

# OHR NET

THE OHR SOMAYACH TORAH MAGAZINE ON THE INTERNET

# TARYAG

BY RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

The Jewish people were given 613 commandments (*mitzvos*), 248 of which are positive and 365 negative. The positive *mitzvos* equal the number of parts of the body; the negative *mitzvos* correspond to the number of days in the solar year.

Thus are we introduced to 613, the magic number of Torah scholarship and Jewish living. Its source is the Babylonian Talmud; its importance is echoed in a vast body of scholarly literature spanning a millennium; its potential as an aid to studying and remembering Torah deserves our careful analysis.

The Talmud refers to this number as “*taryag mitzvos*.” Classical Jewish sources assign a numerical value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is treated not as a mere utilitarian collection of word components but as a conveyor of esoteric information through the Kabbalistic medium of gematriya. Thus the gematriya (numerical

equivalent) of *taryag* is 613 (*tav* = 400, *raish* = 200, *yud* = 10, and *gimel* = 3). The tradition of *taryag mitzvos* was developed by Rabbi Simlai of the Talmud, reasoning as follows: Scripture tells us that Moshe commanded the Torah

(Pentateuch) to the Children of Israel. The gematriya of the four Hebrew letters of the word Torah is 611. Add to this the two commandments which all of

Israel heard from G-d Himself at Mt. Sinai and you have a total of 613 — *taryag*.

Before any ambitious Bible student goes plunging into the Five Books of the Torah in search of a list of these commandments, he should be warned that the task is more formidable than it seems. The Torah is a fascinating complex of prophetic history and Divine guidance, encompassing the entire human and universal experience, and the commandments contained therein represent but one of its



*Continued on page six*

*by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair*

## The MEDIUM & the MESSAGE

“Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Yisrael” (*Bamidbar* 1:2)

Last time I was in America I went for a walk around the Warner Brothers store. It was amazing. All my childhood memories come to life. Original animation cells of “Lady and The Tramp” (a mere \$500). A Batmobile so real you could get a parking ticket for it. Bugs Bunny ashtrays, pajamas, cookie jars. I have never seen a store so full of things that I didn’t need.

It was thirty years ago that American sociologist, Marshall Macluan coined the phrase “The Medium is The Message.” He diagnosed that Western society had replaced form with feeling. It wasn’t so important what you said anymore, rather the way you said it. A former “B” movie actor could rise to be the most powerful man in the world. The entertainment industry had enshrined the principle that “feeling good” was the embodiment of the American dream. Feeling replaced thought as the

*Continued on page eight*

# ASK the RABBI

## Gifts.doc

Michael Reuben from Manchester, UK  
<Michael.M.Reuben@stud.man.ac.uk>  
wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Is it permissible for a doctor to accept free gifts from a drug company? As a little background, many drug companies offer gifts — pens, diaries, clocks, etc.— to doctors in order to advertise their products. This obviously influences (to some extent) the choice of prescription and I would like to know whether or not this constitutes a bribe. Would it be different for a medical student (who receives gifts but cannot prescribe medication)?

Dear Michael Reuben,

I asked your question to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Auerbach, shlitá. He cited the Talmud (*Bava Batra 21b*) which states that a store owner may hand out sweets and nuts to drum up business. He said that this applies to the drug companies as well.

The reason that these gifts are not considered bribes, Rabbi Auerbach explained, is that the pharmaceutical companies do not intend the doctors to prescribe medicine that is inappro-

priate or unnecessary. They are merely trying to influence doctors to prescribe their products as opposed to similar products manufactured by competing pharmaceutical companies.

## Sum-buddies

Avi Ziskind from South Africa  
<az@uctvms.uct.ac.za> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

When the Torah records the counting of the Jewish People, it rounds off the numbers to the nearest 50. I find this hard to understand. If one of the purposes of the counting is for Hashem to show His love for each individual Jew, like a king who counts and recounts his precious jewels, how can the Torah round off the numbers just for “neatness” as it seems to be doing, seemingly disregarding the exact number of people, and rather giving us a general idea?

Mel Friedman from San Antonio, Texas <melf@txdirect.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

There is a census taken at the beginning and end of Bamidbar. The confusing part for me is why are all the numbers apparently rounded to the nearest hundred?

Dear Avi Ziskind and Mel Friedman,  
When the Torah lists the number of people in each of the 12 tribes in Parshat Bamidbar, each number is a multiple of either 50 or 100. There are differing views regarding whether or not these numbers are exact. One view is that the Torah rounded off the numbers. This isn't surprising considering that the Torah does this in other places as well. For example, the Torah says to “Count 50 days” between Pesach and Shavuot, when in reality there are only 49.

Counting the nation benefited the community and the individual. When the individual passed before Moshe and Aharon, Moshe and Aharon would bless the person and pray for him. This itself was a tremendous benefit for the person. Furthermore, each person was counted via his own half-shekel donation, and this served as an atonement for him. These individual benefits were in no way diminished by the fact that the Torah reports rounded numbers.

The communal benefit of the counting was similar to the benefit of any census, which helps the leaders decide how to best serve the needs of the community and tells how many people are available for military service. This was important for the Jewish People who were preparing to war against the Canaanites, and therefore needed to know their own military might. In this sense, round numbers suffice.

