

MISHNAH 5:3

Maimonides on Pirkei Avot

The Sixteenth Street Synagogue – April 13, 2013

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Mishnah Tractate Avot 5:3

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה ג

With ten trials was Abraham our Patriarch tested,
and he withstood them all;
to show how great was the love of Abraham our father.

עשרה נסיונות נתנסה אברהם אבינו
ועמד בכלם,
להודיע כמה חבתו שלאברהם אבינו:

Ten miracles were wrought for our fathers in Egypt;
and ten by the sea.

עשרה נסים נעשו לאבותינו במצרים
ועשרה על הים.

Ten plagues brought the Holy One, blessed is He,
upon the Egyptians in Egypt;
and ten by the Sea.

עשר מכות הביא הקדוש ברוך הוא
על המצריים במצרים
ועשרה על הים.

With ten trials did our fathers test
God in the wilderness,
for it is said (Numb. xiv. 22),
And they have tempted me now these ten times,
and have not hearkened to my voice.

עשרה נסיונות נסו אבותינו
את המקום במדבר,
שנאמר (במדבר יד:כב),
וניסו אתי זה עשר פעמים
ולא שמעו בקולי:

Jubilees

17:15 And it came to pass in the seventh week, in the first year thereof, in the first month in this jubilee, on the twelfth of this month, there were voices in heaven regarding Abraham, that he was faithful in all that He told him, and that he loved the Lord, and that in every affliction he was faithful.

17:16 And the prince Mastêmâ came and said before God, 'Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son, and he delights in him above all things else; bid him offer him as a burnt-offering on the altar, and Thou wilt see if he will do this command, and Thou wilt know if he is faithful in everything wherein Thou dost try him. **17:17** And the Lord knew that Abraham was faithful in all his afflictions; for He had tried him through his country and with famine, and had tried him with the wealth of kings, and had tried him again through his wife, when she was torn (from him), and with circumcision; and had tried him through Ishmael and Hagar, his maid-servant, when he sent them away. **17:18** And in everything wherein He had tried him, he was found faithful, and his soul was not impatient, and he was not slow to act; for he was faithful and a lover of the Lord.

19:2 And in the first year of the third week of this jubilee the days of the life of Sarah were accomplished, and she died in Hebron. **19:3** And Abraham went to mourn over her and bury her, and we tried him [to see] if his spirit were patient and he were not indignant in the words of his mouth; and he was found patient in this, and was not disturbed. **19:4** For in patience of spirit he conversed with the children of Heth, to the intent that they should give him a place in which to bury his dead. **19:8** This is the tenth trial wherewith Abraham was tried, and he was found faithful, patient in spirit.

The Fathers According to R. Natan, 33

With ten trials was Abraham our father tried before the Holy one, blessed be he, and in all of them he was found steadfast, to wit: Twice, when ordered to move on; Twice, in connection with his two sons; Twice, in connection with his two wives; Once, on the occasion of his war with the kings; Once, at the (covenant) between the pieces; Once, in Ur of the Chaldees; And once, at the covenant of circumcision. Now, what was the reason for all this? So that when Abraham, our father, comes to take his reward, the peoples of the world shall say: "More than all of us, more than everyone, is Abraham worthy of getting his reward!" And it is of him that Scripture says, "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God has already accepted thy works (Eccl. 9: 7)." Corresponding to the ten trials with which Abraham our father was tried and in all of which he was found steadfast, the Holy One, blessed be He, performed ten miracles for his children in Egypt. Corresponding to those (trials), the Holy One, blessed be He, brought ten plagues on the Egyptians in Egypt. Corresponding to those, ten miracles were wrought for Israel at the Red Sea. Corresponding to those, ten plagues were brought upon the Egyptians in the Sea.

אבות דרבי נתן פרק שלשה ושלשים

עשר נסיונות נתנסה אברהם אבינו לפני הקב"ה ובכולן נמצא שלם ואלו הן שנים בלך לך ב' בשתי בניו ב' בשתי נשיו אחד עם המלכים ואחד בין הבתרים אחד באור כשדים ואחד בברית מילה (בין הבתרים). וכל כך למה כדי שכשיבא אברהם אבינו ליטול שכרו שיהיו המלאכים אומרים יותר מכולנו יותר מכל שוה אברהם אבינו ליטול שכרו שנא' (קהלת ט) לך אכול בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב טוב יינך. כנגד עשר נסיונות שנתנסה אברהם אבינו ובכולן נמצא שלם וכנגדן עשה הקב"ה י' נסים לבניו במצרים כנגדן הביא עשר מכות כנגדן נעשו לישראל עשרה נסים על הים כנגדן הביא עשר מכות על המצריים בים.

