

One of the iconic lines in this week's parasha is:

אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו דברים יגה:	<b>After the Lord your God you are to walk.</b> Deut. 13:5
--------------------------------------	---

Imagine you are one of the Israelites in Moses'

audience. And Moses has just described to you the very real possibility that when you get in the land, there will be people who will vie for your trust. They will be audacious, bold, and charismatic. They will be deft with words and effective at portents. But in the end, they will be nothing but frauds and charlatans, because their objective is to get you to worship false gods, which is just probably an indirect way to get you to worship...**them!** The rabbis call these individuals, שקר, נביאי שקר, or literally, the **Prophets of Lie**. The punishment for false prophets is death which, one would think, would be a significant deterrent. The rabbis identify a few biblical personages as false prophets, and Jewish history is replete with a different category of fraudulent leader, namely the False Messiah, Shabtai Tzvi being the most famous. Great prophets like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, create pathways to God. False prophets create pathways to idolatry, the worship of power, and nihilism. A true leader is a blessing. A false leader is catastrophic. It is in the context of forbidding the people to follow false prophets, that Moses instructs the people to follow God. The full

אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו ואתו תיראו ואת מצותיו תשמרו ובקלו תשמעו ואתו תעבדו ובו תדבקו	<b>After the Lord your God you are to walk, him you are to revere his commandments you are to keep, to his voice you are to hearken, him you are to serve, to him you are to cling!</b>
--	---

verse is here: ←  
 There are six commands in it, but the first one, poses the most significant problem. How do you walk after God? God is not like a human leader. God doesn't stand up in front of a group and say, **After Me!** God is invisible. Moreover, we have ample evidence from

elsewhere in the Torah that the proximity to God is lethal. Recall that when Israel was at Sinai, they were terrified of God. They said to Moses: **You speak with us, and we will hearken, but let not God speak with us, lest we die!** (Exod. 20:16). Ramban (Nachmanides, Spain 1194-1270) explains the plain meaning of **Following God:**

אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו: היא מצוה שגלגל אחר עצתו וממנו לבדו נדרוש כל נעלם ונשאל כל עתיד.	<b>Follow God: This is a mitzvah that we should follow his counsel and from him alone should we seek that which is hidden and (from him alone) should we inquire about the future.</b>
---	--

Which is another way of saying, for direction in our lives, don't go to fortune tellers, soothsayers, tarot card readers, or any other false prophets or psychics (on Raritan Avenue). Instead, we should do the kinds of things - pray, meditate, or seek wisdom - that will draw us closer to God. Here is a similar interpretation of **Following God** from R. Isaac Samuel Reggio (also known as Yashar, Italy, d. 1855):

כמי שהולך אחרי מורה דרך לא יסור זמין ושמאל כי הוא בוטח עליו שיביאו למקום חפצו:	<b>(Follow God) as one who follows a guide, don't veer to the right or left because you trust him, that he will bring you to your destination.</b>
--	--

Ramban and Yashar are really saying the same thing. Both of them are homing in on the plain sense of the verse which is itself, an elaboration on how one follows God: by revering God, keeping God's commandments, listening to God's voice, serving God, and clinging to God.

The bold and creative darshan, Rabbi Hama bar Hanina (a second-generation Amora of the Land of Israel, (3rd century C.E.) read this verse and was also perplexed by the impossibility of fulfilling it. On the one hand, he would have obviously understood that to follow God means to follow the Torah and the teachings of the earlier sages. But in asking the question, **How does one actually follow God?** in a hyper-literalist way, he wanted to add a new dimension of understanding to this idea. Here is his teaching from Talmud Sotah 14a, (which has been widely anthologized and is even included in our siddur as a text for daily study, p. 18, IV).

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר כי ה' אלהיה אש אוכלה הוא!	<b>And R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: What does the text mean when it says, After the Lord your God you are to walk? Is it at all possible for a person to walk after the divine presence? After all, the Torah has already told us that The Lord your God is a consuming fire! (Deut. 4:24)</b>
אלא, להלך אחר מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא:	<b>Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He.</b>
מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב: "ויניעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתבות עור ויילבשם" — אף אתה תלביש ערומים.	<b>Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21), so too, should you clothe the naked.</b>
הקדוש ברוך הוא ביקר חולים, דכתיב: "וירא אליו ה' באלני ממרא" — אף אתה בקר חולים.	<b>Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, visits the sick, as it is written with regard to God's appearing to Abraham following his circumcision: "And the Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre" (Gen. 18:1) so too, should you visit the sick.</b>

הקדוש ברוך הוא נחם אבלים, דקתיב: "ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בגורו — אף אתה נחם אבלים.	<i>Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, consoles mourners, as it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11), so too, should you console mourners.</i>
הקדוש ברוך הוא קבר מתים, דקתיב: "ויקבר אותו בגורו" — אף אתה קבור מתים.	<i>Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: "And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab" (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead.</i>

