

I have had the pleasure several times of presenting jointly with Dr. Jodi Hoffman, Director of the Victor Outreach and Screening Program for Ashkenazi Jewish Genetic Diseases at Tufts-NEMC, on the subject of genetic screening, and Dr. Hoffman was also kind enough to present to SBM this past summer (both her [presentation](#) and my [sourcesheet](#) are available at www.torahleadership.org). As a public service, I'm attaching her notice of an upcoming screening for Jewish Genetic Diseases in the Boston area, and this week's dvar Torah will address one of the associated Jewish issues.

Is all knowledge desirable? Not necessarily. For example, Maimonides in Guide 1:2 argues that knowledge of good and evil is undesirable because it inevitably distracts us from the more important knowledge of truth and falsehood. The same argument can be made regarding knowledge of vulgarity and erotic awareness

However, Tamid 32a (see also Mishnah Avot 2:9) clearly classifies knowledge of the future as desirable.

איזהו חכם? הרואה את הנולד

"Who is wise? Who sees that which is to come".

Rashi comments

הרואה את הנולד - המבין מלבו מה שעתיד להיות קורות שעתידים לבא ונזהר מהן.
"Who sees that which is to come" – who understands on the basis of his own intellect what will be, what events will come, and is cautious regarding them.

It is therefore highly puzzling that Rashi's comment on Devarim 18:13 apparently forbids seeking knowledge of the future.

תמים תהיה עם ה' א-להיך - התהלך עמו בתמימות ותצפה לו ולא תחקור אחר העתידות, אלא כל מה שיבא עליך קבל בתמימות ואז תהיה עמו ולחלקו:
"You must be *tamim* with Hashem your G-d" – walk with Him in *temimut*, look toward Him and do not investigate future things, rather whatever happens to you – accept it with *temimut*, and then you will be with Him and of His portion.

Rashi's source for this interpretation, as best I can tell, is Pesachim 113b.

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי שמואל בר מרתא אמר רב משום רבי יוסי איש הוצל: מניין שאין שואלין בכלדיים? שנאמר "תמים תהיה עם ה' א-להיך".
Said Rabbah bar Bar Channah said Rabbi Shmuel bar Marta in the name of Rabbi Yosay of Hutzal: From where in Scripture do we know that one may not ask *kildaim*? Because Scripture says "You must be *tamim* with Hashem your G-d".

Rashbam's comment there is along the lines of Rashi:

תמים תהיה" – להיות בטוח בו בכל קורות ונולדות הבאות לך
"You must be *tamim*" – to remain secure in Him through all happenings and developments that come to you.

Similarly, Sefer Mitzvot Katan (Mitzvah 10) writes:

להיות תמים שנאמר "תמים תהיה עם ה' א-להיך" –

פי': שלא ישאל בכלדיי'א לידע העתידו', אלא אומר "מה שרצה הבורא יעשה", ולא יחקור מה שיהיה, כדאמרין
"בהדיה כבשי דרחמנא למה לך".

To be *tamim*, as Scripture writes "You must be *tamim* with Hashem your G-d" – meaning that you should not inquire of *kildaim* to know the future, but rather say: "What the Creator Wills, He will do", and not investigate what will be, as we say "What have you to do with those secrets of the Merciful".

However, as *kildaim* are people who make predictions about the future on some magical or supernatural or astrological basis, one might reasonably suggest that the intent of the verse is to limit whom and how one asks, rather than what one asks. This seems to be the position of Ramban (to Devarim 18:13 and elsewhere) and many followers:

וטעם תמים תהיה עם ה' א-להיך - שנייחד לבבנו אליו לבדו, ונאמין שהוא לבדו עושה כל והוא היודע אמתת כל עתיד, וממנו לבדו נדרוש העתידות, מנביאי או מאנשי חסידיו רצוני לומר אורים ותומים. ולא נדרוש מהוברי שמים ולא מזולתם, ולא נבטח שיבואו דבריהם על כל פנים, אבל אם נשמע דבר מהם נאמר הכל בידי שמים, כי הוא א-להי הא-להים עליון על הכל היכול בכל משנה מערכות הכוכבים והמזלות כרצונו "מפר אותות בדים וקוסמים יהולל" . . . The meaning of "You must be *tamim* with Hashem your G-d" is that we must turn out hearts exclusively toward Him, and believe that He alone does everything and that He knows the truth of every future, and from Him alone we must seek investigate future occurrences, from His prophets or His pious ones, by which I mean the *urim vetummim*, rather than investigating on the basis of astrologers and others like them, and we must not believe that the words of any such will occur no matter what, rather when we hear something from them we must say "All is in the hands of Heaven", because He the Ultimate Divine is above everything and omnipotent, who rearranges the stars and planets at Will, "Who refutes the signs of stargazers and turns wizards into fools" . . .