The Ten Trials of Abriaham						
Jubilees		Avot d'Rabbi Natan	Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer	Rashi	Maimonides	Bartenura
1	Country (Lech Lecha)	Lech Lecha (Include famine?)	Assassins try to murder the infant Abraham who hides for 13 years	Hides for 13 years from Nimrod	Lech Lecha.	Fiery furnace
2	Famine		Imprisoned for ten years, then furnace	Fiery furnace	Famine	Lech Lecha
3	?	Two sons (Sending away Ishmael and binding Isaac?)	Lech Lecha.	Lech Lecha	Egyptians capture Sarah	Famine
4	?		Famine	Famine	Battle of Kings	Egyptians capture Sarah
5	Wealth of kings	Two wives (Sarah captured and Hagar banished?)	Egyptians capture Sarah	Egyptians capture Sarah	Marries Hagar for children	Battle of Kings
6	His wife, when she was torn from him		Battle of Kings and rescue Lot.	Battle of Kings and rescue Lot	Circumcision	Told of Egyptian exile
7	Circumcision	Battle of Kings	Told that his offspring would suffer under four monarchies.	Told that his offspring would suffer under four monarchies.	Avimelech captures Sarah.	Circumcision.
8	Sending Ishmael & Hagar away	Covenant of Pieces	Circumcision	Circumcisions.	Told to send away Hagar.	Avimelech captures Sarah.
9	Sacrifice of Isaac	In Ur of the Chaldees (How is this different from 8?)	Ishmael tries to kill Isaac	Told to send away Hagar and Ishamael.	Told to send away Ishmael.	Told to send away Hagar and Ishamael.
10	Sarah's death	Circumcision	Sacrifice of Isaac			

רמב"ם פירוש המשניות - מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה ג

(ג) העשרה נסיונות אשר נתנסה אברהם אבינו – כלם כתובים. הראשון – הגרות, והוא אמרו יתעלה לו: "לך לך מארצך וממולדתך". והשני – הרעב אשר מצא בארץ כנען כאשר השתקע בארץ, וכבר יעד לו: "ואעשך... ואברכך ואגדלה שמך", וזה נסיון גדול, והוא אמרו: "ויהי רעב בארץ" וכו'. והנסיון השלישי – עשק המצרים אותו בלקיחת שרה לפרעה. והרביעי – הלחמו בארבעה מלכים. והחמישי – לקחו הגר כשנאש מההולדה משרה. והששי – המילה, אשר צוה בה בשנות הזקנה. והשביעי – עשק מלך גרר אותו בלקיחת שרה גם כן. והשמיני – הרחקת הגר אחר הבנותו ממנה. והתשיעי – הרחקת בנו ישמעאל, והוא אמרו לו יתעלה: "אל ירע בעיניך על הנער ועל אמתך", וכבר העיד הכתוב כמה קשה היה הדבר עליו: "וירע הדבר מאד בעיני אברהם", אבל הוא קיים צויו יתעלה וגרשם. והעשירי – עקדת יצחק.

The ten trials which our Patriarch Abraham was tested are explicitly mentioned in the Torah. The first is the departure into exile, [following] God's command, "Go out from your land and your birthplace (Genesis 12:1)." The second is the famine that came upon the land of Canaan when he dwelled there, despite the fact that he had been promised: "I will make you [a great nation], I will bless you, and make you great (Genesis 12:2)." This was a great challenge and [about this,] it is written, "there was a famine in the land (Genesis 12:10)." The third trial was the wrong wrought to him by the Egyptians who took Sarah for Pharaoh (Genesis 12:15). The fourth trial was his conflict with the four kings (Genesis 14:12). The fifth trial was his marriage to Hagar after despairing of having progeny through Sarah (Genesis 15:2-3). The sixth trial was performing the circumcision that he was commanded at an advanced age (Genesis 17:24). The seventh trial was the wrong done him by the King of Gerar in taking Sarah (Genesis 20:2). The eighth trial was banishing Hagar after she bore him a son. The ninth trial was banishing Ishmael. This is implied by the verse: "Do not be troubled over the youth and I over your handmaiden (Genesis 21:12)." Although the Torah has told us that it was very difficult for him, as it is written, "And Abraham was very troubled [because of his son] (Genesis 21:11)," he accepted God's command and banished them. The tenth trial was the binding of Isaac.

ואמנם העשרה נסים אשר נעשו לאבותינו במצרים – הרי הם הנצלים מעשר המכות, והיות כל מכה ומכה מיוחדת במצרים, לא בישראל, ואלו נסין בלא ספק. ולשון התורה בכל מכה מהן שהיא במצרים לבד, וזולת הכנים, שהוא לא באר בה, זה, אבל ידוע שלא ענש את ישראל, ואמנם היו מצויות אצלם ולא צערו אותם, וכך בארו החכמים.