Sources:

- Sefer HaParshiot, Eliyahu KiTov Bamidbar p. 33
- Ramban 1:45

**OHRNET**

THE OHR SOMAYACH TORAH MAGAZINE ON THE INTERNET

Published by

**OHR SOMAYACH**  
TANENBAUM COLLEGE

POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel • Tel: 02-581-0315 • Fax: 02-581-2890

General Editor: **Rabbi Moshe Newman**

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Web Production: **Eli Ballon, Michael Treblow**

Produced by the Office of Communications **Rabbi Eliezer Shapiro, Director**

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PRINTED IN ISRAEL AT OLD CITY PRESS 02-651-1529

לע"נ  
מרת מרים בת  
ר' יחזקאל דב ע"ה  
ח' סיון תשנ"ה  
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

# ASK the RABBI

## Black & White Fire

Ron Cohen <capnrcg@aol.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,  
We are preparing a tour of Jewish artists for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This is a world class museum with very little on Jewish art or artists. One artist mentions "black fire white fire" as the inspiration for one of his paintings. He says it is from the Zohar. Can you please give me some references or some other information on this? I can not find it. Thank You.

Dear Ron Cohen,

In the Zohar we find a statement that the Torah was written with "black fire upon white fire." One explanation of "black fire and white fire" is that black fire denotes Divine Mercy while white fire is Divine Justice. The Maharsha explains that to appreciate G-d one must recognize the fact that both mercy and judgment are Divine attributes.

Interestingly, the concept of colored fire recurs in Midrashic literature. According to the Midrash, G-d showed Moshe the menorah made out of white, green, red and black fire.

Sources:

- Zohar 3 Parshat Naso page 132a
- Devarim Rabbah Parsha 3
- Tanchuma, Parshat Shemini 10
- Maharsha, Tractate Berachot 33a

## Si, Si, Senior

George Wiley from Baldwin City, Kansas <gbwiley@idir.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,  
I read in the paper that when Edgar Bronfman, Sr., named his son Edgar Bronfman, Jr., he violated a Jewish belief against naming a son after his father. Assuming that the newspaper report was correct in this regard, what is the basis for this prohibition?

Dear George Wiley,

There's no prohibition against naming a son after a living father.

However, it is the custom of Jews of European descent not to name children after living relatives. If they name the child after a relative, their custom is to name the child after a deceased relative, as if to say that this child will carry on their tradition.

The Jews of the Middle East, North Africa and Asia do name children after living relatives, and they consider it a great honor to have a child named for them. However, they too generally refrain from naming a child after a living parent. Usually grandparents are the first ones honored by having a child named for them.

## "And Let Us Say..."

Leetal Rivlin from Katzrin, Golan Heights, Israel <rivlin@canaan.co.il> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,  
What are the origins of the word amen? When does it first appear in the Torah? When does it first appear in other religious practices? Thank you.

Dear Leetal Rivlin,

"Amen" first appears in the Torah in *Bamidbar*, Numbers, in chapter 5, verse 22: "And the woman shall say 'amen, amen'." The context there is that a woman is being administered an oath. Saying *amen* is her acceptance of the oath as true, and that she accepts the consequences of the oath if she is lying. In this sense, the word *amen* means "true."

The letters of *amen*, "*alef mem nun*," are also seen by our Sages as an acrostic hinting to the phrase "(K)el Melech Ne'eman" — "G-d, the faithful King."

Perhaps the first place it can be seen as said in a "religious" ritual is at the end of Psalm 41, which ends the first of the five books of Psalms. There, King David says, "Blessed is the L-rd, G-d of Israel, for ever and ever; *amen* and *amen*." This verse is

very similar to what we call a "blessing," and it ends with "*amen*."

Sources indicate that *amen* was said after blessings at least as early as the beginning of the Second Temple period. There's no evidence that this was when it was first introduced, and it very likely goes back much farther.

Sources:

- Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 119b, Ta'anit 16b

## YIDDLE RIDDLE

Last week we asked:

When is the only time one would say "*Av Harachamim*" two days in a row? (*Av Harachamim* is the prayer which according to Ashkenazic custom is generally said on Shabbat before *musaf*).

- Riddle submitted by Dr. Joel Luber, Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem

Answer:

In Eretz Yisrael, when *Erev Shavuot* falls on Shabbat, *Av Harachamim* is said on Shabbat, and again on Sunday — *Shavuot* — as part of *Yizkor* (Ashkenazic custom).

Though *Av Harachamim* is usually omitted on a Shabbat falling on a day when *Tachanun* would be omitted were it a weekday, it is nonetheless recited the Shabbat before *Shavuot*, even if it is *Erev Yom Tom*. This is because the massacres of Rhineland Jewry during the First Crusade reached their peak in the beginning of *Sivan*.

Originally, *Av Harachamim* was recited on only one or two *Shabbatot* during the year, the *Shabbatot* before *Shavuot* and before *Tisha B'Av*. This is still the custom of many German Jewish communities and the United Synagogues of Great Britain. As persecutions and martyrdom continued throughout the centuries, its recital was extended to most *Shabbatot*.

Source:

- *Bein Pesach L'Shavuot* by Rabbi Zvi Cohen, ch. 3, paragraphs 6,13,14



## THE MEGILLAH OF RUTH

### QUESTIONS?

1. Who wrote the Book of Ruth?
2. During which historical period did the events of the Megillah of Ruth occur?
3. Who was Naomi's husband?
4. After she returned from Moav, by what name did Naomi ask to be called?
5. How was Boaz related to Naomi?
6. Into what did Boaz tell Ruth to dip her bread?
7. Why is Elimelech's brother referred to as *Ploni Almoni* and not by his real name?
8. With what object did Boaz redeem Elimelech's property?
9. The people and the elders blessed Ruth that she should be like whom?
10. What was Ruth's relationship to King David?

