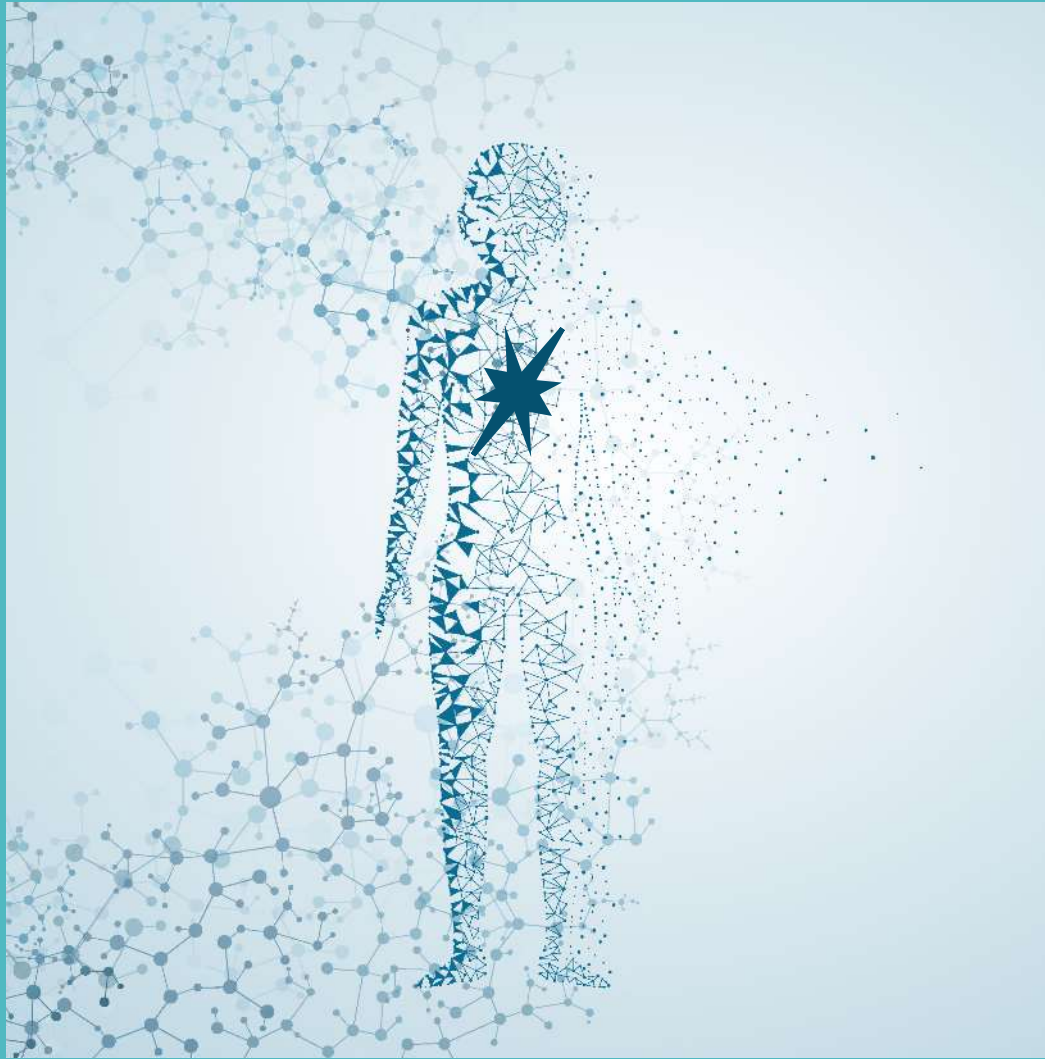
*Rabbi Aharon of
Karlin, cited in
Keneset Yisrael
[Warsaw, 1906], p. 73A*

עצבות איז דאך קיין עבירה. אבער די טמטום הלב וואס עצבות
פארשטעלט, קען ניט פארשטעלין די גראבסטע עבירה . . .

א יוד וואס גייט מיט ארום מיט שמחה מיט דעם וואס ער איז א יוד, איז
ער א כפון טובה דעם הימעל.

Sadness is not a sin. However, the worst sin can't turn
off our hearts as much as sadness.

. . . A Jew who fails to rejoice over the privilege of being
a Jew is ungrateful to G-d.



The fifth element of
the human experience:
our very core.

TEXT 12

*Jodie Cook, "Six Ways
to Go the Extra Mile
for Your Customers,"
www.forbes.com*

Humans want to feel valued. They want to feel like everything they say is heard and understood, and you are the trusted supplier to make that happen. Even if their mind is elsewhere, knowing that yours is on them will cement your company and its caring ethos in their memory.

Adnan Ali, a former restaurant owner, remembers a time when a regular customer dined without his partner. "Knowing that he normally came with her we asked to see if she was OK and he let us know she had the flu. Before the customer left, we packed up some freshly made soup and some other menu items for him to take home to her, on the house." The team's gesture "was super appreciated, resulting in lots of positive feedback."

Putting G-d above all
else means you feel
Him in your deepest
sense of self, and He is
present in your core.

KEY POINTS

1. Everything that exists is comprised of four elements: heat, cold, dryness, and moisture. There is a fifth element, an intangible sphere in which the four elements exist in a generic state.
2. We are forbidden to eat things that are unholy in their fully formed state. We are forbidden to benefit from things in which the unholiness has drilled down to their constituent elements. We are forbidden even to possess things that have become unholy at their core.
3. Humans also have four elements. They are action, speech, thought, and desire. Then, there is a fifth element, our very core.

KEY POINTS

4. To have a connection with G-d, we must serve Him with all four elements. Not just our actions and words but also our minds and hearts.
5. However, to forge a complete connection, we must give Him our very core. This means that nothing is indispensable when it comes to G-d. We are ready to do anything or give up anything to please Him.

