

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

THE WAR OF THE KINGS

“And it happened in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar...” (14:1)

There once was a wealthy merchant whose business dealings took him to many distant lands. On one such trip, the merchant fell ill. His condition deteriorated rapidly and he felt his end was near. Lying on his deathbed, he was distressed by the thought that his possessions might fall into the hands of the slave who was with him and never reach his son whom he had left at home.

He called to the slave and instructed him “Summon the scribe that I may dictate my last will and testament!” The scribe arrived and the merchant began to dictate, “I hereby bequeath to my slave all that I possess. My son shall inherit only one thing of mine, which shall be of his choosing.”

The slave was beside himself with joy. When the merchant passed away, he hastened to return to the son and inform him of his father’s demise – and the will.

The son was heartbroken by the loss of his father and his inheritance, and he went to consult his rabbi.

The rabbi listened to the son’s tale and smiled.

“Your father was a wise man. He made sure that his possessions would not be lost or stolen by the slave. He gave them to him knowing that he would guard those possessions as if they were his own. Tomorrow, when the slave presents your father’s will before Bet Din and

claims for himself all possessions save one, put your hand on his shoulder and say, ‘I choose this slave from among all my father’s possessions.’ Once you acquire the slave, all that belongs to him will become yours, and your father will have successfully bequeathed to you his entire estate, as was his intention.”

Sure enough, the following day, the courts awarded the son the slave together with all the father’s possessions.

One of the more surprising success stories of the last fifty years is the German economy. The Second World War left Germany broke, broken, and carved up between the Americans and the Russians. Some fifty years later, Germany is one of the richest and productive nations in the world.

How did this happen? Apart from any politico-economic reasons, this week’s Torah portion offers us a perspective on this enigma.

We read this week of the War of the Kings. Behind the scenes, G-d incited the four kings to go to war with the five kings in order that their fortune would ultimately fall into Avraham’s hands. Just as G-d manipulated the cogs of history to protect Avraham, so too has He ‘stage-managed’ the success of the Germans, and others, so that the descendents of Avraham will receive what G-d had decreed. G-d preserves the possessions of the wicked so that the righteous can inherit them.

• Source:

Based on the Midrash Tanchuma (Lech Lecha 8)

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Ten generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to the inescapable Truth of Hashem's existence, and thus merits that Hashem appear to him. At the beginning of this week's *Parsha*, Hashem tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where Hashem will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants and those whom they converted to faith in Hashem. When they reach the land of Canaan, Hashem appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants. A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty would cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to the Pharaoh, but Hashem afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues, and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to *Eretz Yisrael* (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in

the fertile plain of the Jordan. A war breaks out between the kings of the region, and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs from accepting any of the spoils of the battle. In a prophetic covenant, Hashem reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to *Eretz Yisrael*, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian hand-maiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her, and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel Hagar returns to Avram, and gives birth to Yishmael. The Parsha concludes with Hashem commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a covenant between Hashem and his seed. Hashem changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and all his household.

ISRAEL Forever

IT'S IN THE GENES

The connection of the Jewish People to their homeland is without parallel in the history of nations. Despite being physically separated from *Eretz Yisrael* for close to two millennia Jews have maintained a mystical bond with their Promised Land, praying for a massive return and even making successful individual endeavors to come back.

What is the secret of this bond?

Our Patriarch Avraham was subjected to ten trials of his faith. One of the purposes of these trials, whose outcome

was certainly known by the Omniscient Creator, was to develop in Avraham those strengths which he could pass through the genes to all of his descendants. By inflicting on Avraham a famine which would force him to abandon *Eretz Yisrael* for Egypt so soon after entering the Land promised to him, Heaven instilled in him a powerful longing to return at the first opportunity, which he indeed did.

We are the heirs of that same longing which makes Israel a part of us forever.

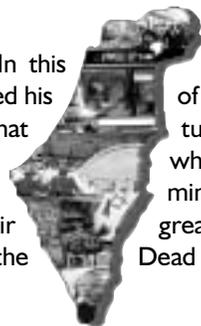
LOVE OF THE LAND - THE NAMES

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

THE DEAD SEA BEGINNINGS

How did the Dead Sea come into being? In this week's Torah reading we learn that "Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan that it was well watered everywhere – before G-d destroyed Sodom and Amorah". (*Bereishet 13:10*).

In his commentary on Chumash, Rabbi Meir Leibish Malbim explains that the area occupied by the



above-mentioned sinful cities was the fertile delta of the Jordan River. When these cities were overturned by Heaven a huge crater was created into which rushed the Jordan water to create a sea. The minerals released from the bowels of the earth by this great explosion joined with those waters to form the Dead Sea.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. What benefits did Hashem promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?
8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites." How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "palit" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "ma'aser" specifically to Malki-Tzedek?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did Hashem indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace?"
17. How did Hashem fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age?"
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when Hashem appeared to him?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

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

1. 12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. 12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. 12:5 - People they converted to the worship of Hashem.
4. 12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.
5. 12:8 - He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.
6. 12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.
7. 13:7 - Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.
8. 14:1 - Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.
9. 14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.
10. 14:13 - He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.
11. 14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.
12. 14:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.
13. 14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.
14. 14:23 - Hashem had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's king to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."
15. 15:13 - With the birth of Yitzchak.
16. 15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.
17. 15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.
18. 15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.
19. 16:1 - Pharaoh.
20. 17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.

HOW THEY WERE PAID

When repairs were made in the *Beit Hamikdash* there was a need to pay the builders who did the work. The *mishna* informs us that such payment could not be made from anything donated for sacrificial purposes. This implies that materials dedicated for the upkeep of the *Beit Hamikdash* could be used as payment for the builders.

As the source for this Rabbi Abahu cites the passage “They shall make a Sanctuary to Me” (*Shemot* 25:8), which indicates that G-d wished that the payment for expenses incurred in the construction or repair of the Sanctuary should come from materials dedicated “to Me”.

Tosefot raises the question as to why such scriptural proof is needed, since it is obvious that the builders must be paid from some Sanctuary source. The answer given is that without such a source we would have assumed that any materials dedicated to the upkeep of the Sanctuary or *Beit Hamikdash* could be used only in the actual construction because they could thus maintain their sacred status. To use them as payment to the builders, however, would mean that they lost their sacred status since the builders could use them for any secular purpose. Payment for the services of the builders would then have to come from funds which were donated to the *Beit Hamikdash* for the express purpose of effecting such payment. The words “to Me” dispel this notion by enabling us to use the very materials dedicated to G-d’s Sanctuary for payment for the services of the builders.

In his commentary on these very words Rashi on Torah explains them as “for Me”, a command to build the Sanctuary with pure intentions that it serve as a dwelling place for the Divine Presence.

Temurah 31a

THE STUFF IDOLS ARE MADE OF

“You shall not make for yourselves gods of silver and gods of gold.” (*Shemot* 20:20) This prohibition against making and serving idols is certainly intended to include those made of lesser materials such as wood. We nevertheless find the Sage Rabbi Papa raising the possibility of a Jew misconstruing the command and assuming that only those made of gold and silver could not be worshipped.

It was such a Jew who could be guilty of multiple sins of idol worship but responsible for only a single sin offering. Although he was aware that it was forbidden for a Jew to worship idols through slaughtering, burning, pouring a libation or bowing to it, he was ignorant of the fact that this applied to an idol not made of silver or gold. His multiple worship of a wooden idol out of ignorance of the law is therefore considered a single unintentional sin of idol worship requiring only a single sacrifice as atonement.

That idol worshippers did indeed use baser materials to form their idols is evident from the warning issued in the Torah (*Devarim* 4:28) that Jews driven from their own land for serving idols will end up serving man-made gods of wood and stone in the land of their exile.

• *Keritot 3b*

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Of the eleven spices which went into the production of the *ketoret* incense daily offered by the *kohanim* in the *Beit Hamikdash* the one called “*shechaillet*” (*Shemot* 30:34) required special treatment to bring out its beauty and its strength. Referred to as *tziporen* (onycha) in our *gemara* because its smooth texture resembled that of a fingernail, this sweet spice had to be treated with a strong dose of *bous karshina* to remove its natural unsightly blackness. To bring out its fragrance it had to be soaked in a strong solution called *kaprisin_wine*.

Jews, who introduce their daily morning and afternoon prayers with a recital of this *gemara* about the incense are familiar with what Rabbi Shimon said about another acidic solution which could have done even a better job. It was called *mai raglayim* which literally translates as urine. The reason it was not used is because it would be undignified to bring such an ingredient into the Sanctuary where the incense production was done.

One approach of the commentaries is that it is literally human urine which is here discussed. Another approach, however, is that there was a certain grass bearing the same name as that used for urine, and that being thus associated with something of an undignified nature ruled out its use in the sacred precincts of the *Beit Hamikdash*.

• *Keritot 6a*

THE AGE OF THE UNIVERSE

From: Michael D. in Los Angeles, CA

Dear Rabbi,

It is hard for me to understand the fact that many relics such as dinosaur bones, cave art, and rock formations are thought to exist for millions of years. I asked a local Rabbi about this. He told me that dinosaur bones were planted by Hashem to test our faith. I do not really understand this answer. How can you explain this apparent contradiction with the Jewish calendar?

Dear Michael,

The resolution of the apparent contradiction between the "scientific" age of the universe and the Jewish date of 5756 years since Creation has two standard approaches:

The scientific estimate is true, and the text of Genesis can be reconciled: For example, saying that the six "days" are not really days, but rather six "time periods."

The Jewish date is true, and the scientific estimate must be explained (away).

Several satisfactory explanations following the first approach can be found in the book "Challenge" and I recommend that you look there. Since you asked about the second approach, I will address it.

It's definitely possible for G-d to create a world that looks older than it is. Adam was created as an adult. Observing him a few minutes after he was created, you would assume him to be at least twenty years old. The Garden of Eden had full-grown trees laden with fruit. According to the Torah text, these trees were no more than three days old.

