

OHRNET

PARSHAT KI TISA • 22 ADAR 1 5784, 2 MARCH 2024
• VOL 31 NO.19

PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

A Watched Pot

“For this man Moshe, who brought us up from Egypt, we do not know what became of him.” (32:1)

My father was a keen Zionist. In fact, he got into serious trouble with my mother when, at their wedding reception, which was a few days after the founding of the State of Israel, he managed to toast the State of Israel and somehow forgot to mention my mother.

But my father, as so many Jews, found it difficult to believe in the coming of the Mashiach. I said to him once, “Daddy, you were born in 1910. You saw the worst horror unleashed on the Jewish People in history, and four years after the end of that nightmare, the Jewish People had a sovereign state for the first time in over a thousand years. If I’d been around in 1930 and told you then that all this was about to happen, you’d have laughed at me. So, is the coming of Mashiach that much more outlandish?”

It seems to me, at the time of my writing this article, that there is no natural solution, no realistic ‘day after’ scenario for the war in Gaza. It is clear that Hamas will not settle for a state unless it’s from the river to the sea. And Hamas isn’t just the voice of Gaza. A recent Palestinian poll showed that 44% of the adult population in the West Bank support Hamas, up from just 12% in September. And in Gaza itself, the atrocities of October 7th enjoy 42% support, up from 38% three months ago. The idea that Hamas enslaves the poor peace-loving citizens of Gaza, and all we need to do is to get rid of those nasty Hamas terrorists and the Palestinian street will rush out to welcome a two-state solution, is a dangerous pipe-dream.

And, on the other side, Israel isn't going to meekly accept a set of water wings – supplied no doubt by the UN - and happily paddle out into the Mediterranean Sea with Tel Aviv fading into the distance. This is an existential war without a solution. It’s not a question of how to divide up the cake. Not a question of where to draw the line on the map, as in “You get this bit and I’ll swap you this bit.” This is a war of ideals, a titanic clash of cultures that will not, and cannot, end in a stable compromise.

As a believing Jew, it's clear to me that the only solution to this situation is Mashiach, the Messiah, for whom we daily hope, wait, and pray. I'm sure that to some people this hope seems like a pipe dream. Because nothing in our experience has ever resembled Mashiach.

Imagine you'd never seen water boil. Imagine you lived in a world where there was just no means to heat something hotter than around 200 F or 90 C. You'd imagine that water just got hotter and hotter and hotter. The idea that a cataclysmic change in the nature of water, turning it into vapor, would seem absurd and fanciful in the extreme. It's difficult for us to imagine cataclysmic change. Today was like yesterday, and yesterday was like the day before that, but things actually do change, and, sometimes, cataclysmically.

Hashem has promised us He will bring Mashiach to us, and just as He promised to preserve His people throughout our long years of exile and torment, which He has done against all the laws of history, so I believe that He will bring His redeemer to Zion.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Bava Metzia 2-8

Possession and the Law

“It is assumed that whatever is in one’s possession is his.”

Similar to the well-known adage that “possession is nine-tenths of the law”, Tosefot cites this logical concept of possession to explain the distinction between the law taught in the first *mishna* of Bava Metzia and the law taught in an apparently identical case in Bava Batra 34b.

Our *mishna* teaches about two people who are holding a garment, with each person claiming that he bought the entire garment or found the garment first. The law is that they divide the garment, but both need to take an oath of Rabbinical origin that was enacted to stop people from grabbing the property of others. However, in Bava Batra, a case where two people claim ownership of a boat is discussed, and the law in that case is *kol d'alim gavar* (literally “whoever is stronger wins,” with the exact meaning and reasoning being explained by the Rishonim).

However, the ruling is not that the court says that they divide the boat equally. So, what's the difference between the boat case and the case when they both hold a garment? Tosefot explains that when the claimers are in possession of the disputed item, it is different, since “It is assumed that whatever is in one’s possession is his.” Being that they both are holding the garment and are both in possession of it, unlike in the case of the boat, they divide it equally.

▪ *Bava Metzia 2a*

Q & A

Questions

1. How many "geira" are in a shekel?
2. What was the minimum age of military service in the Jewish army?
3. What were the three different types of *terumah* donated?
4. The Jews were counted after Yom Kippur and again after Pesach. Both times they numbered the same amount. How can this be? Didn't some 19-year olds turn 20 during that six month period?
5. How many ingredients comprise the incense of the *Mishkan*?
6. According to Rashi, why are sailors called "malachim" ?
7. What is the difference between *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding), and *da'at* (knowledge)?
8. Shabbat is a "sign." What does it signify?
9. When did the Jewish People begin to give contributions for the building of the *Mishkan*?
10. How many books are there in Tanach?
11. From where did the men take the earrings that they donated to make the calf?
12. Why did Aharon build the altar for the golden calf by himself?
13. Why did Moshe break the Tablets?
14. How can two brothers belong to two different tribes?
15. Why did Moshe ask that his name be erased from the Torah?
16. How has the sin of the golden calf affected the Jewish People throughout history?
17. In verse 33:2, G-d says that the inhabitants of *Eretz Canaan* would be driven out of the Land. In that verse, only six of the seven Canaanite nations are mentioned. What happened to the seventh?
18. How did G-d show that He forgave the Jewish People?
19. How did Moshe become wealthy?
20. How do the light rays shining from Moshe's face show us the powerful effect of sin?

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

Answers

1. 30:13 - Twenty.
2. 30:14 - Twenty.
3. 30:15 - For the *adanim* (sockets), for the purchase of communal sacrifices, and for the building of the *Mishkan*.
4. 30:16 - Their ages were calculated based on Rosh Hashana, not based on their individual birthdays.
5. 30:34 - Eleven ingredients were used making the incense.
6. 30:35 - Because they stir (*malach*) the water with their oars.
7. 31:3 - *Chochma* is knowledge acquired from others. *Bina* is the deduction of new knowledge from what one has already learned. *Da'at* is holy inspiration.
8. 31:13 - It is a sign between G-d and the Jewish People that He has chosen them and a sign to the nations of the world that He has sanctified the Jewish People.
9. 31:18 - The 11th of Tishrei.
10. 31:18 - 24.
11. 32:2,3 - From their ears.
12. 32:5 - He hoped that by building it by himself it would take longer and in the interim Moshe would return.
13. 32:19 - Moshe reasoned: If the Torah forbids those who have estranged themselves from the Torah to partake in even a single commandment (Pesach sacrifice), surely the entire Torah cannot be given to a whole nation which has estranged itself from G-d!
14. 32:27 - Half-brothers, sharing the same mother.
15. 32:32 - So people shouldn't say "Moshe was unworthy to plead for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people."
16. 32:34 - Whenever G-d punishes the Jewish People, part of that punishment comes as payment for the sin of the golden calf.
17. 33:2 - The seventh nation, the Girgashites, voluntarily emigrated.
18. 33:14 - He agreed to let His *Shechina* dwell among them.
19. 34:1 - Moshe carved the Tablets out of precious stone. G-d commanded Moshe to keep the leftover fragments.
20. 34:35 - Before the sin of the golden calf, the people would not have been afraid to look at the light rays, but after the sin they were afraid.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

BIRKAT HAMAZON (PART 15)

BLUEPRINT OF JEWISH DESTINY

“Anyone who recites Birkat HaMazon is blessed through it.”
(Zohar HaKadosh to Parshat Terumah)

The next request reads: “The Compassionate One, may He sustain us in honor.”

We ask Hashem to sustain us with honor. What is honor? Perhaps the most basic definition is that we are respected by those around us. But, as with all things that are related to Judaism, it is much deeper than simply whether we are admired or not.

The mishna in Pirkei Avot (4:1) quotes Ben Zoma, who asks four rhetorical questions. The last one is, “Who is honored?” As with the preceding three questions, Ben Zoma then answers with a completely unexpected observation: “Who is honored? He who honors others.” He is offering a piece of advice to all those who would like to be honored. The most direct and effective path to honor is by honoring others.

The Torah relates that when Eisav came back from his hunting expedition to find food for his father, “Vayavoi l’aviv – and he came to his father” (Ber. 27:31). The Rabbis point out that these words in Lashon HaKodesh can be read forwards and backwards, a type of palindrome. This teaches us that if one honors their father and mother, they will be rewarded with their children honoring them. As Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508) writes about Ben Zoma’s thought-provoking insight, a person can only give another what they, themselves, possess. Only someone honorable can give honor to others.

The Midrash, Tana d’Bei Eliyahu, cites Hashem declaring to the Jewish nation, “My beloved children, is there anything that I lack that I should have to ask from you? All I ask is that you love one another, honor one another and respect one another. In this way, no sin, robbery or base deed will be found among you, so that you will remain pure forever.”

One of the foremost disciples of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer and Rabbi Simcha Zisel Ziv, who were the founding giants of the Mussar movement, was Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horwitz (1847-1919). He established the famed Yeshiva in Novardok, which turned into a network of Yeshivahs all over Eastern Europe. Similar to the Alter of Kelm, he became known as the Alter of Nevardok. In teaching what the concept of honor really means, he would tell a story about a blacksmith who worked from morning to night in extreme heat and dust. One day, a friend of his asked him why he hadn’t chosen an easier profession. With his talents, he could easily have been an enormously successful goldsmith. The blacksmith burst out laughing and told his friend that if he would have been a goldsmith, he would have died of starvation a long time ago. “You know why?” he told his friend. “Because, in all the years that I have been in business, no one has ever asked me to fix a golden object. Iron, yes. All the time. But never gold!”

“You are a complete fool!” retorted the friend. “Who, in their right mind would come and ask you to make, or fix for them jewelry? If you had a goldsmith’s workplace and you advertised effectively, you could have earned your income in a much more honorable way!”

The Alter explains, “Aren’t we the same? We think and act as if our income is completely dependent upon ourselves. So much so, that very often we have an unfortunate habit of taking Hashem out of the equation. Perhaps, if we would rely on Hashem more, and on ourselves less, we would be able to earn our living in a more honorable way.”

This is why, after each meal that includes bread, we ask Hashem to sustain us with honor. We turn to our Father in Heaven and “remind” ourselves of the real source of our livelihood.

To be continued...

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Moshe conducts a census by counting each silver half-shekel donated by all men age twenty and over. Moshe is commanded to make a copper laver for the Mishkan. The women donate the necessary metal. The formula of the anointing oil is specified, and G-d instructs Moshe to use this oil only for dedicating the Mishkan, its vessels and Aharon and his sons. G-d selects Betzalel and Oholiav as master craftsmen for the Mishkan and its vessels.

The Jewish People are commanded to keep the Shabbat, an eternal sign that G-d made the world. Moshe receives the two Tablets of Testimony on which are written the Ten Commandments.

The mixed multitude who left Egypt with the Jewish People panic when Moshe's descent seems to be delayed, and so they force Aharon to make a golden calf for them to worship. Aharon stalls, trying to delay them. Hashem tells Moshe to return to the people immediately, threatening to destroy everyone and build a new nation from Moshe. When Moshe sees the camp of idol-worship, he smashes the Tablets and destroys the golden calf. The sons of Levi volunteer to punish the transgressors, executing 3,000 men.

Moshe ascends the mountain again to pray for forgiveness for the people, and G-d accepts his prayer. Moshe sets up the Mishkan and G-d's clouds of glory return. Moshe asks G-d to show him the rules by which he conducts the world, but he is granted only a small portion of this request. G-d tells Moshe to hew new Tablets, and reveals to him the text of the prayer that will invoke Divine mercy.

