

MORE THAN ONE G-D?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And G-d said, 'Let Us make man, in Our own form, like Our own image...' [1:26]

The Medrash says that when Moshe reached this verse, he questioned it. "Why should the verse read 'let us,' thus leaving the door open for those who deny that there is only one G-d?" This is, of course, a fundamental distinction between Judaism and idolatry -- and the verse seems to indicate that there is more than one G-d, Heaven forbid! The question is even stronger, because the word Elo-him is itself plural. We understand this similarly to the royal "we," but when the verse is also plural, it sounds as if there is a "plurality."

G-d answered Moshe, telling him to write it as given. People can learn a lesson in proper conduct from this verse. If a person ever asks, "why should I consult my subordinates before making a decision?" -- we can answer that person by saying, "learn from your Creator, who Created the angels and the entire universe, and then consulted with the angels before creating man!" So this was the reason why Moshe was told to write the verse as indicated. And as for those who would reach the wrong conclusion, "one who wishes to err, let him err."

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman zt"l finds this answer troubling. In business, we know that there is something called a "cost-benefit relationship." Before going into a business opportunity, we look at the potential gains, and we also look at the potential losses. If one can make a substantial amount of money at low risk, then that qualifies as a good business venture. But if one has the opportunity to make a small amount of money, but in doing so risks his entire fortune -- that's foolish! Any intelligent investor would decide to take his or her money elsewhere.

Now, without question, the lesson in derech eretz [proper conduct] is very valuable. But when we look at the other side of the equation, we find one of the fundamentals of Jewish belief. A person could misread this verse and depart from Judaism entirely! How, from a "cost-benefit" perspective, is it worthwhile for the Torah to use a potentially misleading expression in such a "high risk" situation?

The answer, says Rabbi Wasserman, is that the "danger" is an illusion. In reality, there is no such risk -- for thousands of years, Jews of all ages have read, studied and learned this verse, in childhood, their teens, adulthood and senior years. And not once has one of them lifted his or her head from the page and said -- "you see, there's more than one G-d (ch"v)!"

It doesn't work that way. Rather, a person decides to take off down a new path, and then -- post-facto, as it were -- goes into the text and searches for justification for his or her position. If he doesn't

find this, he will find something else. There is no real loss, nothing to be gained by using a different expression, so it is not worth passing up the opportunity for such a beautiful lesson.

As G-d said to Moshe in the Medrash, one who wishes to make a mistake, let him make one -- the verse is not leading him in that direction. One who wants the truth will get it: Rashi adds that the answer is in the very next verse, which says that G-d created them -- and uses the singular form for "created", rather than the plural.

One does not make theological mistakes by learning. One makes theological mistakes through a lack of learning. When a person is parched with a spiritual thirst, any water tastes delicious -- whether a polluted stream or the pure waters of Torah. Then one searches out verses in Torah to support the new ideology, and of course -- given enough time -- finds them.

The only adequate preventative is -- the real thing. Every Jewish child deserves the opportunity to learn about Judaism, to study the Torah, to join the 3300-year-old avocation of our people. It's the joy of a lifetime, and the only way to ensure a Jewish future. Not that it's ever too late to start -- but why not start early?