### ANSWERS!

1. The Prophet Samuel (*Bava Batra 14b*).
2. During the era of the *Shoftim*, the Judges. Boaz was the *shofet* at the time (1:1).
3. Elimelech (1:2).
4. Mara (1:20).
5. He was her husband's brother's son (2:1, Rashi).
6. Vinegar (2:14).
7. Because he didn't want to redeem his brother's property and thereby discharge his family duty (Rashi 4:1).
8. With a shoe (according to the Targum, a glove) (4:8).
9. Like Rachel and Leah (4:11).
10. She was his great-grandmother: Ruth, Oved, Yishai, David (4:22).

### BONUS QUESTION?

Why do we read the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuos? (List as many reasons as you can).

### ANSWER TO BONUS QUESTION!

Here are seven reasons why we read the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuos:

1. The events occurred during the harvest season. Shavuos is the harvest festival.
2. Ruth was a convert to Judaism. Conversion is an individual *Kabbalas HaTorah*.
3. Ruth the Moabite was permitted to marry Boaz, based on a *drasha* (a teaching of the Oral Law) of the verse, "A Moabite may not marry into the Congregation of Hashem" (*Devarim 23:4*). This hints at the unity between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.
4. David Hamelech was born on Shavuos. The Megillah of Ruth concludes with David's lineage.
5. To teach the greatness of *gemillus chassadim* — acts of loving-kindness.
6. To teach that the Torah is acquired only through affliction and poverty.
7. The name "Ruth" has the numerical value of 606. At *Har Sinai* the Jewish People accepted 606 *mitzvos*, in addition to the 7 Noachide Laws which were incumbent upon them already.

### I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

There is a custom to eat dairy products on Shavuos. Pharaoh's daughter drew Moshe out of the water on the 6th of Sivan, and he was willing to be nursed only by a Hebrew woman. Therefore we recall Moshe's merit on the sixth of Sivan — Shavuos — by eating milk foods. Furthermore, the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew word *chalav* (milk) add up to 40 corresponding to the 40 days Moshe spent on Mount Sinai.

• *Sefer Matamim, Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropol*

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## THE MUSHROOM MYSTERY

In order to walk on Shabbos more than 2,000 *amos* beyond the city border, one must make an “*eruv techumim*” by placing enough food for two Shabbos meals at the point where the “*techum*” boundary of 2,000 ends. It is then considered as if he had established his residence there and he may proceed from there another 2,000 *amos*.

Not everything, however, qualifies as food for this *eruv*, or for an *eruv* which is made to allow residents of different courtyards to carry objects into the alley into which their courtyards empty. The *mishna* excludes only water or salt from being considered acceptable foods. A simple reading of our *gemara* indicates that truffles and mushrooms are also excluded. The reason for their exclusion even when cooked, say the early commentaries, is that people do not generally rely on them as a staple, nor even as an accompaniment to meals, and only occasionally indulge in them. Rambam goes even further in ascribing their exclusion to their negative nutritional impact.

Despite this consensus of so many major commentaries based on the text before us, the text before the Gaon of Vilna has an “*etc.*” added to the quotation from the *mishna*, which radically alters the *gemara*’s meaning. The exclusion of mushrooms, in his text, is limited to the law of “*maaser sheni*” — the second tithe — mentioned in our *mishna* immediately after the law of *eruv*. The Torah sets down special rules for what one may purchase in Jerusalem with the money from the redemption of *maaser sheni*. These rules preclude mushrooms because they do not grow from the earth but are only fungi. As far as *eruv* is concerned, he concludes, once they have been cooked into an edible state they qualify as food.

This innovative approach of the Gaon is elaborated upon in another footnote on our *gemara* page, that of Rabbi Betzalel of Regensburg, and is mentioned by the *Mishna Berura* (366:23) as well.

• Eruvin 27a

## A TIMELY REWARD

When does Hashem pay the reward due a man for his good deeds? In regard to the wicked, the Torah tells us (*Devarim* 7:10) that “He does not delay in regard to one who hates Him, and He pays him to his face.” But in regard to the righteous, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi points out on the basis of the very next passage, the reward is delayed: “The commandment which I command you this day to do them” indicates that *mitzvos* can only be done *today* — in this world — while their reward is reserved for *tomorrow* — the World to Come.

An interesting explanation of the timing of payment is offered by *Iyun Yaakov* on the basis of an analogy to the Torah law requiring an employer to pay his employee promptly upon completion of his day’s work. Since we are similar to employees in the service of our Creator it would seem that payment should be due every time we complete the performance of a *mitzvah*. This is where the righteous differ from the wicked for two reasons.

First of all, wages are due the worker only when he demands payment. The righteous man does not serve Hashem for the purpose of reward, so no such demand emanates from him. The wicked one is motivated in the little good he does by the promise of reward, so there is a demand for payment which is promptly met.

An even more dramatic difference between the two is seen against the background of the law which states that payment is due only upon the completion of the stipulated term of service — a day worker at the end of the day, a year worker at the end of the year, a seven-year worker at the end of seven years. The righteous man is in the constant service of his Divine employer until the end of his life on earth. Payment is therefore delayed until the day after this service is terminated — the tomorrow of eternity. The wicked man, however, performs an occasional *mitzvah* and then takes a long vacation from serving Hashem, so that his reward must be given to him right away.