The ten miracles wrought for our ancestors in Egypt refer to saving them from the ten plagues. For each of the plagues was directed against the Egyptians alone, without affecting the Jews. This is without a doubt a miracle. The Torah explicitly states that every plague affected the Egyptians alone, with the exception of the lice, in which instance this was not mentioned explicitly. But it is a well known matter that the Jews were not punished. Instead, there were [lice] among them, but they were not bothered by them. This was explained by our Sages.

אבל

השאר – הרי התבאר בהן, אמר בדם : "ולא יכלו מצרים לשתות מים מן היאר", ראיה על היות הנזק דבק בהם בלבד, ואמר בצפרדע : "ובאו בביתך ובחדר משכבך ועל וכו' ובכה ובעמך ובכל-עבדיך", ואמר בערוב : "והפל(א)[י]תי ביום ההוא את ארץ גשן", ואמר בדבר : "וממקנה בני ישראל לא מת אחד", ואמר בשחין : "כי היה השחין בחרטום ובכל-מצרים", ואמר בברד : "רק בארץ גשן אשר שם בני ישראל לא היה ברד", ואמר בארבה : "ומלאו בתיך ובתי כל-עבדיך ובתי כל-מצרים", ואמר בחשך : "ולכל-בני ישראל היה אור" וכו'.

Concerning the other plagues, however, [the Torah] explicitly states that they did not affect the Jews. With regard to the blood, it is written: "And the Egyptians could not drink water from the river (Exodus 17:21)," implying that the affliction affected them alone. With regard to the frogs, it is written: "And they shall enter your homes, your bedrooms, your beds, your [bodies], your nation and your servants (Exodus 7:28-29)." With regard to the swarms [of beasts], it is written: "And I will make a sign on that day concerning the Land of Goshen (Exodus 8:18)." With regard to the cattle plague, it is written: "And of the herds of the Israelites, not one died (Exodus 9:6)." With regard to the boils, it is written: "For the boils were upon the wizards and upon all the Egyptians (Exodus 9:11)." And it is written with regard to the hail: "Only in the Land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail (Exodus 9:26)." With regard to the locusts, it is written: "They will fill your homes, the homes of your servants and the homes of all the Egyptians (Exodus 10:6)." And it is written with regard to the darkness: "And for the Israelites, there was light in their dwellings (Exodus 10:23)."

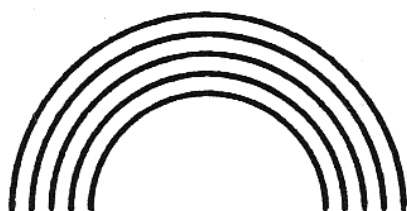
ואמנם העשרה אשר היו על הים, הרי הם קבלה . הראשון – הבקעו, כפשט הכתוב : "ויבקעו המים". והמופת השני – שאחר הבקעו התקמר, עד שנעשה כדמות תקרה קמורה, ונהיתה הדרך כאלו היא נקבה במים, והמים מימין ומשמאל ומלמעלה, הוא מאמר חבקוק : "נקבת במטיו ראש פרזו". והשלישי – שרקעו התקשתה וקפאה להם, כמו שאמר : "הלכו ביבשה", ולא נשארה כקרקעית הנהרות אשר היא ביץ וטיט. והרביעי – שדרכי המצרים בו היו בטיט נדבק, הוא אמרו : "חמר מים רבים".

The ten wonders performed at the Red Sea are all conveyed by the Oral Tradition. The first is the splitting of the sea, as it is written, "And the sea split (Exodus 14:21)." The second miracle is that the waters formed a domed roof, it being neither flat nor sloped. The path was a tunnel through the water, with the water being on the right, on the left and on top. This is alluded to in Habbakuk's statement, "You have pierced with a shaft the head of his settlement (Habakuk 3:14)." The third is that the bed of the sea became firm and solid for them, as it is written: "They walked on dry land (Exodus 14:29)" - i.e., it did not remain like a river bed, which is muddy and filled with sediment. The fourth miracle is that when the Egyptians crossed it became like sticky mud, as it is written: "... the mortar of great waters (Habbakuk 3:15)."

