

O H R N E T

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# POLISHED!

By Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

A few years ago there was a new fad in jewelry. It was to take the finest gold, white or yellow, according to your taste, fashioned into a necklace or a bracelet, (this time according to your budget!) combined with diamonds. Doesn't sound very "fad-like"? Sounds like it's lacking a little inspiration? Ah, but these were not your average diamonds.

These were unpolished diamonds.

Have you ever seen an unpolished diamond before? I have. If you want to have an idea of what they look like just go outside and pick up any old stone from the ground. Dust it off and hold it up to the light and admire its, well, stony appearance. I really can't think of a more apt description. They are an insurance agent's nightmare, because if one were to inadvertently drop an unpolished diamond outside it would be nigh on impossible to distinguish it from the thousands of plain old stones.

So what's so special about them? Why would someone voluntarily

choose to part with a small (sometimes large) fortune to buy them? Because, as we all know, appearances can be deceptive. No one buys an unpolished diamond because it's identical to a regular stone. The only rea-

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 "Just like a rough diamond, our *neshamot* must be polished and shaped; turned into something that refracts G-d's light."  
 —

son to buy an unpolished diamond is for what's *underneath* the surface: Hidden from the human eye, but present nevertheless, is potentially one of the most beautiful sights of the natur-

al world! But there is a certain built-in paradox about all this. In order to really appreciate the diamond in its unpolished state, one has to be aware of what lies underneath that surface. Otherwise you're going to get some pretty funny looks from people when they see that new piece of jewelry!

On the face of it Yom Kippur may not seem to be the best time to discuss the pros and cons of unpolished diamonds versus the polished variety. But I'm not so sure. You see, most of us actually bear a startling resemblance to unpolished diamonds. At birth each of us was given the most exquisite gift from G-d. Its brilliance and beauty are unparalleled — even by the cleanest, brightest diamond. This gift is called the *neshama* (soul) and its potential is simply breathtaking! It is comprised, in part, of luminosity, sparkle and luster, and it is just waiting to be revealed to the world.

If it weren't for a small "technical problem," each uniquely fashioned *neshama* (individually designed by the Creator Himself — just for you!) would release its dazzling light and

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**As we go to press we are horrified at the tragic news of the senseless and cowardly terrorist acts carried out against the American people. Together with all of Klal Yisrael we offer our heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims and pray for the recovery of the wounded.**

## Nitzavim

**O**n the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship because, in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality. Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will result from failure to heed Hashem's *mitzvot*. Descendants of that generation and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually Hashem will bring them back to *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe tells the people to remember that fulfilling the Torah is not an impossibility; rather it's within the grasp of every Jew. The *parsha* dramatically concludes with Moshe comparing the Jewish People's choice to follow the Torah to a choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

mediate days of Succot, the entire nation, including small children, is to gather at the Temple to hear the king read from the Book of Devarim. The sections read deal with faithfulness to Hashem, the covenant and reward and punishment. Hashem tells Moshe that his end is near, and he should summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the *Mishkan*, where Hashem will teach Yehoshua. Hashem tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land, the people will be unfaithful and worship other gods. Hashem will then completely "hide His face," so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, hunted by all. Hashem instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song — *Ha'azinu* — which will serve as "witness" against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to *Bnei Yisrael*. Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah and instructs the *levi'im* to place it to the side of the Holy Ark, so that no one will ever write a new Torah Scroll different from the original, for there will always be a reference copy.

## Ha'azinu

**A**lmost all of *Ha'azinu* is a song, written in the Torah in two parallel columns. Moshe summons the heavens and the earth to stand as eternal witnesses to what will happen if the Jewish People sin and do not obey the Torah. He reminds the people to examine the history of the world and note how the Jewish People are rescued from obliteration in each generation — that Hashem "pulls the strings" of world events so that *Bnei Yisrael* can fulfill their destiny as His messengers in the world. Hashem's kindness is such that Israel should be eternally grateful, not just for sustaining them in the wilderness, but for bringing them to a land of amazing abundance and for defeating their enemies. But, this physical bounty leads the people to become over-indulged. Physical pleasures corrupt the morals of the people. They worship empty idols and powerless gods and indulge in all kinds of depravity. Hashem will then let nations with no moral worth subjugate Israel and scatter them across the world. However, their only purpose is as a rod to chastise the Jewish People. When these nations think that it is through their own power that they have dominated Israel, Hashem will remind them that they are no more than a tool to do His will. The purpose of the Jewish People is fundamental — that man should know his Creator. Neither exile nor suffering can sever the bond between Hashem and His people, and eventually in the final redemption this closeness will be restored. Hashem will then turn His anger against the enemies of Israel, as though they were His own enemies, showing no mercy to the tormentors of His people. Hashem then gives His last commandment to Moshe: That he should ascend Mount Nevo and be gathered there to his people.



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## Vayelech

**O**n the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent bidding farewell to his people, encouraging them to "keep the faith." Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, Hashem is with them. He summons Yehoshua, and in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as leader of the Jewish People. Thus, he strengthens Yehoshua's status. Moshe teaches the mitzvah of *hakhel*: Every seven years on the first of the inter-

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color into the environment this very minute. But it can't because right now it's covered with the drab grayness of this physical world that we live in. In fact, it is so overcome, the vast majority of people cannot even identify it!

There is a famous Chasidic story told about Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk. Many years ago, he finally fulfilled his dream to settle in the Land of Israel. Forty days after his arrival he invited all of his family and students to a special festive meal. His students were a little unsure as to why their rabbi was making the meal but they attended anyway. During the meal, Rabbi Menachem Mendel recounted that before embarking on his trip he had gone to a pious and holy rabbi for a blessing. The Rabbi had informed him that on his arrival in the Land of Israel every stone will be a diamond! He related to his spellbound audience that on arriving he had looked and looked and all he had seen was...stones! Not a single diamond on the ground (in those days there probably weren't even diamonds to be seen on any fingers either!). Imagine his disappointment! What had happened to the guarantee that he had been given? So fiercely did Rabbi Menachem Mendel believe in the

promise that he would see diamonds that he fasted for forty days straight, eating only at night! On the fortieth day he opened his eyes, looked out of the window and saw...diamonds!

Don't think that Rabbi Menachem Mendel made a special meal because now he was rich. Don't think that he went to the grocery store and bought all the requirements for the meal with a stone he picked up off the ground! Quite the opposite! For the store owner and everyone else, all the "diamonds" were still stones.

No, Rabbi Menachem Mendel was celebrating the moment that he was able to *recognize* the diamonds that were all around him, but that he had never been privy to see before. He was celebrating his new-found blessing to be able to cut away, just like a master jeweler, the unimpressive, the unprepossessing, exterior to reveal the magnificent opulence that lies underneath.

You know, Yom Kippur is the culmination of our own forty day period. Starting on the first day of the month of Elul there is a special period of time for intensive introspection. It is a time that is specifically dedicated to identifying that priceless gem buried deep inside of us and to beginning the

process that will bring it to the surface and turn it into a pure source of light. Just like a rough diamond, our *neshamot* must be polished and shaped; turned into something that refracts G-d's light. This will only happen when our *neshamot* have become cleansed of the dirt that has accumulated around them. For forty days we polish our *neshamot* — it's a painstaking business. Hair's breadth by hair's breadth, we slowly begin to remove the grime. Day by day, every second must be dedicated until the last day of the process when we can unveil our pure, polished, radiant *neshamot* to the world.