What makes this text great is that it gives a novel interpretation to a difficult text, it resolves a deep theological tension that all people have when it comes trying to understand how to follow God and live a Godly life, and it gives us a call to action. R. Hama is saying to his audience of ordinary, hard-working, well-meaning, good, decent, but somewhat perplexed Jews: *I understand you. I understand how frustrating it is when some charismatic religious figure, a sage, or a preacher, gets up in front of you and says, "Follow God." It's a ridiculous statement! What does that even mean?! How do you follow God?! So here, let me help you. Let's examine the entire Torah and observe what God does. Especially in critical situations in which a particular individual is facing a very difficult set of circumstances. Most importantly, let's think about the attributes of God, the middot-מדות, that underly God's actions in those circumstances.* And then he works through the Torah chronologically to list the various examples of what God does for others, prompting the listeners to say to themselves, *I never thought of God in that way. That's so interesting. If God can do that, so can I. If that's what makes God Godly, then if I do those same things, I too, can be Godly.* And so, R. Hama points out that **God clothes the naked** (Adam and Eve), **visits the sick** (Abraham), **comforts the bereaved** (Isaac), **buries the dead** (Moses). And if he were to elaborate on those examples, he might have asked: *What are the attributes that drive those behaviors?* And his listeners would most likely have answered, as would we: *Compassion, concern, kindness, generosity, empathy, love, seeing the divine spark in every human being.* But let's take R. Hama's statement a little further. Each one of the examples he chooses is deliberate. Of course, each one is an act of *hesed*. The last one, burying the dead, is the ultimate *hesed*: *hesed shel emet*. In each one of these *hesed*-acts the recipients are helpless. Adam and Eve are naked and powerless, they are in a state of dislocation and trauma. And moreover, while they do have the knowledge gained from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they don't yet have the practical knowledge or experience of making clothing. When God *clothes* them, God is *present* for them. When Abraham recovers from his circumcision, he is not only in physical pain, he is at a moment in his life, let's not forget he was 99 at the time,

when he is quite bewildered. God has just promised him a son, but how will he and Sarah have the *koyach* to raise him, let alone bring him into the world? God visits him, and is *present* for him. And when God blesses Isaac after the loss of his father, (and let's assume that he was still mourning his mother and dealing with the trauma of the Akedah) it's more than just a blessing. It's *presence*. And Moses? The Torah's account of his death is spare and powerful. Having just gazed at the land of Israel, he dies **על פי ה'** (literally, *by the mouth of God*) which either means *at the order of God* or *by a divine kiss* - **בנשיקה** - as Rashi says. But even as we imagine that moment, we are confronted by the fact that at the final moment of Moses' life, there was no-one with him. Except for God, who was *present* for him too. In each of the examples, the recipients of God's *hesed* in a of emotional *alone-ness*. And in each of these examples, what God is giving to the recipients is the intangible quality of *presence*. R. Hama is speaking on two levels: **Follow God** means do what God does. Do acts of lovingkindness. By all means, clothe, visit, comfort, bury. Do *things*. Do *tangible acts*. But in each of those instances, do one more thing: *be present*. **Follow God** not only in the *doing-of-the-tangible* but in the *doing-of-the-intangible*. **Imitate God** not for the *act*, but for the *attribute that motivates the act*. Now, of course we are tempted to be critical of R. Hama and cite examples where God is punitive, destructive, and stern. Those actions are also guided by divine attributes **מדות**. The attribute of Justice, for example. I imagine that if R. Hama had to answer such a question he would have answered it with irony and humor: *Just as God is patient, so too must we all be, even I! But more seriously, God is always mediating Justice with Compassion. After all, we are all here, all of us undeserving and unworthy creatures. And why is that? It is only because God tempers his attribute of Justice with his attribute of Compassion. Let us be as Godly as possible and behave accordingly.*

#### **A Note about Sefaria.org on its 10th Anniversary**

This week marks the 10th anniversary of the launch of Sefaria.org, a website devoted to aggregating the entire library of Judaism, and making it accessible to everyone, everywhere, at all times. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Sefaria has revolutionized Judaic learning. When future historians examine this era in Jewish history, the 2013 launch of Sefaria, will be regarded as significant as the first printings of the Bible and the Talmud in late 15th century Italy. Sefaria has become indispensable! Example: In preparing this (un-sponsored) Parasha Sheet, I performed over 300 searches and clicks on Sefaria. If you have never looked at **Sefaria.org**, do so. And if you want to support Jewish learning in the digital era, go to **Sefaria.org**. **Mazal Tov Sefaria! And, Shabbat Shalom!**