The Biblical context – a set of prohibitions against consulting various magicians and soothsayers – strongly supports Ramban. What then motivates Rashi's radical formulation?

Sefer Mitzvot Katan refers us to Berakhot 10a (attached and translated), where the prophet Yeshayahu is cited as telling King Chizkiyahu that he will die as punishment for deliberately avoiding the obligation to procreate, even though Chizkiyahu's motive was his (prophetic?) knowledge that his child would turn out to be an evil man. "What have you to do with those secrets of the Merciful?!" Yeshayahu's point seems to be that mitzvot are deontological, i.e binding independent of consequences, so that knowledge of the future cannot have normative implications. Accordingly, such knowledge is undesirable, as it may tempt human beings to forgo their obligations on utilitarian grounds.

The rest of the sugya, however, does not fit well with that reading. Chizkiyahu asks for the hand of Yeshayahu's daughter in the hope of warding off both his death and improving his offspring; Yeshayahu tells him that the death has been irrevocably decreed, and Chizkiyahu denies that any decree is irrevocable in the face of repentance. Chizkiyahu turns out to be correct, which means that even prophetic predictions of the future can never be certain knowledge. But if absolute knowledge of the future is unattainable, why should seeking knowledge of the future be forbidden?

In other words – many, many halakhic issues depend on a calculation of the *probability* of future events, whether of financial loss, or how people will react to specific statements, etc. Rashi cannot be forbidding calculating the odds, (although I am constrained to admit that there have been outlier halakhic positions objecting to the purchase of certain types of insurance on similar grounds.) What, then, is Rashi objecting to?

The only explicit halakhic reference I can find to this position of Rashi is Rav Moshe Feinstein's discussion of Tay-Sachs screening in Igrot Moshe Even HaEzer 4:10:

אם יש לבדוק למחלת ט"י סאכס קודם הנישואין.
... עיינתי בזה וזהו הנראה לע"ד כי אף שהוא מיעוט קטן ילדים נולדים כאלו, ושייך לומר על זה הקרא ד"תמים
תהיה עם ה' אלקיך", וכפרש"י בחומש שם שכתב "התהלך עמו בתמימות ותצפה לו ולא תחקור אחר העתידות",
מ"מ כיון שעתה נעשה זה באופן קל לבדוק, יש לדון שאם אינו בודק את עצמו הוא כסגירת העינים לראות מה
שאפשר לראות, ומכיון שאם ח"ו אירע דבר כזה הוא להורי הילד צער גדול מאד, מן הראוי למי שצריך לישא אשה
לבדוק את עצמו . . .

Whether one should screen for the disease Tay-Sachs prior to marriage

. . . I have investigated this matter and this what appears to my humble intellect: even though it is a small minority of children who are born thus, and one could apply to this the verse "You shall be straightforward with your G-d" (Deuteronomy 18:13), in accordance with Rashi's commentary there "walk with Him with straightforwardness and put your hope in Him and do not seek knowledge of the future (through soothsayers et al.)", nonetheless since now this can be easily checked, one can determine that not screening oneself is like closing one's eyes to what one can see, and since G-d forbid if this occurs it will cause very great suffering to the parents, it is appropriate for one who needs to marry to have himself screened . . .

Rabbi Feinstein introduces an apparently novel distinction between "investigating the future", which he discourages, and "keeping one's eyes open", which he requires. I am not at all clear on how to formulate this distinction in practical legal terms, but Rabbi Feinstein's conclusion with regard to Tay-Sachs seems compelling to me. Furthermore, some of the diseases we now screen for are more effectively treatable if the condition is known before birth, so it seems hard to justify willful ignorance. Hence the attached announcement.

Nonetheless, I do feel compelled to say that there is a sense in which the advances of modern science have made Rashi's point seem more rather than less compelling. Specifically but not exclusively with regard to reproduction, our probabilistic knowledge of the future grows ever more detailed, and it seems plausible that within two decades at most it will be possible to cheaply and rapidly sequence the full genome of any individual. We will also have identified many, many more genetic causes of disorders, so that any potential couple will know in advance the odds that their children, if born through unmediated sexual reproduction, will have specific genetic defects. This will generate tremendous pressure for all reproduction to take place in the laboratory. Perhaps, as I once heard Rabbi Michael Broyde say forcefully, this is not a consequence we should fear, but I suggest that it at least bears thinking about, and welcome your thoughts as always.