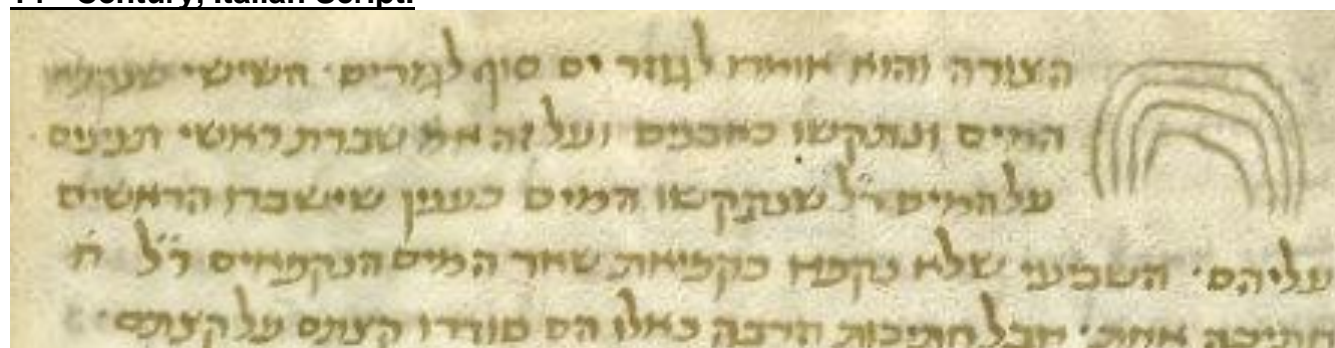
וְהַחֲמִישִׁי

– שֶׁהוּא נִבְקַע לְדַרְכִּים רַבּוֹת כַּמִּסְפָּר הַשְּׁבָטִים, קֶשֶׁת עֲגֻלָּה בְּתוֹךְ קֶשֶׁת עֲגֻלָּה, כָּזֶה :
וְהוּא אָמְרוּ : "לְגִזֹּר יָם סוֹף לְגִזְרִים".

The fifth is that it split into [twelve] paths, one for each of the tribes, semi—circles within semicircles, as in the accompanying drawing. This is alluded to in the verse, "He split the sea into sections (Psalms 136:10)."



14th Century, Italian Script.



וְהַשְׁשִׁית – שֶׁהַמַּיִם קָפְאוּ וְנִתְקְשׁוּ כְּאַבְנִים, וְעַל

זֶה אָמַר : "שִׁבְרַת רָאשֵׁי תַנִּינִים עַל הַמַּיִם", רְצוֹנוֹ לֹמַר, שֶׁהַמַּיִם נִתְקְשׁוּ עַד כְּדֵי שִׁשְׁבְּרוּ עֲלֵיהֶם הָרָאשִׁים. וְהַשְּׁבִיעִי – שֶׁהוּא לֹא קָפָא כְּקֶרֶת, רְצוֹנִי לֹמַר: חֲתִיכָה אַחַת, אֲלֹא מִפְּרֹד וּמִפְּרֹד, כְּאִלוּ הֵן אַבְנִים שֶׁסִּדְּרוּ קִצְתָּן עַל קִצְתָּן, הוּא אָמַר : "אַתָּה פּוֹרַרְתָּ בְּעֹז יָם". וְהַשְּׁמִינִי – שֶׁהוּא קָפָא כְּזִכּוּכִית אוֹ כְּסִפִּיר, רְצוֹנִי לֹמַר: שְׁקוּף , עַד שִׁירָאוּ קִצְתָּם אֶת קִצְתָּם בְּעֶבְרָם בּוּ, וְהוּא אָמַר : "חֲשֶׁרֶת מַיִם עָבִי שְׁחָקִים", רְצוֹנוֹ לֹמַר, שֶׁקְבוּץ הַמַּיִם הָהֵם הָיָה כְּעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם, אֲשֶׁר הֵם שְׁקוּפִים. וְהַתְּשִׁיעִי – שֶׁהָיוּ נִזְזִלִים מִמֶּנּוּ מִימֹת מִתּוֹקִים, שֶׁהָיוּ שׁוֹתִים אוֹתָם. וְהַעֲשִׂירִי – שֶׁהֵם הָיוּ קוֹפְאִים עִם נִזְלָתָם, אַחֵר שֶׁלְקָחוּ מֵהֶם מָה שֶׁשָּׁתוּ, כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יֵרְדוּ לָאָרֶץ, וְהוּא אָמַר : "נִצְבּוּ כְּמוֹ גִּד נִזְזִלִים, קָפְאוּ תַהֲמַת בִּלְבָב יָם", רְצוֹנוֹ לֹמַר, שֶׁהִדְבֵּר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה נִזְזִל – הָיָה קוֹפֵא בִּלְבָב יָם.