• Eruvin 22a

dimensions. Tradition has it that God used the Torah as His blueprint for creating the world and that all of its letters can be combined to form the different sacred names of the Deity. Attempting to approach the Torah superficially is therefore as safe as negotiating an iceberg. One unfamiliar with the Talmudic ground-rules for calculating the *mitzvos* is likely to come up with a number far below or beyond the 613 total. In actuality the Torah contains thousands of rules and the *taryag mitzvos* are only the broad classifications.

### THE FIRST SHORTHAND

The first recorded attempt to develop scholarly criteria for counting the commandments was made close to 1,000 years ago by Rabbi Shimon Kaeira, whose classic *Halachos Gedolos* (The Great Laws) became the pacesetter in this field. The famed medieval Spanish scholar, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, suggests that something along the lines of Rabbi Kaeira's work had been written more than two millennia earlier by Joshua and the Children of Israel when entering the Land of Israel. Commanded by G-d to record the entire Torah in 70 languages on 12 great stones after crossing the Jordan, they faced the apparently insurmountable task of inscribing millions of words. Ibn Ezra concludes that they only listed the 613 commandments in each language, rather than the whole Torah.

Even if Ibn Ezra is correct in his assumption, later generations had no record of which commandments were indeed inscribed on those stones. Kaeira's work won wide acceptance but by no means went unchallenged. There has probably been no single item of the Talmud which has been the subject of so much critical analysis as Rabbi Simlai's statement. Rav Saadia Gaon's listing differed from Rabbi Kaeira's, and Maimonides challenged them both. His own compilation laid the groundwork for his *Sefer Hamitzvos* (Book of the Mitzvos) and the classic *Mishneh Torah* codification which followed. Dozens of volumes and epic poems have been authored throughout the generations of the *taryag* theme, with earlier generations favoring Rabbi Kaeira's system and the later ones following the pattern of Maimonides.

But there was consensus in one matter: The usefulness of the listing of the *mitzvos* as a medium for gaining a perspective of all the Divine commandments included in the Torah's message to Jewry. The great French Torah authority and itinerant preacher, Rabbi Moshe of Coucy, memorized all of the 613 *mitzvos* as a personal checklist when he set out in 1235 on a tour of Jewish communities in France and Spain for the purpose of strengthening their fulfillment of Torah commandments. French Jewry was then suffering from the decree of Crusader King Louis IX (who was later canonized by the Catholic Church) on the burning of the Talmud, and these talks on the *mitzvos* filled a serious intellectual void. In one community after another he was besieged by information-hungry audiences asking him to expand his lectures into

a full-fledged book.

Modesty prevented the sage of Coucy from undertaking a work of such magnitude for the public. Then one night he was commanded in a dream to write a book on the *mitzvos* which was to be divided into two sections: The positive commandments and the negative ones. The response to this prophetic dream was the compilation of the classic *Sefer Hamitzvos Hagadol* (The Great Book of Mitzvos).

Not long afterwards, another French sage, Rabbi Yitzchak of Couerville, compiled a more concise listing of the *mitzvos*, *Sefer Mitzvos Katan* (The Small Book of Mitzvos), which he dispatched at his own expense to Jewish communities in western Europe so that they might copy its contents as a record of the commandments they were obligated to fulfill.

### THE NIGHT-LONG VIGILS

The situation in Spain was different. There was no need for *mitzvah* listings as a replacement for banned literature. But even here the need was felt for providing at least a periodic review of the commandments in order to refresh the Torah perspective of both scholar and layman. An ingenious method, typical of the character of medieval Spanish Jewry, was developed. Scholar-poets wove all 613 commandments into long poems to be recited once a year. The time chosen for this unique sort of review was the long sleepless night with which Jews traditionally usher in the Shavuot festival. As they celebrate this holiday, known as "the season of the giving of our Torah," the People of the Torah recall with shame that on a summer morning in the year 2448 (1312 BCE) in the Sinai Desert, they had to be roused from their sleep by G-d, anxious to give them His Torah. As an atonement for this ancestral lack of enthusiasm, they stay awake all Shavuot eve studying Torah. The most renowned of these poetic compilations which became part of the *tikkun* (order) of Shavuot eve are the *Azharos* (warnings) of Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gvirol, and it is his version which so many Oriental Jews still recite during their all-night holiday vigil.

There is an apocryphal tale of how Ibn Gvirol's masterpiece was inspired. Once, when he was still an 18-year-old student in the yeshiva, he heard the master announce that he would offer the hand of his exceptional daughter in marriage to the disciple who would present him with some new scholarly creation. That night the young scholar-poet went without sleep, pouring all of his energies into the writing of his *Azharos* and tossing the finished manuscript into his master's home through an open skylight. The following morning the master found the papers, recognized Ibn Gvirol's handwriting, and immediately made arrangements for taking him as his son-in-law.

The once-a-year recital of *taryag mitzvos* through *Azharos* poetry did not satisfy religious leaders in other lands who felt a need for a more frequent review. Rav Moshe of Couerville recorded his listing of relevant com-

## PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions  
concerning previous “Ohrnet” features

### Re: Yiddle Riddle (Ohrnet Tzav):

Regarding names in Megillat Esther also appearing as names in the Chumash, I found two more that you omitted: *Shimi* (Exodus 6:17 & Esther 2:5), and *Avichayil* (Numbers 3:35 & Esther 2:15).

