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**Who
Knows
Twelve?**

**Themes and Values in
Trei Asar**

Maggid Books

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Chapter 1

God's Eternal Debate with Israel

One of the hallmarks of the prose of the Trei Asar prophets is that their messages to the Jewish people are frequently framed in the form of a debate – questions and answers – between God and His chosen people. Questions and answers in fact form the basis of Torah discussion and of the faith of Israel.

Before giving the Torah to the Jewish people at Sinai, God asked them if they were willing to accept it. Throughout the Torah, we are told that our faith and actions will be questioned by our children and later generations. The Pesach Seder is framed as a question-and-answer discussion between generations. The entire Talmud is one long question-and-answer session between the great scholars of Israel. Jewish scholarship throughout the ages is mainly found in the rabbinic responsa: questions asked of the great scholars and the answers that they propose.

This form of Jewish thought and learning is patterned after the template of the prophecies of Trei Asar. However, the debates recorded by the prophets are not between human beings but rather between God and Israel. The Lord is not satisfied with merely stating His case and

criticisms; He demands answers and a response from the Jewish people. In its highest sense, Judaism sees Jewish life and Torah observance as an ongoing conversation and dialogue between God and the individual Jew, as well as a debate between God and the Jewish people as a whole. This form of dialogue becomes our connection to God and eternity. It also teaches us that God demands our attention.

The questions of God as formulated by the prophets of Trei Asar are probing, incisive, and insightful. For example, the prophet Micah states that God wishes to debate with the Jewish people regarding their behavior and their lack of gratitude and appreciation (6:1–2). The question is asked of Israel, “My people, what have I done to you and how have I so tired you? Please answer Me” (6:3). In typical Jewish fashion, Israel responds by asking God questions: “How shall I present myself before God? How shall I bow down before the Lord on high? Shall I present myself by bringing more animal sacrifices before Him? Does He desire year-old calves? Does the Lord want thousands of rams, tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Does He want my firstborn sacrifice to atone for my sin? The fruit of my womb sacrificed to atone for the failings of my soul?” (6:6–7).

In the phrasing of this series of questions, the prophet introduces a note of sarcasm into the debate. He is saying to Israel: You have not understood what God has asked. The problem lies not in the offering of animal sacrifices or in the shuddering thought of killing children to pacify a vengeful God. Rather the question is: Why are you so weary of God’s relationship with you? The prophet continues and asks Israel, “Do you somehow think that you will be judged favorably, even as you use evil and false scales [in your commercial enterprises]? [Do you think that the Lord approves of the fact that] within your pockets you carry false and cheating weights?” (Mic. 6:9–11). When Israel cannot answer or offer a logical defense to these hammering questions, the prophet himself proposes the answers necessary to conclude the debate: “I have already told you humans what is good and what the Lord God asks of you – it is only to deal and act justly, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). This is truly one of the greatest debates recorded for us in the entire Bible. Its words and content dominate the visions and behavior of Jewish society till our day.

A similar type of debate between God and Israel opens the book of Malachi. The debate begins on a very conciliatory tone. The Lord states, "I love you!" (1:2). That is a bold statement of loyalty and attachment of God to the Jewish people. But in the continuation of the verse, the Jewish people respond to this warm greeting by asking, "In what way have You shown Your love for us?" It is the old "What have you done for me lately?" syndrome that so characterizes the attitude of the Jewish people towards God during their forty-year sojourn in the Sinai desert. The prophet Malachi, in the name of God, responds that His love for Israel is shown in His age-old preference for Jacob over Esau, and in the fact that Israel has survived countless defeats and tragedies while the other nations of the world have been unable to do so.

The Lord continues the debate by asking, "A son honors his father and a servant honors his master. If I am your father, where is My honor, and if I am your master, where is your fear of Me?" (Mal. 1:6). The complaint of the Lord is that the Jews have treated Him shabbily. When it comes to sacrifices on the altar of God, both the priests and the people bring forth damaged and shoddy food and animals. They see nothing wrong in sacrificing the lame and the broken, the rotten and the cheap. They do not understand that by so behaving, they degrade the very Temple service that represents the direct attachment of Israel to the Creator. Thus the prophet bitingly asks the people, "Would you bring such an offering to your governor? Do you think that you would find favor in his eyes if you did so? Do you think that he would then acknowledge your presence and grant your requests?" (1:7-8).

The prophet continues and asks the Jewish people, "Do you not wish to appease your God so that He may show you grace and kindness? If this is the offering of your hands to Him, can you expect that He will show you an uplifted countenance?" (Mal. 1:9). These are naturally rhetorical questions for which no answers are expected or even possible. The Lord has certainly made His point clearly in this portion of the debate.

One of the distinctive ideas in Judaism as presented throughout the Bible is that the Lord actually encourages Israel to debate with Him. The prophet Isaiah famously declares in the name of the Lord, "Let us go forth and debate [the nature of our relationship]. If your sins have been as scarlet as the red thread, they will yet become white as snow" (1:18-19).