Yom Kippur is that day. The last day, the fortieth day is the final test. The last exam to see whether we are worthy of being put on show by the "Master Jeweler." In effect, Yom Kippur is the ultimate jewelry exhibition — and we are the exhibits!

Let us hope and pray that by the end of this Yom Kippur we succeed in our goal; that every place we go, we will be exhibiting the cleanest, purest, most exquisite diamond in the world. One that people will immediately recognize who the "Artisan" was and point at it and say "I, too, want such a *neshama*!"

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### Nitzavim

## IDOL WORSHIP

*"And you saw their abominations and their detestable idols, of wood and of stone"*  
(29:16)

Think of idol worship. Primitive tribes in Borneo with painted faces and wild eyes come to mind. Ancient Egyptians and not-so-ancient Mayans. When we think about idol worship, we think of anyone but ourselves. In our own mind we are as far as can be from card-carrying idol worshippers. Me? An idol worshipper?

And yet there is a very subtle kind of idol worship that we can very easily fall

prey to.

Throughout the month of Elul, we have been sounding the *shofar* at the end of morning prayers. Ostensibly, this is part of our preparation for Rosh Hashana. One authority, however, when describing the *shofar*-blowing of Elul, makes no reference to Rosh Hashana at all. Rather, the Pirkei d'Rabi Eliezer relates the sounding of the *shofar* to a specific event in the first Elul after the Jewish People left Egypt:

When Moshe went up to receive the first tablets, the Jewish People made a tragic miscalculation which led to the incident of the golden calf. Eventually, G-d forgave them for this sin and He

summoned Moshe on the first day of Elul to "ascend to Me to the mountain." (*Shemot 24:12*) Moshe went up to receive the second tablets. As he ascended, "the sound of the *shofar* was sounded in the encampment so that they would not once again err after idol worship."

So, the reason we blow the *shofar* during Elul is to protect ourselves from the same mistake the Jewish People made over 3000 years ago in the desert — idol worship.

Most people don't have graven images stashed away in their attic; they have no plans to convert their lofts into a local coven for witchcraft. Where do

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## HAIRLINE JUSTICE

“Nechuniya, the digger of cisterns” was what they called him. This saintly man was in the practice of digging deep holes in the ground to create cisterns for storing water; he would then turn them over to the general public, who made pilgrimages to Yerushalayim and needed water for themselves and their animals.

Along with the happy story of how his daughter was miraculously saved after falling into such a cistern, there is the sad account of his son who died of thirst. This tragedy is cited by our Sages as an expression of the strict justice which Hashem dispenses to those close to Him, of whom he demands such perfection that even a shortcoming as thin as a hair is punished.

The source for this is a passage in Tehillim (50:3) which speaks of that future day in which Hashem will destroy the nations who persecuted His people, a day in which He will appear with all His power “and all around Him will be tempestuous.” The Hebrew word for a tempestuous storm is “sa’arah” written with the letter “samech.” The word in this passage appears instead with the letter “sin.” Although this does not alter the pronunciation, it does transform the word into an approximation of the Hebrew word for hair. This led Rabbi Acha to interpret it as a hint to the hairline judgment of Hashem in regard to those “around Him” — the righteous ones.

Maharsha offers an explanation for this strict justice in regard to the righteous: Since the real reward for man is in the World to Come, it is actually a favor for the righteous to be punished for even their slightest sins in this world so that their reward in the eternal hereafter will be complete.

Another approach is suggested by the commentaries: Even the slightest sin of a righteous man takes on a magnified guilt because others are likely to learn from his example, since he is the model of religious commitment. The punishment he receives, on the other hand, takes on a greater significance as our Sages point out in regard to the death of the sons of Aharon (*Rashi on Vayikra 10:3*).

When Hashem does justice with the righteous He is exalted and feared by all, for they say, “If this happens to the righteous, then the sinners must certainly expect judgment.”

• *Bava Kama 50a*

## WHERE WAS YEHOSHUA?

“Whoever has a case for litigation shall approach them.” (*Shmot 24:14*) This passage is taken from the instructions given by Moshe just before going up to heaven for forty days to learn the entire

Torah and to receive the tablets upon which were etched the Ten Commandments heard by all of Israel the day before. In delegating authority for administering justice, Moshe used the term “yigash” (approach) which can also be read “yagesh” which means to put forward and present a case. There are two opinions in our *gemara* as to what this teaches us: Either that the claimant must present proof for his claim in order to have the court take the property of the defendant; or that the courts must first deal with the initial claim presented to it and only afterwards deal with the counterclaim of the defendant.

In the first part of the above passage we learn that this judicial authority was delegated to Moshe’s brother Aharon and to his nephew Chur. Why were these two chosen over Yehoshua, who was Moshe’s closest disciple and eventual successor?

To solve this mystery, our commentaries refer us to a passage (*Shmot 32:17*) describing the scene of Moshe descending from Heaven with tablets in hand and encountering Yehoshua. The latter heard the loud noise emanating from Jews shouting in their excitement over the golden calf which they had sinfully created as a replacement for Moshe, whom they mistakenly assumed was not returning to them. Yehoshua told his master Moshe that he assumed that this was the sound of battle, and Moshe corrected him that this was rather the sound of frivolity.

If Yehoshua was thus unaware of what happened in the Jewish camp, we must conclude that he accompanied Moshe to the foot of Mount Sinai, pitched his camp and waited there alone for forty days so that he would be able to serve his master the moment he returned from Heaven. This is in the spirit of the praise given by the Torah (*Shmot 33:11*) of Yehoshua as the loyal servant who never left his master’s tent, a loyalty which eventually won him the right to be Moshe’s successor.

• *Bava Kama 46b*

## THE MISSING GOOD

Why does the term “good” not appear the first time the Ten Commandments are mentioned, yet it does appear the second time they are recorded?

This question was a major focus of the Sages in our section of the *gemara*. In Parshat Yitro (*Shmot 20:12*), the Fifth Commandment presents the reward for honoring parents as long life, while in Parshat Va’etchanan (*Devarim 5:16*) the reward promised is “your days will be increased and it shall be good for you.”

The solution to this mystery of the missing “good” was finally provided by Rabbi Ashi: The tablets upon which the

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commandments in Parshat Yitro were etched were shattered by Moshe when he saw the people dancing around the golden calf they made as a substitute for him. Since Hashem did not wish to have the “good” intended for His people to come to an end, He left that term out.

In order to understand this enigmatic solution, Maharsha refers us to a *gemara* in *Kiddushin* (39b). There it is explained that the meaning of the reward mentioned in Parshat Va’etchanan and etched upon the second tablets is “your days will be increased” — in this world — “and it shall be good for you” in the World to Come, the world which is all good. This is what is meant by the well-known *mishnah* (*Peah* 1:1) about honoring parents being one of the things for which a person “eats the fruits in this world and the principle remains for the World to Come.”

Now we understand the significance of the “good” element of this reward missing from the first tablets: The reward in this world which is promised there will indeed be interrupted as a result of our sins, just as the first tablets were shattered. But the reward promised in a “world that is all good” will be an eternal, uninterrupted one, just as the tablets which contain that reward were never shattered and remain forever.

## THE DANGEROUS TOOTH

What is the connection between the prophecy of punishment for an evil king and the damage caused to a man’s field by his neighbor’s animal eating its crops?

The answer lies in the *gemara*’s effort to define the nature of the damage described in the Torah (*Shmot* 22:4) as a man “sending his cattle to destroy another’s field.” The Hebrew word for destroy — “*u’veir*” — is similar to the word “*yeva’air*” — it will destroy — found in a prophecy in *Melachim* I 14:10, leading our Sages to the conclusion that this is a damage caused by teeth.

The background for that prophecy is the sinful reign of Yeravam ben Navat, who rebelled against Rechavam, the son and successor of King Shlomo, and who established the separatist kingdom of Yisrael. Although he had been initially encouraged by the prophecy of Achiyah Hashiloni, Yeravam strayed from the service of Hashem. Fearful that his subjects would make pilgrimages to Yerushalayim, capital of the rival Kingdom of Yehuda, and there return their royalty to Rechavam, Yeravam established golden calves for them to worship, proclaiming that “these are the gods who took you out of Egypt.” He even went as far as establishing his own altar and inventing his own holiday.

As Yeravam continued on this idolatrous path, Hashem struck his son Aviyah with a severe illness. When the boy’s

mother went to the Prophet Achiyah regarding her son’s fate, she was told by the prophet in the Name of Hashem that, because of the evil ways of her husband, his household would be totally destroyed. The word accompanying “*yeva’air*” is “*hagalal*,” which our Sages translated as teeth, so that the destruction of Yeravam’s household was being compared to the total destruction of crops by the teeth of a hungry animal.

As to how the word “*hagalal*” relates to teeth, there are a number of approaches. Rashi (*Bava Kama* 3a) relates it to the word “*meguleh*” meaning “revealed.” (Teeth are sometimes concealed and sometimes revealed). Another approach proposed by Rashi is to link it to the word “*gelal*” — manure — since the animal’s teeth begin the process of digestion which eventually produces animal waste. Tosefot quotes Rabbi Chananel who refers us to the term “*gelal*” in *Ezra* (6:4) which means marble stone. Since the tooth of an animal is of the same appearance as marble, this is an indication that “*hagalal*” means teeth, and it is teeth which do the destroying both in the prophecy regarding Yeravam and in the neighbor’s field mentioned in *Shmot* 22:4.

• *Bava Kama* 55b

## WHO GOES FIRST?

“The righteous person is taken away from the evil to come.” (*Yeshayahu* 57:1) This passage is cited in our *gemara* as an explanation of why it is actually of benefit to the righteous person, the *tzaddik*, to be taken from this world before the sinners when Hashem visits a collective disaster upon His people. Rashi explains this in terms of the *tzaddik* being spared the agony of witnessing that disaster. Other commentaries add that this is part of the Divine plan to remove the *tzaddik* from serving as a protective shield for his generation, which has reached the point of no return as regards Heavenly judgment.

Maharsha offers a different approach: Should the *tzaddik* perish together with the sinners, it would give the wrong impression that he was as guilty as they. Hashem therefore takes him away from the world in advance of the punishment of the sinners to make it clear that he does not share their guilt. (Had the *tzaddik* remained alive, he would have shared their fate because “once free rein is granted to the destroyer, it does not distinguish between the *tzaddik* and the sinner.”)

It was this rule of Heavenly procedure, says Rabbi Yosef, which made it necessary for Moshe to warn his people on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt that “none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning.” (*Shmot* 12:22) Since the firstborn of the Egyptians were being slaughtered, there was a general danger; therefore, Jews

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were required to seek refuge from this destructive force by remaining in their homes until daybreak when they would finally embark on their road to total freedom from Egyptian bondage.

• Bava Kama 60a

## MONEY OR LIFE

If one takes the property of another in order to save his life, is he obligated to make compensation? This was the halachic question facing King David in one of his battles against his Philistine enemies (*Shmuel II 23*). There was a "piece of ground full of lentils" in which the Philistines were hiding in ambush. One of David's options called for setting fire to these crops, which belonged to Jews. But he was not certain whether to exercise this option, as he might be obligated to compensate the owners for the crops, even though they were being destroyed for the purpose of saving the lives of the king and his soldiers.

His powerful desire for a decision on this matter by the Sanhedrin convened in Beit Lechem is described as a longing for water from the well in that city. Three of his warriors "broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well." They returned with the ruling of the Sanhedrin that, although compensation is generally required for destruction of property even if done for the sake of saving life, David, however, would be exempt from such payment because he, as king, had the right of eminent domain to expropriate for royal needs.

David's response was to refuse to drink the "water" which his courageous warriors had brought him. He did not wish to exploit his royal prerogative at the expense of the field's owner, and he abandoned this option.

This explanation of the *gemara* at hand is that of Tosefot and Rosh, who both posit that there is no question that a Jew may steal or destroy another's property if his life depends on it; the only question, they hold, is whether one must make compensation. Other commentators, however, infer from Rashi's commentary that the question was whether one may even save his life at the expense of taking from another person, even if he intends to repay him. One of these, Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger in his Responsa Binyan Zion, suggests that even Tosefot would concede that it is forbidden to save a life at another's expense where subsequent compensation is impossible. He applies this to prohibiting an autopsy even where this can save a life, as there is no way of restoring the dignity stolen from the deceased. This is in direct conflict

with the ruling of Rabbi Yechezkel Landau in his Responsa "Noda B'yehuda" permitting autopsies when there is a clear case of saving life.

• Bava Kama 60b

## WHEN COMPENSATION IS ATONEMENT

If a Jew denies his responsibility regarding theft, loan, found object or any other monetary claim, and he takes a false oath to substantiate his denial, when he subsequently confesses his sin he is obligated to follow the procedure described in Vayikra 5:10 and Bamidbar 5.

He must pay to the claimant the full amount which he attempted to deprive him of, plus an added "*chomesh*" (a quarter of the principle which, when added to the principle, is a fifth (*chomesh*) of the total). On top of this, he is required to provide a ram as an "*asham*" sin offering.

The term "*asham*" (literally "guilt") is used by the Torah in two contexts regarding this atonement. In Vayikra 5:25 this word refers to the sacrifice, while in Bamidbar 5:7 it means the principle which must be repaid. (Rashi cites both of these passages in his commentary on this *gemara*, and it was perhaps his intention to call attention to this distinction. (See Rashash's comment on Rashi.)

But why should the term "*asham*," which always means a sin offering (e.g., regarding *nazir*, *metzora* and the other four *asham* categories listed in the *mishna* we say each morning in "*Eizehu Mekomon*"), also be applied to what appears to be an ordinary financial compensation?

The answer lies in a rule stated by the Sage Rava (*Bava Kama 110a*) regarding the restrictions which the Torah places on the method of compensation that this repentant sinner must make for taking a false oath to deny a financial claim against him. Should he make this payment at night or should he pay it in installments, states Rava, he has not achieved his atonement. The reason given is that by referring to this payment as an "*asham*" the Torah equated it with a sin offering, which cannot be offered at night nor offered in sections.

The underlying principle is that one who exacerbated his sin of dishonesty to his fellow man by taking the Name of Hashem in vain must view even the compensation component of his repentance as a sacrificial atonement.

• Bava Kama 65a

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## A RAM IS A RAM IS A RAM

When is an ox called an ox and when is a ram called a ram? The relevance of this question to our *gemara* is the question of whether a stolen calf is considered as having undergone a name change by growing into an ox while in the thief's possession, and, similarly, whether a lamb grown into a ram has undergone a name change.

The position put forward by the Sage Rava is that even if there is a significant physical change in the animal — calf and lamb are terms applied to these animals only during their first year of life — their name has not changed because “a day-old ox is already called an ox, and a day-old ram is already called a ram.” In regard to age eligibility for sacrificial purposes, the Torah (*Vayikra* 22:27) speaks of an “ox...that will be born,” which indicates that already at birth it is called an ox. Yaakov Avinu protests his honesty to his father-in-law Lavan (*Bereishet* 31:38) by declaring that during his 20 years of caring for his cattle “I never ate from your rams.” Since Yaakov certainly did not mean to imply that he *did* eat from the younger sheep, we must conclude that even

the youngest lamb is included in the designation “ram.”

Although it emerges from our *gemara* that there is no difference in common perception between ram and lamb to consider the growth of one into the other as a name change, we are reminded by Tosefot that there is a difference when it comes to eligibility as a sacrifice. Since the Torah sometimes designates a *lamb* for sacrificial purposes and at other times a *ram*, we conclude that there is a difference in the age requirement. Where a lamb is designated, the animal is eligible only during its first year, while the designation of ram requires the same animal to be from one year and a month old until the end of its second year.

Another difference is found in regard to the quantity of flour and wine offered as *mincha* and *nesachim* (gift and libation) along with the lamb or ram being sacrificed (*Bamidbar* 15:5-6). In this area, however, the ox remains an ox from birth to maturity, for the *gemara* (*Menachot* 91b) deduces from a Torah passage in the aforementioned chapter that there is no difference in the *mincha* and *nesachim* which accompany a calf and those accompanying the ox (or bullock) that is offered.

• *Bava Kama* 65b

## LOVE OF THE LAND: THE PEOPLE

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

## NOACH — A TALE OF TWO SURVIVORS

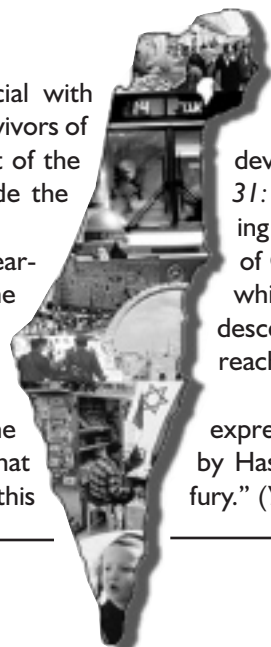
Noach shared something very special with the Land of Israel — both were survivors of the Deluge that destroyed the rest of the world and all of its land inhabitants outside the Ark.

The survival of Noach and his family is clearly recorded in the second *parsha* of the Chumash. But where is it indicated that the flood waters did not damage the Land of Israel?

The answer lies in the olive leaf that the dove brought back to Noach as evidence that the flood waters had receded. Where did this

bird manage to find a leaf in a world whose animal life and vegetation had been so completely devastated? Rabbi Levi, in *Midrash Rabbah* (*Vayikra* 31:10), supplies the solution to this mystery by revealing that the olive leaf came from a tree on the Mount of Olives in the Land of Israel. The devastating rains which destroyed all vegetation elsewhere did not descend upon this land, and the flood waters which did reach there covered its trees but did not destroy them.

This survival of the land, say our Sages, finds expression in the prophecy of Yechezkel, who was told by Hashem that “it was not rained upon in the day of fury.” (*Yechezkel* 22:3)



## PARSHA Q&A ?

### NITZAVIM

1. Why did Moshe gather the Jewish People together on the day of his death?
2. Who are the wood-cutters and water-drawers mentioned in verse 29:10?
3. How do two parties “pass” into a covenant?
4. What is the connection between the verse “*Atem nitzavim*” and the curses in the previous parsha?
5. Why can't Hashem disassociate himself from the Jewish People?
6. How many curses were listed in *Parshat Ki Tavo*?
7. Which two leaders followed Moshe's example and assembled the people at the end of their rule?
8. With whom did Moshe make the covenant and oath?
9. Why did the Jewish People see only idols of wood and stone in Egypt?
10. What is meant by the punishment of “adding drunkenness to thirst (29:18)”?
11. The Hebrew word for nose and anger are the same. What is the connection?
12. Why is Hashem described in anthropomorphic terms?
13. What two cities were destroyed along with Sodom and Amorah?
14. When is the entire nation punished for the sins of an individual?
15. When and where did the Jewish People become culpable for each other's sins (*areivim zeh lazeh*)?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to Nitzavim's Questions!

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

1. 29:9 - To initiate them into the covenant with Hashem.
2. 29:10 - Canaanites who came to join the Jewish People.
3. 29:11 - The two parties place objects in two parallel lines and pass between them.
4. 29:12 - The Jewish People asked, “Who can survive such curses?” Moshe comforted them, saying, “You've done a lot to anger Hashem, and yet — ‘*Atem nitzavim*’ — Hashem didn't destroy you ...you're still standing before Him.”
5. 29:12 - Because He told them He wouldn't and because He swore to the *Avot* (Patriarchs) that the Jewish People would always remain His nation.
6. 29:12 - Ninety-eight.
7. 29:12 - Yehoshua and Shmuel.
8. 29:14 - With the people standing before him and all future generations.
9. 29:16 - Because these were exposed openly. The idols of gold and silver, however, were locked away by their owners for fear of theft.
10. 29:18 - Even unintentional sins will be considered by Hashem as if they were committed intentionally. “Drunkenness” refers to sins committed unintentionally. “Thirst” refers to sins committed intentionally.
11. 29:19 - When one gets angry, his nostrils flare.
12. 29:19 - The Torah speaks in terms that people can understand.
13. 29:22 - Admah and Tsevoyim.
14. 29:28 - When the Jewish People fail to bring the sinner to judgment.
15. 29:28 - When the Jewish People took the oath at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval.

## I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

Nitzavim

The word “shofar” is related to the Hebrew word “*shapair*,” which means “improve.” The shofar blast tells us: “Improve your ways!”

• *Vayikra Rabba 29*

## RECOMMENDED READING LIST

Nitzavim

### Ramban

- 29:18 Refusing the Covenant
- 29:28 Accidental Sins
- 30:2 Returning to Hashem
- 30:6 Divine Help

### Sforno

- 29:18 Denying the Curse
- 30:6 Clinging to Hashem
- 30:9-10 Our Own Merit
- 30:11 Repentance in Exile