• *Chaim Levin, Jerusalem*

### Re: Mosquitoes (Ohrnet Tzav):

I heard from Rav Moshe Aharon Stern, *zatzal*, a *pshat* that he learned from Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz, *zatzal*. The students were sitting outdoors on a hot summer evening studying with Rav Mendelowitz and the boys were being constantly

pestered by “thousands of mosquitoes.” Rav Shraga Feivel couldn’t understand why the boys couldn’t sit still since he couldn’t see the bugs in the dark and for some reason he wasn’t being affected by them. The next day they were again sitting with the Rav learning *Sefer Mishlei*. They came to the verse (16:7) “When a man’s ways please the L-rd, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” Rav Shraga Feivel quoted a Midrash that “*even his enemies*” refers to mosquitoes and other insects. The students realized that this was a Heavenly message which explained the events of the previous evening while simultaneously revealing to them at least one aspect of their Rabbi’s true greatness.

• *Shaul Gutstein, Har Nof, Jerusalem*

### THE 613 COMMANDMENTS....continued from page six

mandments on seven pages so that a Jew could complete the entire listing each week through daily review. Rabbi Aharon Halevi of Barcelona, a contemporary of the sages of Coucy and Couerville, arranged his *Sefer Hachinuch* (Book of Education) according to weekly Torah portions to encourage his son and other youths to reflect upon the *mitzvos* contained in each chapter. The motivation for this effort, as explained in his introduction, has a ring of contemporary significance: “To familiarize them with the *mitzvos* and to occupy their minds with pure thought and meaningful calculation lest they take into their hearts calculations of amusement, insignificance and meaninglessness; and even when they grow older these *mitzvos* shall not depart from them.” The weekly portion system of listing the *mitzvos* for review was utilized a few centuries later by Rabbi Yeshaya Halevi Horowitz in his *Shnei Luchos Habris* (Two Tablets of the Covenant).

### DAILY REVIEW

The idea of a comprehensive review each week was revived by Rabbi Shabtai Hacohen (1621-1663),

author of the classical *Sifsei Cohen* on the Shulchan Aruch. His *Poel Tzedek* (Worker of Righteousness) was a listing of the 613 *mitzvos*, each identified by a one-line scriptural source. He divided them into seven sections to enable readers to easily complete a total review each week. Rabbi David Arel of Volozhin made the same time-breakdown in his elaboration of the *Keter Torah* (Crown of Torah) compilation of *mitzvos* authored by Rabbi David Vital.

Even a week was too long for some authors. Rabbi Shabtai considered a daily review of all the *mitzvos* as the ideal fulfillment of the prophetic command: “This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall study therein day and night.” He submitted his weekly plan only as a concession to those who couldn’t keep the daily pace.

Somewhere in between the ideal and practical paces discussed by his predecessors is the quota suggested by a Torah giant of the last generation. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen Kagan (1838-1933), known as the Chafetz Chaim, wrote *Sefer Hamitzvos Hakatzar* (Abridged Book of Mitzvos)

in which he offered brief descriptions of the commandments relevant to our own times. He advised reviewing half the positive commands on Monday and half on Thursday, repeating the same pattern the following week in regard to negative commands.

Almost a millennium is spanned by all these efforts, from the pacesetting, comprehensive *Halachos Gedolos* till the Chafetz Chaim’s concentration on relevance. The common denominator of all these works is their authors’ conviction that it is vital for a Jew to regularly review the commandments as a means of refreshing his sense of duty and his general Torah perspective.

In this age of the information explosion, there is still very little available for the uninformed Jew curious about his heritage, but too impatient to read lengthy works at the outset of his investigation. The experience of 1,000 years teaches us that *taryag mitzvos* may well provide both the medium and the message for the student in search of an introduction to the vast wealth of Torah knowledge.

continued from page one

vehicle of communication.

This week we celebrate Shavuos, the festival of the giving of the Torah. The Torah, as the blueprint of the world, is the ultimate expression of what reality is. Therefore, the way in which the Torah was given must also express a truth about the nature of reality.

The Torah was not given to the Jewish People as a group of individuals. Its giving required them to be a *klal*, a united entity, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

When the Jewish People stood at Sinai they were “*like one man with one heart*” (Rashi). Interestingly, Rashi uses almost exactly the same phrase to describe Pharaoh and the Egyptian army at the crossing of the Sea: “*With one heart like one man.*” A subtle reversal of the order. The Jewish People are “*like one man with one heart.*” The Egyptians “*with one heart like one man.*” What is the significance of this reversing of the word order?

The heart represents the raw matter of existence. The raw material which waits for an imprint, a form to define it. The heart is the medium. The nature of emotion is to be molded, to be channeled. Not to lead.

The form of something is its spiritual component. Its purpose. The form is the message.

A spoon, for example. A spoon consists of two parts. Its matter is the metal. Its form is its purpose: To scoop and stir. That’s why it has a scoop at one end and a long handle. Its form expresses its purpose. The function of a thing is its spiritual dimension, its spiritual identity in the world.

The nature of physical things is to be passive. The nature of spiritual things is to be active. The shape of the spoon dominates the metal and defines it, not the reverse. That is the correct order of the world. Form shaping matter. The message shaping the medium.