The sixth is that the water hardened and became rigid like stone. This is alluded to in the verse, "You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the water (Psalms 74:13)," - i.e., the water became so hard that [the sea monsters] broke their heads against it. The seventh was that [the sea] did not harden like ice, [solidifying] into a single mass, but was rather separated and segmented, like stones piled one on top of another. With regard to this, it is said: "You fragmented the sea with Your strength (Psalms 74:13)." The eighth was that it solidified like glass or like sapphire - i.e., it was transparent, allowing them to see each other when they passed through. This is implied by the phrase: "The mounds of water were like the density of the skies (II Samuel 22:12)" - i.e., the collection of the waters was shiny and transparent, as the skies are. The ninth is that fresh water fit for drinking flowed from the sea. And the tenth miracle was that, after flowing, so that the people could have water to drink, the waters would again harden, so that they would not descend to the ground [and muddy it]. This is implied by the verse: "They stood up like a wall; the flowing streams congealed; (Exodus 15:18)," i.e., that which was flowing became congealed in the depths of the sea.

וּבָאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַקְבָּלָה גַּם כֵּן , שֶׁהַמִּצְרִים יֵרְדוּ עֲלֵיהֶם מְכֹת עַל הַיָּם יוֹתֵר מִמְּכֹת מִצְרַיִם, אֲבָל הָיוּ כֻּלָּן מֵאוֹתָם הַעֲשָׂרָה מִיָּנִים אֲשֶׁר יֵרְדוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם, וְנִחְלָקוּ לְמִינֵי מִיָּנִים עַל הַיָּם. וְהָרְמוֹז עַל זֶה, אָמַר : "אֵלֶּה הֵם הָאֱלֹהִים הַמִּכִּים אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּכָל־מֶכָה בְּמִדְבָּר", רְצוֹנוֹ לֹמַר: בְּמִדְבַּר יָם סוּף.

The Oral Tradition states that greater plagues descended upon the Egyptians at the Red Sea than the plagues of Egypt. These, however, were of the same ten types that descended in Egypt; they merely sub-divided into different categories at the sea. This is alluded to in the verse: "These are the gods who smote Egypt with all the plagues in the wilderness (I Samuel 4:8)," - i.e., in the desert of the Red Sea.

וּמִנֵּה עֲשָׂה נִסִּיּוֹת שְׁנֵסוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֶת הַמָּקוֹם – הֲרִי כָּלם כְּתוּבִים גַּם כֵּן. הָרִאשׁוֹן –
עַל יַם סוּף, בְּאֶמְרָם: "הַמִּבְלִי אֵין קְבָרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם" וְכוּ'. וְהַשְּׁנִי – בְּמִרְיָה, הוּא אָמְרוּ:
"וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר מַה נִּשְׁתָּה". וְהַשְּׁלִישִׁי – בְּמִדְבַּר סִין, כְּשֶׁבִקְשׁוּ הַמָּן, הוּא
אָמְרָם: "מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד ה'" וְכוּ'. וְהָרְבִיעִי – מְרוֹתֶם בְּהַנַּחַת הַמָּן לְבִקְרָה, כְּמוֹ
שֶׁאָמַר: "וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹתְרוּ" וְכוּ'. וְהַחֲמִישִׁי – מְרוֹתֶם בְּבִקְשָׁם אוֹתוֹ בְּיוֹם
הַשַּׁבָּת, "יֵצְאוּ מִן הָעָם לִלְקֹט וְלֹא מֵצְאוּ". וְהַשְּׁשִׁי – בְּרִפְדִּים, עַל הַמַּיִם גַּם כֵּן. וְהַשְּׁבִיעִי
– בְּחוֹרֵב, בְּמַעֲשֵׂה הָעֵגֹל. וְהַשְּׁמִינִי – בְּתַבְעֵרָה, בְּעוֹרֵרָם בְּמָקוֹם הַהוּא סֶפֶק בְּאֻמָּתוֹת,
וּבְמִרְדָּם, וְהוּא אָמְרוּ: "וַיְהִי הָעָם כְּמִתְאַנְּנִים" וְכוּ'. וְהַתְּשִׁיעִי – בְּקִבְרוֹת הַתְּאֹוָה, בְּבִקְשַׁת
הַבָּשָׂר, אָמַר: "וְהָאֶסְפָּסָף" וְכוּ'. וְהָעֲשִׂירִי – בְּמִדְבַּר פָּאֶרָן, בְּמַעֲשֵׂה הַמְּרַגְלִים, וְשֵׁם
נֶאֱמַר: "וַיִּנָּסוּ אֹתִי זֶה עֶשֶׂר פְּעָמִים".