It is through this process of debate and discussion that the possibility for return and forgiveness, for turning scarlet into white, exists. Modern psychology encourages all of us troubled human beings to “talk it out” with others and ourselves. King Solomon in Proverbs suggests that inner troubles be expressed to others for solution and relief (12:25). This has been the formula of the prophets of Israel from time immemorial. The participation in the debate itself, no matter how painful or shameful the process may be, is itself a catharsis and the beginning of healing and rapprochement.

The rabbis of the Talmud teach us that “God desires our hearts” (Sanhedrin 106b). He wants to hear from us and He wants us to engage Him in a debate regarding our individual futures and the destiny of the Jewish people – in fact, the destiny of all civilization and humankind. A debate is really a form of dueling; the weapons used are words and ideas rather than swords and guns. Every one of the prophets of Israel engages in such a form of dueling, hoping that the points made in the debate will be taken to heart by the people and thus allow them to speak back to God with their hearts and not only with their lips. The medium of debate is a most powerful one, and God’s employment of it reinforces the unbreakable bond between God and Israel.

The prophecy of Habakkuk is the ultimate debate between God and Israel. Habakkuk represents the People of Israel in this debate and voices clearly, even aggressively, the anguished complaints of Israel regarding its treatment throughout history. The nation clearly feels that it has been wronged by God and by the fate assigned to it. It storms against the injustices perpetrated by the nations of the world and demands to know how God allowed these things to happen. The opening chapter of the book of Habakkuk contains some of the strongest language and vehement accusations against the judgments of Heaven found anywhere in the Bible or rabbinic literature.

I remember that when I was a young rabbi in Miami Beach some fifty years ago, I accompanied Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, the great rav of pre-World War II Ponovezh and the founder of the largest yeshiva in Bnei Brak, Israel, on a fundraising visit to the home of a wealthy Jew who was a Holocaust survivor. The Jew used the visit to voice his pain and frustration against God for what he had experienced, seen, and

suffered. I squirmed in my chair while Rabbi Kahaneman, who himself had lost most of his immediate family in the Holocaust, patiently heard him out. When the man finished venting, Rabbi Kahaneman softly said to him, "Everything that you have said is correct. However, it was all said thousands of years ago by the prophet Habakkuk in the first chapter of his book. Now go study the second and third chapters of the book and you will find peace for your soul and a restored faith in God and the destiny of the Jewish people."

The first chapter is only the beginning of the debate. There Habakkuk demands answers to the eternal question of the unfairness of life that plagues all believers. Why are the wicked triumphant (1:4)? Where is God when we need Him and why does He not see and take action against the wicked (1:13)? Habakkuk adamantly requests answers from God to his questions (2:1). God's initial response is something of a non sequitur. His main argument is that humans can never understand the Divine and therefore the debate as constituted is a very unequal one. Nevertheless, the prophet is moved and soothed by the response of Heaven. And thus the third chapter of the book of Habakkuk, which concludes the debate, is one of faith restored and hope rekindled (3:18). It is obvious that no matter how the debate begins or what form it takes, the conclusion of a debate with Heaven must always result in the strengthening of spirit and the broadening of vision (2:14; 3:19).

Perhaps the most famous debate in *Trei Asar* is that between the prophet Jonah and the Lord regarding the appearance and disappearance of the miraculous gourd that provided shade and comfort to the prophet. Jonah, who is already greatly disappointed that the Lord has apparently relented and retracted the punishment of Nineveh, is now even more frustrated and angry over the disappearance of the gourd that protected him from the sun. In his complaint to Heaven, Jonah demands that if the Lord does not accede to his wishes regarding the restoration of that plant, he no longer wishes to live (4:8–10). These are certainly strong words. The death wish is a sign of deep psychological depression, a loss of hope and faith. The Lord chides Jonah and rhetorically asks him, "Are you truly justified in your anger and frustration?" Heaven points out to Jonah that if he can be so compassionate and distressed about a plant that he did not create or nurture, one that

only provided temporary shade during the heat of the day, shall not God in turn be compassionate regarding the great city of Nineveh and its millions of inhabitants?

It is on that note that the debate ends. I feel that this very debate is one of the reasons why the book of Jonah forms part of our traditional services on Yom Kippur. The essence of Yom Kippur is that of a day of debate within one's self and with one's true inner soul.

This debate between unequal partners forms the basis of Jewish prayer and theology. The observance of the commandments of the Torah, the study of Torah in all of its myriad facets, and the struggle for contentment and meaning in life are all part of this ongoing debate. Israel and God are constantly interacting with one another. These actions and beliefs are the tools that Jews employ to state their case before the Almighty. In the context of such a dialogue, there are no meaningless or empty acts in life. Everything we do is part of this never-ending debate in which we are engaged.

For Jews, this debate is not a voluntary one. It is a central condition of the covenant of Sinai. It is no wonder that the prophets of Trei Asar formulate their prophecies in the format of debate, questions, and discussion, for that is the only way we can truly communicate with God and with our inner souls and eternity.