## PARSHA Q&A ?

### VAYELECH

1. How old was Moshe when he died?
2. Why was Moshe unable “to go out and come in” (31:2)?
3. What happened to Moshe’s Torah knowledge on the day of his death?
4. How did Moshe foresee the relationship between Yehoshua and the Elders?
5. What did Hashem tell Yehoshua concerning his relationship with the Elders?
6. How often does the *hakhel* (assembly of the Jewish People) take place?
7. Why does the Torah call the year of the *hakhel* the “*shemita* year”?
8. What sections of the Torah does the king read at the *hakhel*?
9. In what physical location does the king read at the *hakhel*?
10. Why were the men commanded to come to the gathering?
11. Why were the women commanded to come to the gathering?
12. Why were the parents commanded to bring their infant children to the gathering?
13. What does it mean when Hashem hides his face from the Jewish People?
14. What function does the song *Ha’azinu* serve?
15. Where was the Torah that was written by Moshe placed?
16. What was the normal manner of assembling the congregation? Why was it not done that way for the teaching of *Ha’azinu*?
17. In 30:19, Moshe called upon the heavens and the earth as witnesses, and in 31:28, he does so again. What is the difference between the two times?
18. What did Moshe say that the Jewish People would do immediately after his death?
19. How long after Moshe’s death were the Jewish People careful in their service of Hashem?
20. How did Moshe perceive the period in which Yehoshua led the Jewish People?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to Vayelech’s Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi’s commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 31:2 - Exactly 120.
2. 31:2 - Hashem did not let him, because the power of leadership was being transferred to Yehoshua.
3. 31:2 - The well-springs of knowledge were closed up for him.
4. 31:7 - He foresaw that they would work in partnership.
5. 31:7 - That he alone would be the leader — for there can only be one leader in each generation.
6. 31:10 - Once every seven years, in the first year of the new *shemita* period.
7. 31:10 - Because the laws of *shemita* still applied to the harvest.
8. 31:11 - From Devarim: 1:1-6:9; 11:13-21; and 14:22-28:69.
9. 31:11 - On a wooden platform erected in the *azara*.
10. 31:12 - In order to learn.
11. 31:12 - In order to hear words of Torah.
12. 31:12 - So that the parents could receive a special reward for bringing them, because they demonstrated how precious Torah learning is even for those who cannot yet understand it.
13. 31:17 - He ignores their distress.
14. 31:21 - It comes as a warning to the Jewish People of what will befall them if they abandon Torah.
15. 31:26 - There are two opinions: It was placed beside the *Aron*; or it was placed inside the *Aron* itself.
16. 31:28 - The Jewish People were normally assembled by blowing the trumpets, however at this time the trumpets had already been hidden away.
17. 31:28 - In 30:19, he was informing the Jewish People of his intention to call upon them as witnesses. In 31:28, he was actually calling upon them.
18. 31:29 - Corrupt themselves.
19. 31:29 - Throughout the entire reign of Yehoshua.
20. 31:29 - As if he himself were still ruling.

## I DIDN’T KNOW THAT!

Vayelech

“*Hain* (behold), the time is coming for you to die....” (31:14) Why did Hashem announce Moshe’s death using the word *hain*?

*Hain* is spelled with the Hebrew letters “*hei*” (which equals five) and “*noon*” (which equals 50). These letters are unique in that neither one can pair with another letter to add up to 10 or 100. *Alef* (1) plus *tet* (9) equals 10, *bet* (2) plus *chet* (8) equals 10, etc. But “*Hei*” (5) has no such “partner.” The same is true for *noon* (50); it has no pair among the number from 10 to 90 with which to add up to 100, as the other letters do.

Because Moshe is unique among the prophets, his leaving this world and entering the next world is announced with the two letters that are unique among the letters.

• *Da’at Zekeinim Mi’ba’alei Hatosefot*

## PARSHA Q&A ?

### HA'AZINU

1. Why were heaven and earth specifically chosen as witnesses?
2. How is the Torah like rain?
3. How is Hashem "faithful without injustice"?
4. Why is Hashem called "tzaddik"?
5. How many major floods did Hashem bring upon the world?
6. What group of people does the Torah call "fathers"? Cite an example.
7. Why did Hashem separate the world's nations into exactly 70?
8. Why is the merit of the Jewish People's ancestry called a "rope"?
9. How is Hashem's behavior toward the Jewish People like an eagle's behavior toward its offspring?
10. Regarding the Jewish People's punishment, Hashem says "I will spend my arrows on them." What is the positive aspect of this phrase?
11. How does the idea of "chillul Hashem" prevent the nations from destroying the Jewish People?
12. What will happen to the nations that conquer the Jewish People?
13. When Hashem overturns a nation that persecutes the Jewish People, His attribute of Mercy is "replaced" by which attribute?
14. When Hashem punishes the heathen nations, for whose sins does He exact punishment?
15. How will Hashem's punishment change the way the nations view the Jewish People?
16. On what day was *Ha'azinu* taught to the Jewish People?
17. Verse 32:44 calls Yehoshua "Hoshea." Why?
18. In verse 32:47, what does "it is not empty from you" mean?
19. Why did Hashem tell Moshe that he would die a similar death to that of Aharon?
20. If Moshe had spoken to the rock rather than striking it, what would the Jewish People have learned?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to Ha'azinu's Questions!

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

1. 32:1 - They endure forever.
2. 32:2 - The Torah gives life and promotes growth like rain.
3. 32:4 - He is "faithful" by rewarding the righteous, and "without injustice" by rewarding even the wicked for any good deeds.
4. 32:4 - All will agree that His judgments are righteous.
5. 32:7 - Two. One in the time of Adam's grandson Enosh and one in the time of Noah.
6. 32:7 - The Prophets. Elisha called the Prophet Eliyahu "My Father." (*Melachim II 2:12*)
7. 32:8 - To correspond to the 70 *Bnei Yisrael* who entered Egypt.
8. 32:9 - Their merit is "woven from" the merits of the *Avot*.
9. 32:12 - He mercifully wakes them gently, hovering over them, and carrying them on His "wings."
10. 32:23 - "The arrows will be spent" implies that the afflictions will cease but the Jewish People will not.
11. 32:27 - The nations would attribute their success to their might and the might of their gods. Hashem would not let His name be desecrated like this.
12. 32:35 - They will eventually be punished.
13. 32:41 - His attribute of Justice.
14. 32:42 - For their sins and the sins of their ancestors.
15. 32:43 - They will view the Jewish People as praiseworthy for cleaving to Hashem.
16. 32:44 - The Shabbat upon which Moshe died.
17. 32:44 - To indicate that although he was the Jewish People's leader, he still maintained a humble bearing.
18. 32:47 - That you will receive reward for studying Torah and that there is nothing meaningless in the Torah.
19. 32:50 - Because Moshe wanted this.
20. 32:51 - The Jewish People would have reasoned as follows: If a rock, which receives neither reward nor punishment, obeys Hashem's commands, all the more so should we.

## I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

Ha'azinu

### "Ha Lashem Tigmalu Zot?" (32:6)

The above verse starts with an unusual letter "hey." It is unusual in two ways: It is larger than normal, and it is written far away from the word that it goes with. The Midrash sees this as a hint to Moshe's name, as follows: Start from the beginning of the *parsha* and take the first letter of each verse. Do this up to and including the above verse. Now take the numerical value of those letters and you get 345, which equals the numerical value of "Moshe." Thus, Moshe "signed" his name in this song at the end of the Torah. (Taking after Moshe's example, Jewish poets through the ages have encoded their names into their works.)

• Based on *Midrash Tanchuma*

## PARSHA Q&A ?

### V'ZOT HABRACHA

1. Before giving the Torah, Hashem went to Seir and Mount Paran. Why?
2. Why is Yehuda blessed immediately after Reuven?
3. What covenant (*brit*) did Levi keep?
4. Why was Binyamin blessed before Yosef?
5. Which Tribe received the “best” portion of *Eretz Yisrael*?
6. Besides the sun, which celestial body helps fruit to ripen?
7. If there were only 7 Canaanite nations, why did Yehoshua need to conquer 31 kings?
8. What three things did the land of Zevulun possess?
9. What did visiting merchants see that inspired them to convert to Judaism?
10. The tribe of Gad saw “the beginning — *reishit*.” The beginning of what?
11. The source of the Jordan River was in the territory of which tribe?
12. Which tribe possessed the *Kinneret*?
13. The daughters of which tribe married High Priests and Kings?
14. Who wrote the last eight verses in the Torah, starting with the verse “and Moshe died”?
15. Who buried Moshe?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to V'zot Habracha's Questions!

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

1. 33:2 - In order to offer the Torah to the people of Seir (Esav's descendants) and the people of Paran (Yishmael's descendants).
2. 33:7 - Because both of them admitted their sin.
3. 33:9 - *Brit Mila* (circumcision).
4. 33:12 - Because the *Beit Hamikdash*, built in Binyamin's portion, was “more beloved” than *Mishkan Shilo*, built in Yosef's portion.
5. 33:13 - Yosef.
6. 33:14 - The moon.
7. 33:17 - Since the Land was so desirable, all foreign kings and governments acquired palaces and property there.
8. 33:19 - *Tarit*, a type of fish; *chilazon*, a mollusk whose blood was needed for the *techelet* (a dye needed for *tzitzit*); and a type of sand needed for white glass.
9. 33:19 - They saw that the Jews serve one G-d and follow a unified kashrut code.
10. 33:21 - They saw the beginning of the conquest of the land, and chose that as its portion.
11. 33:22 - Dan.
12. 33:23 - Naftali.
13. 33:24 - Asher.
14. 34:5 - According to one opinion, Yehoshua wrote it. Rabbi Meir says Moshe himself wrote it with tears.
15. 34:6 - According to one opinion, Hashem buried Moshe. According to Rabbi Yishmael, Moshe buried himself.

## I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

### V'zot Habracha

The Torah's last verses describe Moshe's death. According to Rabbi Meir, Moshe wrote these verses “*b'dima* — in tears.” But this word can also be read “*b'dema* — jumbled.” This implies that Moshe wrote these verses in a disorderly fashion so their meaning could not be immediately discerned.

• Based on *The Vilna Gaon*

## RECOMMENDED READING LIST

### V'zot Habracha

#### Ramban

- 33:6 Why not Shimon?  
33:12 The Shelter of Binyamin

#### Sforno

- 33:6 Reuven's Blessing  
33:7 Shimon's Blessing  
33:17 The Kingship of Yosef  
33:25-6 The Collective Blessing

## FOUR DIRECTIONS

**From: Seru**

Dear Rabbi,

When G-d showed Moses the land of Israel, G-d told him: "Look west, north, south and east." (Deuteronomy 3:27) If Moshe was standing outside Israel (to the east) looking in, then only three directions would apply, because if he looked in back of him it would be a position outside of Israel; so why is he told to look in 4 directions?

Dear Seru,

Moshe was told to look not only at the Land of Israel, but at the lands of Sichon and Og as well (which Moshe had just conquered) which were part of the greater *Eretz Yisrael*. These were behind Moshe, to the east.

Another answer is that when Moshe was told to look "east," this meant that he should look to the east of the Land of Israel; he would be looking west when he did so.

## TORAH SCROLL

**From: Jake Stein**

Dear Rabbi,

My name is Jake Stein and I am in fourth grade. My question is, please tell me about the Torah scroll. Thank you.

Dear Jake Stein,

Thank you for writing. To answer you, we are sending you an article written by Rabbi Aron Prys. He is an expert regarding writing Torah scrolls. If you want more answers about the Torah scroll, you can write to us or to him. (His email is at the bottom.) Here is his message:

### WRITING A TORAH SCROLL

Writing a *sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll) is one of the 613 commandments. It is the last commandment mentioned in the Torah, and it occurs in Parshat Vayeilech where Hashem tells Moshe: "And now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*, place it in their mouth...." Our sages take this to refer to writing the entire Torah.

The Talmud says that the Torah contains 600,000 letters; these correspond to the 600,000 Jews who received the Torah at Mount Sinai. When counting, you find only about 300,000 letters in the Torah, but if you count the gaps between the words and the crowns on top of the letters it comes to about 600,000. The crowns are very significant; the famous Rabbi Akiva was able to discover many halachic insights by searching their meanings.

Moshe wrote 13 Torah scrolls before he died (7 Adar 1272 BCE). He gave one to each of the 12 tribes, and the

13th he placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle. It was therefore always possible to check the "master copy" to prevent forgery. Later on, a copy of the *sefer Torah* was also placed in the Temple.

The text of the *sefer Torah* has been very carefully preserved. Yemenite Jews were separated from the vast majority of Jewish communities for centuries. In 1948-50, during "Operation Magic Carpet," most came to Israel. When their Torah scrolls were checked against the local ones, they were found identical, word for word! A few minor spelling variations were found, not affecting the meaning of even a single word. (Think of English spelling variations such as "color" and "colour.")

It was also Moshe himself who introduced the practice to read the Torah publicly every Shabbat.

In many landmark events in the history of our nation, public reading of the Torah played a key role. The Bible relates that Chilkiah, the high priest, discovered a *sefer Torah* in the Temple. Why was this discovery so exciting? This happened in the 10th year of the reign of the righteous king Josiah, who was 18 years old (627 BCE). Josiah's father Menashe, who was king for a record 55 years, introduced idol worship; during his reign Judaism was widely forgotten and most Torah scrolls were destroyed. This is why finding this Torah scroll was so significant. After reading the Torah, King Josiah was overcome with sadness for unknowingly not keeping all its commandments. He and all the Jews of his kingdom resolved to keep all the commandments from then on. Josiah wiped out all visible traces of idolatry.

Surely Josiah read in the *Torah* that the king has a special commandment to write his own *sefer Torah* which was to be always at his side so that he could read it and remind himself of his duties, as it says: "And it shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life." He took it with him when he went into battle, when he sat in judgement and when he sat down for a meal.

The second-to-last commandment in the Torah, "*hakhel*," or "gather", mandates that every seven years everyone gather together and that the king read to them part of the book of Devarim.

Josiah died in 607 BCE. Not long after, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple. It was re-built 70 years later; the religious level, however, had dropped drastically, and intermarriage was rife. When Ezra the Scribe arrived in Israel in 458 BCE, he changed this. On Rosh Hashana that year, Ezra publicly read the Torah from early morning until midday to a large populace. This reading made an enormous impact, leading to a great wave of return to Jewish observance and an end to intermarriage.

Ezra the Scribe instituted public Torah readings in addition to those introduced by Moshe.

Today we still use quill, ink and parchment to write a *sefer Torah* as did Moshe over 3300 years ago. Most scribes

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## Nitzavim

*Haftara: Yeshaya 61:10-63:9*

In this last of the seven “*haftaras* of consolation,” the Prophet Yeshaya describes how, just as the land will seem to bloom and flourish in the time of the *mashiach* without any prior cultivation, Hashem will redeem his people and shower them with kindness without any prior action on their part and without them deserving it.

The Targum Yonatan translates “For Zion’s sake, I will not be silent” to mean that there will never be peace in the world while the Jewish People are scattered in exile.

In the final days, Hashem will come “stained with blood” from the battle with Esau-Edom-Rome and its spiritual heirs to liberate His people and reveal that He has been with them in every exile, frustrating the designs of those who wished to obliterate them.

## ONLY HAPPINESS IS A TWO-WAY STREET

*“I will rejoice intensely with Hashem; my soul shall exult with my G-d.” (61:10)*

Our Sages teach us that “a person is obligated to make a blessing on adversity just as he makes a blessing on good.” (*Berachot* 54) However, this only applies when the misfortune happens to *oneself*, but if one’s neighbor is beset by tragic events, it is forbidden to rejoice. Rather, a person is obligated to empathize with his neighbor’s plight.

This is the intention of the verse “*I will rejoice intensely with Hashem*”: When I perceive Hashem through the aspect of His mercy, when He blesses me with an abundance of revealed good, then I can both rejoice and give others cause to rejoice with me.

However, when I perceive G-d through the aspect of His judgment, “*my soul shall exult with my G-d.*” When affliction befalls me alone, I am allowed to exult, for “a person is obligated to make a blessing on adversity just as he makes a blessing on good.” But when misfortune befalls others, then not only am I forbidden to exult, I must seek out every way to empathize with them in their loss.

## Vayelech - Shabbat Shuva

*Haftara: Hoshea 14:2-10; Micah 7:18-20 or Joel 2:15-27*

Shabbat Shuva is the first Shabbat of the year. It is the prototype, the blueprint for the whole year. Because of this, we must be especially careful to guard its sanctity — as it is the first. The Talmud tells us that if the Jewish People had kept the first Shabbat properly, no nation or cul-

ture could have ruled over them.

Man was created on Friday afternoon in order to immediately enter into the blissful restful state of Shabbat. But before Shabbat came, Man had already sinned.

But Shabbat and *teshuva*, repentance, go together. Our Sages teach (*Berachot* 37) that *teshuva*, repentance, “preceded the world.” (*Pesachim* 54) Therefore, the level of a person who returns to Judaism is before the world, and thus above the world. Shabbat too has a radiance which is higher than the six days of the week — a reflection of the world to come.

The Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is called *Shabbat Shuvah*, which means both “return” and “repentance.” The first word of this week’s *haftara* is “*Shuvah*”— “Return O Israel to Hashem, your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity.” If a person is found guilty by the courts, his only hope is to throw himself on the mercy of the king: so, too, the prophet exhorts the Jewish People to throw themselves on the mercy of the Supreme King of Kings and beg for clemency, for He alone in His great kindness has the power to overrule the verdict and forgive their sins and transgressions.

## Ha’azinu

*Haftara: Shmuel II 1 - 51*

The *haftara* for *Ha’azinu* is known as “The Song of David,” which David wrote in his youth when he was beset by so many troubles. It is an all-inclusive psalm, relating to any possible evil which could occur during David’s lifetime. He kept this psalm with him throughout life, reciting it in praise every time he experienced Hashem’s salvation.

## V’zot Habracha - Simchat Torah

*Haftara: Yehoshua 1:1*

Immediately when we finish reading the Torah, we start again “In the beginning of Hashem creating the heavens and the earth....” In this way we remind ourselves that immersing ourselves in the truths of the Torah is an eternal task, with neither beginning nor end. The *haftara* says “*And Hashem spoke to Yehoshua bin Nun, Moshe’s lieutenant, saying ‘Moshe my servant is dead. You arise and cross over the Jordan....’*” This reminds us that the work of the Torah is not that of a human being, not even the highest, but it is Hashem’s work that began with the revelation on Sinai, and its accomplishment is not dependent on the personality and life of any man, however great and sublime he may be.

• Adapted from Dr. Mendel Hirsch, based on the words of his father, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

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immerse themselves in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) before writing the ineffable name of Hashem. A scribe must concentrate very hard, since even the slightest mistake can render a Torah invalid. It is therefore almost impossible to write for longer than a few hours a day, and many scribes write in the morning and study in the afternoon.

It takes about a year and a half to write a *sefer Torah* and it is therefore even more special and precious. Then the *sefer Torah* is brought to the synagogue under a canopy, accompanied by singing and dancing; a festive meal follows. The first and the last letter of the Torah are especially important. Together they spell *lev*, or heart, which constitutes an essential ingredient in the service of G-d.

Writing a *sefer Torah* is a pivotal commandment. It concludes the 613 commandments and, in a sense, it encompasses all the others, for it reminds us of all the commandments contained in it. At the same time, being placed towards the end of the Torah, we read it near the account of

Creation. (When we finish reading the Torah, we immediately begin again.) The Midrash tells us that the whole world was created for the sake of the Torah. By writing a *sefer Torah* we demonstrate that we understand that this is the purpose for which we have been created: To keep the Torah and its commandments.

Aron Prys of The Sefer Torah Centre  
www.sefertorahcentre.com.  
e-mail: enquiries@sefertorahcentre.com

Sources:

- Devarim 31:19, 10-13 and Rashi, 17:19
- Sanhedrin 21b
- Menachot 29b; See also Eruvin 21b re: Shir Hashirim 5:11
- Midrash Rabbah, Devarim 9:9
- Mishneh Torah, Tefillah 12:1
- Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4 and Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 3:1
- Vayikra Rabbah Parsha 23

## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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### V'zot Habracha

The Torah draws to its close with *V'zot Habracha*, which is the only Parsha in the Torah not read specifically on Shabbat. Rather, *V'zot Habracha* is read on *Shmini Atzeret-Simchat Torah*, when everyone in the synagogue gets called up to the Torah — even little children who are under Bar Mitzvah age.

Moshe continues the tradition of Yaakov by blessing the Tribes of Israel before his death. Similar to the blessings bestowed by Yaakov, these blessings are also a combination of the description of each Tribe's essence, together with a definition of its role

within the nation of Israel. The only Tribe that does not receive a blessing is Shimon, because they were central to the mass immorality of worshipping the idol *ba'al pe'or*. Another explanation is that this Tribe's population was small and scattered throughout the south of the Land of Israel, and would therefore receive blessings together with the host Tribe amongst whom they would live; i.e., Yehuda. Moshe's last words to his beloved people are of reassurance that Hashem will more than recompense His people for all of the suffering they will endure. Moshe ascends the mountain and Hashem shows him prophetically all that will happen to *Eretz Yisrael* in the future,

both in tranquillity and in times of oppression. Hashem also shows him all that will happen to the Jewish People until the time of the Resurrection. Moshe dies. To this day, no one knows the place of his burial, in order that his grave not become a shrine for those who wish to make a prophet into a god. Of all the prophets, Moshe was unique in his being able to speak to Hashem whenever he wanted. His centrality and stature are not a product of the Jewish People's "blind faith," but are based on events that were witnessed by an entire nation — at the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai and constantly during 40 years of journeying through the desert.

## PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

Regarding your Yiddle Riddle asking for grandfather-grandson pairs in the *amida*. If you consider including the "*yehi ratzon*" immediately following the *amida*, you have Yehuda, which is also the name of a grandson (Yehuda Macabee) of Yochanan mentioned in the Chanukah edition to the *amida*.

• Philip Silverman, Atlanta GA

Yaakov (first blessing) and his grandson Ephraim, mentioned in the Mussaf of Yom Kippur.

• Neil Parks, Beachwood, OH

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you see idol worship nowadays?

Nothing in Judaism is merely commemorative, if we still blow the *shofar* during Elul, it must be that the same potential for falling into idol worship still exists. What is this idol worship?

The Ramban in his discourse on Rosh Hashanah links the word *shofar* to the verse, “By His breath the Heavens are spread (*shifra*).” (*Iyov* 26:13)

This verse refers to the dispersing of the clouds to reveal the clear blue sky. That which was clouded over and concealed becomes revealed. The root of the word *shifra* also means to beautify, for true beauty is to see the essence of something, the purpose for which it was created. *Shifra* is also the root of the word *shofar*.

The *shofar* gives us a clarity to see beyond the clouds — to see to the blue sky beyond. It is this clarity that results in fear and trembling: “Can the *shofar* be sounded in the city and the people not tremble?” (*Amos* 3:6)

In 1948, when the sound of bomb blasts was all too common in Israel, the Slabodka Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Sher, took aside a ten-year-old boy and asked him what blessing should be made on the sound of a bomb blast. When the boy could not answer, Rabbi Sher told him, “Whose strength and power fills the world” — the blessing a Jew says when he hears thunder. Rabbi Sher was not giving the boy a practical halachic ruling; rather, he was telling him that bomb blasts are no different than unexpected thunder on a cloudless day. They are both a reminder of Hashem’s power.

Thunder, the Talmud tells us, exists only to straighten the crookedness of our hearts, to strip away the layers of our self-deception. Thunder is an unexpected break from the everyday, and as such it snaps us to attention by reminding us of the One whose strength and power fill the world.

Every explosion in this city,

Jerusalem, is like a clap of thunder, is like the blast of the *shofar*, reminding us of His power and awesome might.

## Only One Way

The letters which make up the name of the month “Elul” can be rearranged to spell “*lulei*” which means “were it not.” *Lulei* always indicates a situation which very easily could have been the reverse — “were it not this, then this.”

Either this or that. There is no other way. Either we trust in Hashem’s ultimate goodness or we fall into the hands of our enemies. Either this or that.

The *shofar*, thunder and the sound of a bomb exploding all come to remind us of the same thing — that there is no power other than Him. There are no political maneuverings. There are no clever strategies. No great white hopes. There is only Him.

The *shofar* is a sound that reaches a place in our hearts that words cannot reach. It is a sound that takes us back to a place before words and all their duplicity. It takes us back to a sound before propaganda, be it the propaganda of the media or the propaganda of our own twisted thinking. It echoes like a thunder clap out of a clear blue sky to remind us that there is nothing apart from Him. He is the King who takes life away — and gives life.

Nothing in this world has life, except if Hashem wills it; nothing in this world has any independent power. The sun shines only because Hashem gives it the power to shine. He created it, and He sustains it, re-creating it and its power every single split second. Every nuclear reaction in that fiery orb is no more than a further expression of His will.

The idol worship from which the *shofar* of Elul protects us is the mere thought that any event takes place without His willing it. This is idol wor-

ship just as surely as if we had kneeled before a marble statue.

In a couple of days, we will stand in front of the Supreme King of Kings. He will decide then “Who will live and who will die.” May it be His will to have mercy on His people Israel and write us in the Book of Eternal life!

## Vayelech

### COSMIC HIDE-AND-SEEK

“I will surely hide My face.” (31:18)

Once, there was a great rabbi who came upon a young child crying his heart out. “What’s the matter, little one?” asked the Rabbi. “We were playing...” the child sobbed. “We were playing hide and seek; I was hiding.” The boy looked up into the Rabbi’s face. “Yes, I’m listening,” said the Rabbi. “I was hiding, but...” “Tell me, please,” said the Rabbi softly. Finally the boy managed to finish his sentence “...but nobody came to look for me!”

After a few moments, the Rabbi smiled his warm smile and said, “You know, you shouldn’t feel so bad. You’re in good company.” The child heaved a little, his tears abating. The Rabbi continued: “You’re in good company indeed. G-d feels a lot like you — He’s hiding, and not many people are coming to look for Him.”

This world is a cosmic game of hide and-seek: Who brought us here? Who sustains us here? What are we doing here?

To make the game more challenging, and our success more meaningful and rewarding, there are various distractions, false leads, to take us out of the game. But our “Host” has not left us without a “crib sheet” to help us navigate this ultimate virtual adventure. He has provided a clear manual which is guaranteed to allow us to unmask Him and the purpose of our existence. This manual is called the Torah.

But if we don’t keep the Torah, He

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will hide himself more deeply; finding Him will be very difficult.

“I will surely hide My face.”

There are two types of concealment. One type is where you know someone is there but you just can't see him. The other type is where you don't know if the person is there at all. In this second type, the hiddenness is itself hidden. This is the ultimate hiding.

When people are aware that G-d is hiding, then, ultimately, He is not concealed, for they will eventually find Him. However, when the hiding is itself hidden, when people don't realize Hashem is there hiding, they'll never bother to look.

Yom Kippur is a once-a-year opportunity to throw ourselves on the mercy of the King. If we search with all our hearts, we will find Him.

• *The Sfat Emet in the name of the Chidushei HaRim in Mayana shel Torah; a story heard from Rabbi Zev Leff*

Ha'azinu

GARDENING - JEWISH STYLE

“May My teaching drop like rain, may My utterance flow like the dew.” (32:1)

A violent storm. Winds howling. The rain lashes the ground. It seems as though the earth is being torn apart by the weather. And yet without this heavy downpour, nothing will grow properly. For if only the dew waters the ground, the heat of

the sun will burn and shrivel the seeds.

Only if heavy rains water the ground will the dew do its job of bringing forth the flowering blossoms.

This is the way of Torah. If a person labors in the study of *halacha*, filling himself with the methodology and torrent of Talmudic logic, even though it may seem that he is struggling against a deluge, he will eventually bring forth healthy and beautiful flowers.

He may feel storm-driven and pounded by the rains. Nevertheless, the fruits of his labors will also include the esoteric parts of Torah, the “dew” of *Aggadata*, the homiletic teachings. They will flower in his hands.

However, if he concerns himself only with the “dew” of the Torah, the *Aggadata*, then in the withering “sun,” the bright lights of secular cynicism, his acquisition of Torah will wither and die, lacking the deep rain to nourish its roots.

• *Based on the Netziv, as heard from Rabbi Pinchas Kantrovitz*

V'zot Habracha

WHAT GOES AROUND

“And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of G-d, blessed the children of Israel.” (33:1)

The perfect circle. Complete. The circle unites the beginning and the end. There is no beginning to a circle, nor end. If you take one point and call it its beginning, when you get to the end you will find yourself back where you started.

On *Simchat Torah*, we finish reading the Torah and immediately start again from the beginning.

In our joy at having completed the Torah, we dance with it in a circle. Specifically in a circle. The Torah is endless. When we reach its end, we are already back at its beginning.

The final words of the Torah are: “In the eyes of all Israel.” And its first words: “In the beginning.” The circle dance of *Simchat Torah* joins the end to the beginning, that “the eyes of all Israel” should be fixed on the “beginning.”

• *Adapted from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin*

SPENDING AND SAVING

“The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov.” (33:4)

There is a great difference between an inheritance and a heritage.

An inheritance is the sole possession of the one who inherits it — it is his to do with as he pleases — to consume, to invest or to squander. However, a heritage must be cherished and preserved and passed on to the next generation intact.

The Torah is our heritage, not our inheritance. We must pass it on to the next generation as we found it, not abridged, altered or adulterated.

• *Heard from Rabbi Nachman Bulman*

שנה טובה

The Ohr Somayach Family wishes you and yours and all of Israel a year filled with happiness, health and peace.