Shabbat shalom

Aryeh Klapper

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף י עמוד א

אמר רב המנונא: מאי דכתיב "מי כהחכם ומי יודע פשר דבר"?

מי כהקדוש ברוך הוא שיוודע לעשות פשרה בין שני צדיקים, בין חזקיהו לישעיהו.

חזקיהו אמר: "ליתי ישעיהו גבאי, דהכי אשכחן באליהו, דאזל לגבי אחאב."

ישעיהו אמר: "ליתי חזקיהו גבאי, דהכי אשכחן ביהורם בן אחאב דאזל לגבי אלישע."

מה עשה הקדוש ברוך הוא? הביא יסורים על חזקיהו, ואמר לו לישעיהו: 'לך ובקר את החולה',

שנאמר "בימים ההם חלה חזקיהו למות ויבא אליו ישעיהו בן אמוץ הנביא ויאמר אליו כה אמר ה'

צו לביתך כי מת אתה ולא תחיה וגו'".

מאי "כי מת אתה ולא תחיה"? מת אתה בעולם הזה ולא תחיה לעולם הבא.

אמר ליה: "מאי כולי האי"?

אמר ליה: "משום דלא עסקת בפריה ורביה".

אמר ליה: "משום דחזאי לי ברוח הקדש דנפקי מינאי בנין דלא מעלו."

אמר ליה: "בהדי כבשי דרחמנא למה לך? מאי דמפקדת איבעי לך למעבד, ומה דניחא קמיה קודשא

בריך הוא לעביד!"

אמר ליה: "השתא הב לי ברתך! אפשר דגרמא זכותא דידי ודידך ונפקי מנאי בנין דמעלו."

אמר ליה: "כבר נגזרה עליך גזירה".

אמר ליה: "בן אמוץ, כלה נבואתך וצא! כך מקובלני מבית אבי אבא - אפילו חרב חדה מונחת על

צוארו של אדם, אל ימנע עצמו מן הרחמים."

אתמר נמי:

רבי יוחנן ורבי אלעזר דאמרי תרוייהו: אפילו חרב חדה מונחת על צוארו של אדם, אל ימנע

עצמו מן הרחמים, שנאמר (איוב י"ג) "הן יקטלני לו איחל".

Talmud Berakhot 10a

Said Rav Hamnuna:

What is meant by the verse in Scripture “Who is like the wise, and who knows the interpretation (*peshet*) of the matter?” (Kohelet 8:1)

Who is like The Holy One Who is Blessed, Who knows how to forge a compromise (*pesharah*) between two of the righteous, between Chizkiyah (the king) and Yeshayahu (the prophet).

Chizkiyah said: Let Yeshayahu come to me, as we find regarding Eliyahu (the prophet) that he went to Ach'av (the king).

Yeshayahu said: Let Chizkiyah come to me, as we find that Yehoram ben Ach'av (the king) went to Elisha (the prophet).

What did the Holy One Who is Blessed do? He brought suffering on Chizkiyah, and said to Yeshayahu: 'Go visit the sick person',

as Scripture says: 'In those days Chizkiyah fell deathly ill and Yeshayahu ben Amotz the prophet came to him and said to him: "So said G-d: 'Put your house in order, for you are dying and will not live'." (II Kings 20:1 and Isaiah 38:1)

What is the meaning of "you are dying and will not live"?

You are dying in this world and will not live in the Coming World.

Chizkiyah said to Yeshayahu: What is all this?

Yeshayahu said to him: Because you have not engaged in procreation.

Chizkiyah said to him: That's because I saw through Holy Inspiration that I would have bad descendants.

Yeshayahu said to him: What have you to do with those secrets of the Merciful? What you are commanded to do, you must do, and let what is acceptable before The Holy One Who is Blessed happen!

Chizkiyah said to him: "Now give me your daughter! Perhaps our combined merit will be effective and I will have good descendants.

Yeshayahu said to him: The decree regarding you has already been decreed,

Chizkiyah said to him: Ben Amotz, end your prophecy and leave! This is my tradition from my grandfather's house – even if a sharp sword is resting on a person's neck, a person should not keep himself from asking for mercy.

An Amoraic statement says the same:

Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi El'azar both said: even if a sharp sword is resting on a person's neck, a person should not keep himself from asking for mercy, as Scripture says: "Though He slay me I will put my hope in Him".