The ten trials with which our ancestors tried the Omnipresent are all mentioned in the Torah. The first was at the Red Sea, when they said, "Are there no graves in Egypt?" The second was at Marah, as it is written: "And the people complained to Moses saying, 'What shall we drink?' (Exodus 14:11)." The third was in the desert of Sin when they requested the manna, as they said: "Would that we had died by the hand of God (Exodus 15:24)." The fourth was their rebellion in leaving the manna to remain until the next day, as it is written: "And they did not heed Moses (Exodus 16:3)." The fifth was seeking [the manna] on the Sabbath, as it is written: "Some of the people went out to gather, but they did not find it. (Exodus 16:27)" The sixth was at Refidim with regard to the water. The seventh was at Chorev by making the [Golden] Calf. The eighth was at Tav'erah; at this place they expressed their doubts and rebelled, as it is written: "And the people complained (Numbers 11:1)." The ninth was at Kivrot HaTaavah when they requested meat, as it is written: "And the mixed multitude in their midst lusted (Numbers 11:4)." And the tenth was in the desert of Paran with regard to the spies. There it is said: "And they have tried Me these ten times (Numbers 14:22)."

Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed III:24

THE doctrine of trials is open to great objections: it is in fact more exposed to objections than any other thing taught in Scripture. It is mentioned in Scripture six times, as I will show in this chapter. People have generally the notion that trials consist in afflictions and mishaps sent by God to man, not as punishments for past sins, but as giving opportunity for great reward. This principle is not mentioned in Scripture in plain language, and it is only in one of the six places referred to that the literal meaning conveys this notion. I will explain the meaning of that passage later on. The principle taught in Scripture is exactly the reverse; for it is said: "He is a God of faithfulness, and there is no iniquity in him" (Deut. xxxii. 4).

The teaching of our Sages, although some of them approve this general belief (concerning trials), is on the whole against it. For they say, "There is no death without sin, and no affliction without transgression." Every intelligent religious person should have this faith, and should not ascribe any wrong to God, who is far from it; he must not assume that a person is innocent and perfect and does not deserve what has befallen him.

The trials mentioned in Scripture in the [six] passages, seem to have been tests and experiments by which God desired to learn the intensity of the faith and the devotion of a man or a nation. [If this were the case] it would be very difficult to comprehend the object of the

trials, and yet the sacrifice of Isaac seems to be a case of this kind, as none witnessed it, but God and the two concerned [Abraham and Isaac]. Thus God says to Abraham, "For now I know that thou fearest God," etc. (Gen. xxii. 12). In another passage it is said: "For the Lord your God proveth you to know whether ye love," etc. (Deut. xiii. 4). Again, "And to prove thee to know what was in thine heart," etc. (ibid. Viii. 2). I will now remove all the difficulties.

The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe; so that the event which forms the actual trial is not the end desired: it is but an example for our instruction and guidance. Hence the words "to know (la-da'at) whether ye love," etc., do not mean that God desires to know whether they loved God; for He already knows it; but la-da'at, "to know," has here the same meaning as in the phrase "to know (la-da'at) that I am the Lord that sanctifieth you" (Exod. xxxi. 13), i.e., that all nations shall know that I am the Lord who sanctifieth you. In a similar manner Scripture says:--If a man should rise, pretend to be a prophet, and show you his signs by which he desired to convince you that his words are true, know that God intends thereby to prove to the nations how firmly you believe in the truth of God's word, and how well you have comprehended the true Essence of God; that you cannot be misled by any tempter to corrupt your faith in God. Your religion will then afford a guidance to all who seek the truth, and of all religions man will choose that which is so firmly established that it is not shaken by the performance of a miracle. For a miracle cannot prove that which is impossible; it is useful only as a confirmation of that which is possible, as we have explained in our Mishneh-torah. (Yesode ha-torah vii. f. viii. 3.)

. . .

The account of Abraham our father binding his son, includes two great ideas or principles of our faith. First, it shows us the extent and limit of the fear of God. Abraham is commanded to perform a certain act, which is not equalled by any surrender of property or by any sacrifice of life, for it surpasses everything that can be done, and belongs to the class of actions which are believed to be contrary to human feelings. He had been without child, and had been longing for a child; he had great riches, and was expecting that a nation should spring from his seed. After all hope of a son had already been given up, a son was born unto him. How great must have been his delight in the child! how intensely must he have loved him! And yet because he feared God, and loved to do what God commanded, he thought little of that beloved child, and set aside all his hopes concerning him, and consented to kill him after a journey of three days. If the act by which he showed his readiness to kill his son had taken place immediately when he received the commandment, it might have been the result of confusion and not of consideration. But the fact that he performed it three days after he had received the commandment, proves the presence of thought, proper consideration, and careful examination of what is due to the Divine command and what is in accordance with the love and fear of God. There is no necessity to look for the presence of any other idea or of anything that might have affected his emotions. For Abraham did not hasten to kill Isaac out of fear that God might slay him or make him poor, but solely because it is man's duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment. We have repeatedly explained this. The angel, therefore, says to him, "For now I know," etc. (ibid. ver. 12), that is, from this action, for which you deserve to be truly called a God-fearing man, all people shall learn how far we must go in the fear of God. This idea is confirmed in Scripture: it is distinctly stated that one sole thing, fear of God, is the object of the whole Law with its affirmative and negative precepts, its promises and its historical examples, for it is said, "If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this Law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, the Lord thy God," etc. (Deut. xxviii. 58). This is one of the two purposes of the 'akedah (sacrifice or binding of Isaac).

