

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Rochel *bas* Nosson *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Where in the World...?

KORACH 5775

The Ramban in his essay *Sha'ar Hagemul* writes the following: “Being that it is explicit from the teachings of our Sages that final retribution is meted out in Gehinnom...it behooves us to clarify, based on their words, what the nature of this punishment called ‘Gehinnom’ is...” In his work, the Ramban proceeds to elaborate with some detail on the nature of both Gehinnom and Gan Eden and the gamut of the concept of Divine reward and punishment. An incident related to this week’s *parshah* affords us the opportunity, however minimally, to fulfill the Ramban’s aforementioned dictum, which we will seek to do largely by drawing from his very words.

How Low Can One Go?

The incident referred to involves the descent to the depths of the participants in Korach’s rebellion, concerning whom it states (*Bamidbar 16:33*): וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה – “And they, and all that was to them, descended, while living, to the netherworld.” R’ Eliyahu Dushnitzer remarked on the extent of this precipitous plunge. The Yerushalmi relates (*Sanhedrin 10:4*) that the transgressors continued to fall farther and farther until the righteous Chanah offered prayers on their behalf. What is most remarkable about this is the sheer amount of time that elapsed. Korach’s followers were sucked into the earth circa (the Jewish year) 2450; Chanah offered her prayer circa 2830. This means that the rebels were falling steadily downward for almost 400 years – and would have gone even further, if not for Chanah’s merciful intercession (*cf. Derech Si’ach [R’ Chaim Kanievsky]*).

What is especially chilling from this account is the revelation of Gehinnom’s mammoth dimensions. Gehinnom is comprised of seven levels, one below the next. According to the Tannaic work “*Orko Shel Olam*” (cited by the Ramban), the span of each level is quite large: it would take 300 years to traverse any one of them. This means, then, that Korach’s swallowed multitude had barely cleared the first level by the time of Chanah’s prayer, and without it would have continued falling for another 1,700 years. This means they would have hit rock-bottom roughly around the time of the reign of Charlemagne.

While the fact that Gehinnom is accorded specific dimensions may come as a surprise to many, the Ramban is fairly unequivocal on this point. While asserting that there should be no real need to bring extensive supporting evidence – as the matter is already quite explicit in the Gemara and *medrashim* – the Ramban, in fact, does proceed to cite various sources at some length (apparently to starkly negate the cynics and apostates). Thus he quotes the Talmudic teaching (*Eruvin 19a*) that identifies three points on earth that contain an entranceway to Gehinnom: Yerushalayim, (somewhere) in the sea, and in the desert (the latter being derived from the earlier-cited *passuk* from this week’s *parshah*: וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה). Another example is a passage from the *Medrash Iggeres (Epistle of) R’ Yehoshua ben Levi*, which contains a vivid portrayal of the sage R’ Yehoshua ben Levi’s observations upon his visit to Gehinnom, in which he took some actual measurements: “When I measured the first house in (one of the) levels, I found it to be 100 *mil* in length and 50 *mil* in width (approx. 70 miles x 35 miles).” After various such citations, the Ramban concludes: “These and similar

matters should not be relegated to mere allegory, for (Chazal) have detailed the location... and have even derived *halachic* ramifications (from some of the delineated details)..."

Perfect Fit

One issue that arises, however, relates to one of the citations the Ramban himself brings. Regarding the measurement of these areas, the Gemara (*Ta'anis 10a*) engages in some comparisons: "The world is 1/60th the size of Gan Eden; Gan Eden is 1/60th the size of Eden itself; and Eden is 1/60th the size of Gehinnom. Thus, the entire world, in comparison to Gehinnom, resembles a lid covering a cauldron." The obvious question is a practical one: Gehinnom, the Ramban explained, is an actual location contained on this earth, as is Gan Eden (the Ramban cites an opinion [that of the Ibn Ezra] that it is located "under the equator"). But how is this possible? If Gan Eden is sixty times greater than the earth's area, and Gehinnom is even larger than that – how could the world possibly contain these entities?

The *Chazon Yo'el* (commentary to the *Sha'ar Hagemul*; §376) posits that the issue is comparable to a phenomenon found in the Beis Hamikdash. Commenting on the remarkable spiritual qualities of the *Aron Hakodesh* (Holy Ark), the Gemara (*Bava Basra 99a*) tells us that, while placed squarely within the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (Holy of Holies), the *Aron* itself took up no physical space. That is, the Torah delineates the dimensions of the *Aron* as being 2½ cubits long. It was placed within a chamber that itself was 20 cubits wide. What would happen if one were to measure from each side of the *Aron* to its adjacent wall? Mathematical law would render that the measurer should discover a span of 8.75 cubits on either side ($8.75 \times 2 + 2.5 = 20$). But what actually happened is that one would measure a span of 10 cubits on either side! Apparently, being an inherently spiritual object, it did not register as taking up space in the physical realm. These could also be the attributes of Gehinnom and Gan Eden; only one (such as R' Yehoshua ben Levi) who could gain access to them would be able to observe their measurements; but on this physical world, they do not take up actual space.

One point the Ramban adds is that while the matters and details he discusses (regarding Gehinnom and Gan Eden) are to be taken quite literally, they do serve a dual purpose. "All of these matters," he writes, "Gan Eden, its four rivers, the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge, etc., exist exactly as stated... but they also help to illustrate another deeper, more esoteric matter." The Ramban compares the situation to an aspect of the examination of the witnesses for the new moon, as stated in the Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah 2:8*):

דמוות צורות לבנות היו לו לרבן גמליאל בטבלא ובכתל בעלינו, שבהן מראה את ההדיוטות ואומר, הקנה ראית או קנה?

"Rabban Gamliel had images of moon shapes on a tablet on the wall of his attic, which he used to display to the simple folk (who arrived bearing testimony that they had witnessed the new moon). (To verify their claim) he would say to them: 'Did it appear like this or like that?'"

These visual aids of Rabban Gamliel were real, of course, but they served a purpose of illustrating the more vast entity that was the heavenly bodies. In a similar sense, the Torah and Chazal have revealed to us certain aspects of the Next World, which exist in their literal form. At the same time, they reflect much deeper entities, matters that cannot be fully grasped by mortal comprehension and whose true nature is more spectacular than our wildest dreams.