Idol worship, intermarriage and the combination of milk and meat are prohibited. The laws of Pesach, the first-born, the first-fruits, Shabbat, Shavuot and Succot are taught. When Moshe descends with the second set of Tablets, his face is luminous as a result of contact with the Divine.

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WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Ki Tisa/Purim Katan: Myrrh & Myrtle (Part 1/2)

Last week, Jews the world over celebrated Purim Katan, a minor holiday observed in the month Adar I of a leap year, exactly one month before the regular Purim is observed in Adar II. To start getting into the Purim spirit, this essay explores the names of two heroes from the Scroll of Esther customarily read on Purim – Mordechai and Esther. What is interesting about these two characters is that both of them have multiple names, so their alternate names can be said to be “synonymous” with their more familiar names. This essay offers an onomastic exploration of these characters’ names and makes some interesting connections in doing so.

Throughout the Scroll of Esther, Mordechai (Mordecai) – the lead male hero of the story – is known by the name Mordechai. The Talmud (*Chullin* 139b) asks where we find an allusion to the name Mordechai in the Torah, before replying with a phrase describing one of the spices used as an ingredient in the Anointing Oil, *pure myrrh* (Ex. 30:23). In Hebrew, that phrase reads *mar dror*, but Targum Onkelos translates it into Aramaic as *mira dachya*, which is phonetically similar to the name Mordechai. The idea behind this connection is that a righteous person like Mordechai exudes good vibes and good deeds in the same way that sweet-smelling myrrh gives off a good fragrance.

Similarly, the Talmud (*Megillah* 10b) relates that the Amoraic sage Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachamani would begin his ruminations on the Scroll of Esther by citing the verse, “instead of the thorn-bush will arise a cypress-tree [*brosh*]... (Isa. 55:13). He plays on the word *brosh* as though it said *b’rosh* (“at the head”), and reinterprets it as an allusion to Mordechai, whose name alludes to *mar dror*, which is described by the Torah as *besamim rosh* (“the head of all spices/fragrances”). Amazingly, the *Peirush HaRokeach* (to Ex. 30:23) writes that the *gematria* of the word *rosh* (=501) equals that of the Hebrew phrase *zehu Mordechai Ha’Tzadik* (“this is Mordechai the righteous one”), thus further cementing the connection.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the Talmud did not mean any of this as an etymological insight into the name Mordechai, but rather as an exegetical allusion to the name in the Torah. What, then, is the actual etymology of the name Mordechai?

Many scholars have already noted the similarity between the name Mordechai and the Babylonian name Merodach, which appears elsewhere in the Bible. For example, the successor to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar was named Evil-Merodach (II Kings 28:27); and earlier, at the same time that Hezekiah was king of Judah, a fellow named Merodach-Baladan was the king of Babylonia (Isa. 39:1). Interestingly, Merodach-Baladan is known elsewhere as *Berodach-Baladan* (II Kings 20:12), probably due to the interchangeability of the letters MEM and BET.

Either way, the name Merodach appears one more time in the Bible: When Jeremiah foretold of the impending destruction of Babylonia and the downfall of its idolatrous deities, Jeremiah said that the people will exclaim, “Bel is ashamed, Merodach is devastated; her idols are ashamed, her gods are devastated” (Jer. 50:2). In this passage, Jeremiah uses the name Merodach as an alternate name for the Babylonian god Bel (equivalent to the Canaanite Baal). Indeed, as archeologists have discovered, Merodach/Marduk was one the chief gods of the Babylonian pantheon.

Just to clarify, I am not saying that Mordechai was named after the Babylonian deity Merodach/Marduk. Rather, the personal name Mordechai and variants, which were used in Babylonian/Persian society, were rooted in the name of that god. Once those names became popular and accepted, one can be said to bear such a name without being named directly after an idolatrous deity. This is very much like the way we use names like Mark or Veronica nowadays, without thinking about the names of the Roman deity Mars or the Greek deity Nike, from which those given names are derived.

*For the rest of the discussion about Mordechai's other names, visit us online at:

http://ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word/

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS

Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.” (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)

THE HALF-SHEKEL (Part 1 of 2)

Mitzvos #105 in Sefer HaChinuch

By the Sinai revelation, the Jewish people attained a lofty Divine status and a marriage-like union with Hashem. After they sinned with the Golden Calf – “like a bride who is disloyal to her groom while still under the wedding canopy,” in the words of the Sages – Hashem enabled them to gain atonement by building Him a Mishkan where He would once again dwell amongst them. Many Jews died as a punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf. In order to show the preciousness of each Jew to Hashem, He told Moshe to count by having them each contribute a half-shekel coin toward the silver foundation bases of the Mishkan. Thus, the giving of the half-shekel served multiple related purposes: atonement for the sin, the counting of the people after the punishment for the sin, and the building of the Mishkan to house Hashem’s presence that departed as a result of the sin. A full shekel weighs 20 *gerah* of silver, so the half-shekel weighs 10 *gerah*. Women are not obligated to contribute, but they may do so if they wish.

The Midrash relates that when Hashem told Moshe that the Jewish people could atone for their sin by means of a monetary contribution, he was taken aback. How could any amount of money rectify the spiritual damage of cosmic proportions that was caused by the sin of the Golden Calf? Hashem told him, “I do not place upon people demands that are beyond their capabilities.” He withdrew a coin of fire from beneath His Throne of Glory and told Moshe, “This is what they should give” (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:3). One interpretation of this Midrash is that when the Jewish people contributed toward the making of the Golden Calf, they were guilty of shifting their love away from Hashem and onto an idol. Now they would reverse this sin at its root by rededicating their love to Hashem and contributing toward His service. Although they would only give a single coin, this would be done with fiery devotion, thus returning glory to Hashem’s Throne of Glory. In this way, their limited physical acts would assume an unlimited spiritual form. Although they would each provide only a minuscule contribution, Hashem

in His great mercy derives great satisfaction from His people's deeds by focusing on the loving intention in our hearts.

This mitzvah includes the requirement to give a half-shekel in the Adar that precedes Nissan to pay for the communal offerings and other expenses, and there is a corresponding enactment of the Sages to read the passage of this mitzvah in the Shabbos before Adar. In this way, the offerings belong to and represent every Jew equally. In addition, these contributions provide atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf whose effects reverberate until this day. Hashem told Moshe, "Just as the heads of the Jewish people that became lowered in shame due to their sin will now become raised in dignity through the half-shekel coins, so will their heads become raised every year when they read the passage of this mitzvah" (*Midrash Tanchuma*). By reading this passage, even without actually giving the coin, we awaken a fiery desire to give to Hashem, and we thereby atone for the fiery desire to give toward the Golden Calf (*Sfas Emes, Shekalim 5631*). The coins are made of silver, *kesef*, which is related to the word *kissufim*, meaning, loving desire (*Shem MiShmuel, Mishpatim 5675*).

Although the mitzvah of the half-shekel does not apply when there is no *Beis HaMikdash*, we may attain atonement through acts of charity. If a Jew does not give charity, Hashem may cause gentiles to take money from him against his will to bring about the necessary atonement (*Bava Basra 9a*). There is also a custom to give three half-shekels corresponding to the three times the word *terumah*, donation, is written in the passage of the half-shekel, by the Minchah prayer of Taanis Esther, in remembrance of this mitzvah (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 694:1*).

**To be continued*

Ohrnet Magazine is a weekly Torah magazine published by Ohr Somayach Institutions, POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel · Tel +972-2-581-0315 · Email. info@ohr.edu

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