The second purpose is to show how the prophets believed in the truth of that which came to them from God by way of inspiration. We shall not think that what the prophets heard or saw in allegorical figures may at times have included incorrect or doubtful elements, since the Divine communication was made to them, as we have shown, in a dream or a vision and through the imaginative faculty. Scripture thus tells us that whatever the Prophet perceives in a prophetic vision, he considers as true and correct and not open to any doubt; it is in his eyes like all other things perceived by the senses or by the intellect. This is proved by the consent of Abraham to slay "his only son whom he loved," as he was commanded, although the commandment was received in a dream or a vision. If the Prophets had any doubt or suspicion as regards the truth of what they saw in a prophetic dream or perceived in a prophetic vision, they would not have consented to do what is unnatural, and Abraham would not have found in his soul strength enough to perform that act, if he had any doubt [as regards the truth of the commandment]. It was just the right thing that this lesson derived from the 'akedah ("sacrifice") should be taught through Abraham and a man like Isaac. For Abraham was the first to teach the Unity of God, to establish the faith (in Him), to cause it to remain among coming generations, and to win his fellow-men for his doctrine; as Scripture says of him: "I know him, that he will command," etc. (Gen. viii. 19). In the same manner as he was followed by others in his true and valuable opinions when they were heard from him, so also the principles should be accepted that may be learnt from his actions; especially from the act by which he confirmed the principle of the truth of prophecy, and showed how far we must go in the fear and the love of God.

This is the way how we have to understand the accounts of trials; we must not think that God desires to examine us and to try us in order to know what He did not know before. Far is this from Him; He is far above that which ignorant and foolish people imagine concerning Him, in the evil of their thoughts. Note this.

Maimonides' Eight Chapters, Chapter 8

[We hold that] God already expressed His will in the course of the six days of creation, and that things act in accordance with their nature from then on... That explains why the Sages found it necessary to say that all the supernatural miracles that have occurred [in the past] and all those that we are promised will come about [in the future] were already designated to come about in the course of the six days of creation, when the miraculous events were implanted in the nature of the things involved in them.

Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed, II:29

For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, the pure and noble hand into a leprous one, without the existence of any natural cause that could effect these or similar phenomena, these changes were not permanent, they have not become a physical property. On the contrary, the Universe since continues its regular course. This is my opinion; this should be our belief. Our Sages, however, said very strange things as regards miracles: they are found in Bereshit Rabba, and in Midrash Koheleth, namely, that the miracles are to some extent also natural: for they say, when God created the Universe with its present physical properties, He made it part of these properties, that they should produce certain miracles at certain times, and the sign of a prophet consisted in the fact that God told him to declare when a certain thing will take place, but the thing itself was effected according to the fixed laws of Nature. If this is really the meaning of the passage referred to, it testifies to the greatness of the author, and shows that he held it to be impossible that there should be a change in the laws of Nature, or a change in the will of God [as regards the physical properties of things] after they have once been established. He therefore assumes, e.g., that God gave the waters the property of joining together, and of flowing in a downward direction, and of separating only at the time when the Egyptians were drowned, and only in a particular place. I have already pointed out to you the source of this passage, and it only tends to oppose the hypothesis of a

new creation. It is said there: R. Jonathan said, God made an agreement with the sea that it should divide before the Israelites: thus it is said, "And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared" (Exod. xiv. 27). R. Jeremiah, son of Elazar, said: Not only with the sea, but with all that has been created in the six days of the beginning [was the agreement made]: this is referred to in the words, "I, even my hands have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded" (Isa. xlv. 12); i.e., I have commanded the sea to divide, the fire not to hurt Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, the lions not to harm Daniel, and the fish to spit out Jonah. The same is the case with the rest of the miracles.

Maimonides' Epistle on the Resurrection

What I must clarify at this point, although it is too important for this essay, is that miracles may occur in the realm of the naturally impossible—like the change of the rod into a serpent, or the sinking of the earth in the story of the followers of Korah, or the splitting of the Red Sea – and they may occur in the realm of the naturally possible—like the onset of the locust, the hail, and the pestilence in Egypt.

It is the way of these latter happenings to occur at certain times and in certain places. So also is the breaking of the altar of Jeroboam when the man of God announced: Here is the portent which the Lord has decreed: This altar shall break apart, and the ashes on it shall be spilled [1 Kings 13:3]. For it is the way of structures to fall apart, particularly recently reconstructed buildings. Similarly the rain, so rare in the summer, which Samuel foretold, and also the blessings and curses in the Torah. Every one of them may come at any time in any country. They are all of the class of the possible when you examine them. However, these possible occurrences become miracles by one of three conditions or by all of them.