The word for “man” in Hebrew is *ish*. *Ish* comes from

the word *aish* meaning “fire.” Fire symbolizes spirituality. It is the nature of fire to rise upwards; it is the nature of spirituality to aspire upwards. The nature of fire is to dominate; the nature of spirituality is to rule: A small nation imbued with a spiritual ideal can overcome a large nation which is apathetic and decadent. This has been the lesson of history. Someone with a spiritual motivation will ultimately rule over someone with a physical motivation because the physical desires inertia, to be passive, to take it easy.

When intellect dominates the emotions, when the message dominates the medium, then we have the very picture of how the Torah was given. “*Like one man with one heart.*” The *man* — the intellect, the spiritual component leading the *heart* — the raw material, the medium.

However, when the heart dominates the mind, *the medium becomes the message*. This is the literal antithesis of the way the Torah was given.

Then you have a world where Bugs Bunny becomes the President.

## THE GOOD BOOK

“*In the desert*” (1:1)

This week we start reading the Book of Bamidbar/Numbers. Bamidbar means “*In the desert.*” Why was the Torah given in the desert?

The desert is the archetype of desolation, the antithesis of life and activity. The symbol of civilization, of the flow and vitality of life, is the city. A city consists of houses, and the houses, stones.

The letters of the *alef-beis* are like stones. Just as each stone by itself is devoid of life, but when combined together into a house they form a setting of life and vitality, so the letters of a word: By themselves they

## Parsha Overview

The book of *Bamidbar* — “*In the desert*” — begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to take a census of all the men over the age of twenty — old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *Levi'im* are counted separately later, because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the *Mishkan* and its furnishings and putting them together when the nation encamps. The Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the *Mishkan* in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp. A formal transfer is made between the first born and the *Levi'im*, whereby the *Levi'im* take over the role the firstborn would have had serving in the *Mishkan* if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *Levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *Levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the *Mishkan*. The remaining firstborn sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our firstborn today. The sons of Levi are divided in three main families, Gershon, Kehas and Merari (besides the *Kohanim* — the special division from Kehas’ family). The family of Kehas carried the *menorah*, the table, the altar and the Holy Ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the ark and the altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *Levi'im* prepare them for travel.



radiate no light or life, but built into words and sentences, sayings and utterances, they radiate the light of intellect that infuses life into man; that leads him and guides him.

“With the word of Hashem, the heavens were made.” The entire world was created with the combination of the letters of the Hebrew *aleph-beis*. The letters and the words are spread out and dispersed over the whole face of the earth.

We have a choice. If, through these letters and words, we recognize Hashem in the world; if they are like beads of a necklace revealing the Godly thread that weaves the world into One, then the world is no longer a desolate wasteland, but a populous city vibrant with life and purpose.

However, if we fail to comprehend the writing of the Divine Hand, if we make no effort to assemble the letters of existence into words and sentences, then the world remains a desolate wilderness.

Picture two people reading the same book. One reads with insight and understanding; the other spews forth a jumble of letters and words without grasp or comprehension. The first reader kindles the light of wisdom that is in the words; he brings them to life. The second leaves behind him a trail of dead stones. The world is a large book. Fortunate is he who knows how to read and understand it.

“When the Jewish People stood at Sinai they were ‘like one man with one heart’...”

## PRELUDE

“In the desert” (1:1)

This year, Shabbos falls on the day before Shavuos. We go straight from Shabbos into Shavuos. Historically also, Shabbos was given to the Jewish People before the giving of the Torah. It was the power of Shabbos that brought us to Sinai: For Shabbos creates unity in the Jewish People. And unity among the Jewish People is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. When the family sits together as one at the Shabbos table, we recreate that same unity.

And unity among the Jewish People is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. When the family sits together as one at the Shabbos table, we recreate that same unity.

If the unity that Shabbos creates is one way we prepare for receiving the Torah, another way is the self-abnegation that Shabbos represents: Instead of being full of ourselves, we make ourselves like the desert, void of all personal concerns.

We free ourselves of the shackles and cares of the working week and dedicate ourselves to spiritual pursuits. All we wish is to be close to Hashem on this special day and do His will. Every Jew has this capability of self-denial which expresses itself in refraining from creative work on Shabbos.

Thus, Shabbos is a necessary prelude to the receiving of the Torah. As it says in the Haggadah of Pesach: “And He gave us the Shabbos and He brought us close to Mount Sinai.”

Sources:

- *The Medium And The Message* - Maharal, Rabbi Noach Orlowek • *The Good Book* - Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin - *Torah U'Moadim*
- *Prelude* - Sfas Emes

## Haftorah - Hoshea 2-1:22

### THE SEA WALL

“But the limited number of the Children of Israel will become (as important) as the sand of the sea which is not measured nor counted” (12:1).

Israel is the smallest of the nations. Ten of its tribes, five-sixths of its number, have been completely lost to our sight. The remainder has been repeatedly battered by the storm-winds of history.

Numerically, we have little significance. And yet, it is this scattered remnant who are destined to be of vital importance to the nations of the world. Just as the sand on the seashore which seems so insignificant when considered grain by grain, yet holds back the mighty forces of the sea, so too the Jewish People, scattered amongst the nations, will form the mighty bulwark behind which a world, weary of blind dogma and rampant materialism, will ultimately find refuge.

• Rabbi S.R. Hirsch

# PARSHA Q&A

1. Why were the Jewish People counted so frequently?
2. What documents did the people bring when they were counted?
3. What determined the color of the tribal flags?
4. What is the difference between an *os* and a *degel*?
5. How do we see that the Jews in the time of Moshe observed '*techum Shabbos*' — the prohibition against traveling more than 2000 *amos* on Shabbos?
6. What was the signal for the camp to travel?
7. What was the sum total of the counting of the 12 tribes?
8. Why are Aharon's sons called "sons of Aharon and Moshe?"
9. Who was Nadav's oldest son?
10. Which two people from *Megillas Esther* does Rashi mention in this week's *Parsha*?
11. Why did the *levi'im* receive *ma'aser rishon*?
12. Which groups of people were counted from the age of one month?
13. Name the first descendant of Levi in history to be counted as an infant.
14. Who assisted Moshe in counting the *levi'im*?
15. Why did so many people from the tribe of Reuven support Korach in his campaign against Moshe?
16. Why did so many people from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar, and Zevulun become great Torah scholars?
17. In verse 3:39 the Torah states that the total number of *Levi'im* was 22,000. The actual number of *Levi'im* was 22,300. Why does the Torah seem to ignore 300 *Levi'im*?
18. The firstborn males of the Jewish People were redeemed for five *shekalim*. Why five *shekalim*?
19. During what age-span is a man considered at his full strength?
20. As the camp was readying itself for travel, who was in charge of covering the vessels of the *Mishkan* in preparation for transport?

## Answers to this Week's Questions

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated

1. 1:1 - They are very dear to Hashem.
2. 1:18 - They brought birth records proving their tribal lineage.
3. 2:2 - Each tribe's flag was the color of that tribe's stone in the *Kohen Gadol's* breastplate.
4. 2:2 - An *os* is a *flag*, i.e., a colored cloth that hangs from a flagpole. A *degel* is a flagpole.
5. 2:2 - Hashem commanded them to camp no more than 2000 *amos* from the *Ohel Mo'ed*. Had they camped farther, it would have been forbidden for them to go to the *Ohel Mo'ed* on Shabbos.
6. 2:9 - The cloud over the *Ohel Mo'ed* departed and the *kohanim* sounded the trumpets.
7. 2:32 - 603,550.
8. 3:1 - Since Moshe taught them Torah, it's as if he gave birth to them.
9. 3:4 - Nadav had no children.
10. 3:7 - Bigsan and Seresh.
11. 3:8 - Since the *Levi'im* served in the *Mishkan* in place of everyone else, they received tithes as "payment."
12. 3:15, 40 - The *Levi'im*, and the firstborn of B'nei Yisrael.
13. 3:15 - Levi's daughter Yocheved was born while the Jewish People were entering Egypt. She is counted as one of the 70 people who entered Egypt.
14. 3:16 - Hashem.
15. 3:29 - The tribe of Reuven was encamped near Korach, and were therefore influenced for the worse. This teaches that one should avoid living near the wicked.
16. 3:38 - The tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar, and Zevulun were encamped near Moshe, and were therefore influenced for the good. This teaches that one should seek to live near the righteous.
17. 3:39 - Each *Levi* served to redeem a first born of the Jewish People. Since 300 *Levi'im* were themselves first born, they themselves needed to be redeemed, and could therefore not redeem others.
18. 3:46 - To atone for the sale of Yosef, Rachel's firstborn, who was sold by his brothers for five *shekalim* (20 pieces of silver.)
19. 4:2 - Between the ages of 30 and 50.
20. 4:5 - The *kohanim*.

## RECOMMENDED READING LIST

- RAMBAN  
Introduction to *Bamidbar*  
1:3 The Draft Age  
1:45 The Reason for Counting  
2:2 The Organization of the Camp  
3:14 The *Levi'im*  
4:16 The Role of Elazar ben Aharon
- IBN EZRA  
1:19 Organization of the Camp
- SFORNO  
Introduction to *Bamidbar*

## BONUS Question

### SHERLOX HOLMES & THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING NEIGHBOR

“I will miss our neighbors dearly,” said Watstein looking wistfully out the window. “No one trims shrubbery like Mr. Greenleaf. Maybe he’ll leave me his hedge-trimmer as a memento.”

“Yes,” said world famous de-text-ive Sherlock Holmes, “one can certainly learn a great deal from one’s neighbors. For instance, read this verse and Rashi’s explanation.”

Watstein read: “*And those who camped in front of the Mishkan eastward were ... Moshe and Aharon and his sons*

(*Bamidbar* 3:38).’ Rashi comments that because Moshe was in the east, he was near the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun; due to their proximity to Moshe, the people of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun became great Torah Scholars.”

“Instructive, isn’t it?” said Sherlock.

“But why does Rashi offer this seemingly extraneous information? The verse gives a very clear, simple description of the camp. Is there something wrong with the text as it stands?” asked Watstein.

“If you want to get to know a verse,” said Sherlock with a wry grin, “You’ve got to look at its neighbors.”

*What did Sherlock mean?*

### I Did Not Know That!

When Yaakov blessed his sons at the end of his life, he hinted that the tribes of Reuven, Yehuda, Yosef and Dan would lead the four flag-camps. Anyone whom Yaakov addressed in the second person — “you” — became the head of a flag-camp. Reuven: “*You* are my firstborn”; Yehuda: “*You*, will your brothers acknowledge”; Yosef: “From the G-d of *your* father”; Dan: “For *your* salvation I long.”

• *Ba'al Haturim* 2:2

## BONUS Answer

“Look at the verses (23,29,35) which describe how the other Levites are to camp,” said Sherlock. “Each uses the expression *yachanu* — ‘they will camp.’ Concerning Moshe and Aharon, however, the text says *hachonim* — ‘those who are camping.’ The very fact that the text departs from its standard pattern warrants explanation.”

“Furthermore,” continued Sherlock, “the term *yachanu* is future tense. Thus, it simply tells Levites where to camp. *Hachonim*, on the other hand, is present tense. It not only

tells where Moshe is to camp, but also narrates the fact that he *presently* camped there. Of what consequence is this extra information?”

“It had tremendous consequence! It helped his neighbors become great Torah Scholars!” said Watstein.

“Maybe Mr. Greenleaf will leave you his set of Talmud as a memento, Watstein.”

• *Based on Gur Aryeh*

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

*We often act without thinking how our behavior will be viewed. We don't imagine that others will interpret our actions as negative — especially when we know we've done nothing wrong. Remember: Honest doings sometimes look like...*

### CHEESY DEALINGS

Mrs. Ross stopped by the local grocery store and bought three tubs of cheese for the traditional Shavuot cheesecake. That afternoon, she and her daughter Yehudis were in the process of mixing the batter. When they had used half the cheese Mrs. Ross said, “Taste it.” Yehudis dipped a finger into the batter and tasted it. “Ick!” she said, wrinkling her nose. “What’s wrong?” asked Mrs. Ross. She took a spoon and tasted it herself. It was awful! The cheese was spoiled! It must have been

### Giving People the Benefit of the Doubt

spoiled when she bought it. “Yehudis,” she said, “please go to the store. Tell the storekeeper that I bought this cheese today and it was spoiled. Take these containers with you and exchange them for three fresh ones.” She gave Yehudis the three containers: One full, one half-full and one empty. The next week, Mrs. Ross went shopping. As she was checking out, the storekeeper commented: “Mrs. Ross, I hope you don’t mind my asking, but is it necessary to eat one and a half containers of spoiled cheese before you return the rest?”

*True, the storekeeper erred by not judging favorably. But Mrs. Ross was also to blame: She should have realized that returning empty containers might create the false impression that she had eaten the contents. We help others judge favorably when we explain our questionable behavior.*

• *Adapted from “The Other Side of the Story” by Yehudis Samet, ArtScroll Series*

# LOVE<sub>OF THE</sub> LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

## THE TORAH AND THE LAND

In our Pesach Special we called attention to the arrangement of the long list of expressions of gratitude to Hashem in the “Dayenu” song which suggests that the gift of Torah was an indispensable prerequisite to the gift of the land of Israel. For our Shavuot Special, focusing on the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, we offer the following insight on the special dimension which Eretz Yisrael lends to the quality of Torah observance.

In the second chapter of the Shema which we recite each morning and evening we repeat Hashem’s warning that turning away from Him to worship idols will result in being exiled from the land which He has given us. This is immediately followed by the commandments of *tefillin* and *mezuza*.

This connection is explained by the Midrash (*Sifri Parshas Eikev*) with a parable.

A king became angry with his wife and sent her off to her parents’ home. As he banished her he instructed her to continue wearing her royal jewelry even while she was away so that she would be familiar with them when she eventually returned to his palace.

In similar fashion Hashem instructed His beloved people as He banished them from His palace, *Eretz Yisrael*, to continue being distinguished with their *mitzvos* so that they would be familiar with them when they returned.

*Tefillin* and *mezuza* are *mitzvos* which are not dependent on living in *Eretz Yisrael*, unlike the many *mitzvos* relating to agriculture, and they are as incumbent on a Jew outside of *Eretz Yisrael* as upon one in the land. Why then is this connection made between these *mitzvos* and the land?

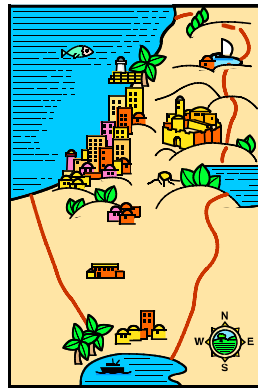
The answer lies in the unique spiritual status of *Eretz Yisrael*, which is directly ruled by Hashem without the involvement of angels or any other heavenly forces. *Mitzvos* fulfilled in *Eretz Yisrael* therefore have the ultimate spiritual quality, alongside which those fulfilled outside of the land are of only secondary quality. This is communicated in the statement of our Sages (*Sifri Parshas Re’eh*) that living in *Eretz Yisrael* is equivalent to all the *mitzvos* of the Torah.

This unique status of *Eretz Yisrael* is also expressed in the land’s sensitivity to sin. The Torah warns us that *Eretz Yisrael* is not like other lands and it will vomit out those who contaminate it (*Vayikra 18:25*). When the Kuttim (later known as the Samaritans) were brought to *Eretz Yisrael* by the Assyrian conqueror Sancheriv to replace the Ten Tribes he had exiled, they continued to worship idols and Hashem sent lions to devour them (see *Melachim II chapter 17*). In their native land

they were not punished in such swift fashion, but *Eretz Yisrael* cannot tolerate idolatry.

Hashem sanctified the nation dwelling in His land by commanding them *mitzvos* and warned them that if they contaminate this land with idolatry or licentiousness the land will vomit them out.

“Love of the Land” is therefore not expressed by merely mouthing patriotic slogans but by maintaining a standard of loyalty to Hashem’s Torah and living according to the moral standards set by the Torah, which will grant us the privilege of remaining in our beloved land with security and sanctity.



• Adapted from Nachmanides Commentary on *Vayikra 18:25*

The Ohr Somayach family wishes you a Chag Somayach.

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