Let's take this idea a step further: A star 10 million light-years from the earth could have been created with its light already reaching the earth. The star would appear 10 million years old, even though it was just created.

Now you're probably thinking, "But why would G-d do that? Why create bones, artifacts, partially decayed radium,

potassium-argon, uranium, red-shifted light from space, etc. - all pointing to an age which is not true?"

Strictly speaking, this isn't a problem. Not knowing why G-d did something doesn't prove that He didn't do it. But I'll try to answer this anyway:

The purpose of this world is to hide G-d's presence. This allows us to exercise free will. In fact, the Hebrew word for "world" - *olam* - means "hiding." Evidence which "hides" the age of the universe could be part of G-d's general "policy" of hiding.

Now you might say, "According to this we can never rely on our observations. Doesn't this approach negate all scientific findings?"

No. This approach merely questions evidence that contradicts other reliable evidence.

Let me give you an analogy: Suppose George is accused of murder. We find his fingerprints at the scene of the crime, the murder weapon on his premises, and he has a motive. The defense argues that George was framed. Will anyone take that seriously? But suppose that reliable witnesses testify that they saw George 100 miles from the scene at the time of the murder. Suddenly it becomes appropriate to take the "frame-up" defense seriously.

Here too, scientific observations have to be understood in light of the other available evidence - i.e., the Torah. The Jewish People were eyewitness at Sinai who observed the giving of the Torah (hence the term "observant Jews?"). For us the Torah's account of events is first-hand testimony. Therefore, the idea that scientific observations might be misleading should be taken seriously.

Speaking of archeological finds that ought not be taken too seriously, did you hear this one?

Caveman 1: Ugh!

Caveman 2: Ugh! Ugh!

Caveman 1: Stop changing the subject!

Sources:

- *Challenge, Carmell and Domb, 1978, Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, pp. 124-41, 164-75.*
- *ibid., pp. 142-49.*

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TURNING POINT IN THE LOBBY

It happened in the lobby of a Swiss hotel. An Israeli visitor active in charitable causes noticed a family parked on lobby sofas at a late hour of the night. Upon inquiring he learned that the father, mother and daughter had an early morning return flight to Israel. In order to save the expense of another night in their hotel room they had checked out and were spending the remaining hours till their ride to the airport parked in the lobby.

When they refused his invitation to come to his room for some refreshments he brought some cookies and chocolates to them in the lobby. Upon his return to Israel he forgot the entire incident until some months later when he received an invitation to the daughter's wedding referring to him as the

"main *mechutan* (title usually reserved for the parents of the bride and groom)".

Unaware of his connection he called for clarification. He was told that the bride had strayed from the religious lifestyle of her parents and had become engaged to marry a non-Jew. The trip to Switzerland was a desperate attempt to dissuade her but she refused to budge. It was only on the flight back to Israel that she kept talking about how wonderful that religious Jew was to them in the hotel lobby. She was so moved by his thoughtfulness that she decided that she wanted to return to a lifestyle which had such values.

The result was that she called off the intermarriage and soon became engaged to marry a fine, religious Jew.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

Do I Look Dangerous?

Question — Upon entering a supermarket in Jerusalem I am often asked by the guard at the door if I am carrying any weapon and then given a quick "once over" with his metal detector. With my very Jewish appearance – facial hair and modest garb – I hardly look like a terrorist. Is it right for me to take exception to being suspected of being one?

Answer — The guard is merely following the orders given to him by the people concerned with protecting you and the general public against terrorists who dress up like religious Jews to get by security checks. It is this sort of

uncompromising scrutiny which discourages suicide bombers from attempting to carry out their deadly missions.

Let me share with you what happened to me a couple of years ago in the airport in Detroit. I was informed by the young lady at the check-in counter that I had been randomly selected for a spot check of my hand baggage and person. The fellow who did the checking in a very thorough manner explained to me in a thick Arab accent that he feels a need to protect a Jew like me "For aren't we cousins after all?" Is Jerusalem safer than Detroit?

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous Ohrnet features

Re: Ask! - At Home in the Succa

Dear Ohrnet,

It might have also been a good idea to explain to Jenny that the reason for Succot is actually a dispute between our Sages. One version indeed says it represents "*ananei kavod*- clouds of glory" but the other one claims it was "*succot mamash* – the actual temporary shaded booths they dwelled in while in the desert".

On the other hand the real reason is not known to us, and we do it because G-d commanded us.

• Samuel Cohen

Ohrnet replies: True, we do the mitzva because G-d commanded us to do so, but one should also have in mind that the

succa reminds us of the fact that G-d took us out of Egypt and protected us. This is to be remembered throughout our generations as the verse states. (See Vayikra 23:43 and Mishna Berura)

Re: Permission to Reprint Riddles

Shalom,

My name is Dani, living in Yakir, Israel. A few months ago I got from a friend a file with riddles. I decided to publish one every week in the paper of our settlement. Only now I got to know that they come from your website Ohr.edu. So please let me know if it's okay with me continuing this custom. The settlement has about 210 families, making about 1200 citizens. I assume that most citizens read the paper, and most of them read the riddle as well. Thanks.