One: that the possible incident comes when the prophet says it will, as happened to Samuel: I will pray to the Lord and He will send thunder and rain Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain [1 Sam. 12:17-18]. This is what happened to the man of God who came from Judah: The altar broke apart and its ashes were spilled—the very portent which the man of God had announced . . . [1 Kings 13:5].

Two: that that possible happening is singular and exceptional beyond anything imaginable of its kind. The locust is described: before it there had been no locust like it, nor will there ever be like it [Exod. 10:14]. Of the hail it is written: Such as had not fallen on the entire land of Egypt since it had become a nation [Exod. 9:24-]. Of the pestilence it is stated: But of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died [Exod. 9:6]. The particularity of that possible happening, whether in a class referred to, or some specific place, or some species mentally conceived,¹⁸⁵ is the singularity and the exclusiveness of that possible event. Three: the duration and the persistence of that possible event, like the blessings and the maledictions. For, if it came once or twice, it would not be miraculous; it could be claimed to have been a chance incident. This has been clearly expounded in the Torah: And you remain hostile to Me and refuse to obey Me [Lev. 26:21], that is, if you regard the afflictions that will befall you as accidents and not as punishment, He will protract the violent distress you thought was an accident. He expresses it thus: And you remain hostile to Me, I will act against you with wrathful hostility. Now that this has been clarified, you must realize that the miracles in the naturally impossible class will not last at all, nor will they tarry or remain with their features. For, if they persisted, they would open the way to suspicion. If the rod remained a serpent, the uncertainty would be entertained that it had been originally a serpent, so that the miracle is achieved by its return to a rod: And it became a rod in his hand [Exod. 4:4]. If, in the incident of the followers of Korah, the ground had burst asunder, and stayed open for good, the miracle would be challenged. In fact, the miracle was completed when the ground returned to its former condition: The earth closed over them [Num. 16:33]; so also: And at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state [Exod. 14:27].

Because of this fact, which I have alerted you to, I refuse to accept the duration of an unnatural situation, as I have explained in this essay.

But the miracle in the class of the possible is more wondrous the longer it lasts and endures. This is why I accept the blessings that come from obedience and the maledictions on the community from disobedience unto eternity. For they become a sign and a portent, as I pointed out. If someone should ask why this miracle was performed before them, why not the ultimate wonder, that is, the Resurrection, or the reward and punishment of the soul and body together after death, he may just as well ask regarding any of the miracles of the apostle: Why was the rod changed into a serpent? Why not into a lion? The entire issue is connected with the decision of divine wisdom of which we know nothing.

Maimonides' Code – Laws of Torah Foundations 10:5

When a prophet proclaims that another individual is [also] a prophet, we accept the latter as a prophet without requiring [any further] investigation. Thus, after Moses, our teacher, proclaimed that Joshua [was a prophet], all the Jews believed in him before he performed any wonders. The same holds true for subsequent generations. Once a prophet has made known his prophecy, and his words have proven true time after time, or another prophet has proclaimed him a prophet, if he continues in the path of prophecy, it is forbidden to doubt him or to question the truth of his prophecy. [When establishing the authenticity of a prophet,] it is forbidden to test him more than necessary. We may not continue to test him forever, as [Deuteronomy 6:15] states: "Do not test God, your Lord, as you tested him in Marah," when [the Jews] said [Exodus 17:7]: "Is God in our midst or not?" Rather, once an individual is established as a prophet, we should believe in him and know that God is in our midst. We should not doubt or question him, as implied by [Ezekiel 2:5]: "They shall know that a prophet was in their midst."

רמב"ם יד החזקה – הל' יסודי התורה פרק י

(ה) נביא שהעיד לו נביא אחר שהוא נביא הרי הוא בחזקת נביא ואין זה השני צריך חקירה שהרי משה רבינו העיד ליהושע והאמינו בו כל ישראל קודם שיעשה אות וכן לדורות נביא שנודעה נבואתו והאמינו בדבריו פעם אחר פעם או שהעיד לו נביא והיה הולך בדרכי הנבואה אסור לחשב אחריו ולהרהר בנבואתו שמא אינה אמת ואסור לנסותו יותר מדאי ולא נהיה הולכים ומנסים לעולם שנאמר לא תנסו את ה' אלהיכם כאשר נסיתם במסה שאמרו היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין אלא מאחר שנודע שזה נביא יאמינו וידעו כי ה' בקרבם ולא יהרהרו ולא יחשבו אחריו כענין שנאמר וידעו כי נביא היה בתוכם: