

O H R N E T

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

THE END OF THE PLOT

“You will be a source of astonishment, a parable and a conversation piece, amongst all the people where G-d will lead you.”

There are two kinds of Jewish jokes — jokes by Jews and jokes about Jews. The former is a kind of psychological protection against the latter.

Anti-Semitic jokes go back much further than you might think. In the *Midrash Eicha Rabati (Pesikta 17)*, Rabbi Abahu describes how non-Jews ridiculed us in their theaters and their circuses. They used to get drunk and say, “How long do you want to live?” Then another would reply, “As long as a Jew’s Shabbat coat.” Nothing lasts longer than a Shabbat coat because it’s only worn once a week. Ho. Ho. Sidesplitting stuff this.

Another joke they told was to bring a camel into the circus-ring covered with sacks. One then said to the other, “Why is this camel wearing sack-cloth, is it in mourning?” The other then says, “Well, how would you feel if you had no food? The Jews didn’t harvest their land in the seventh year, so now they’re all starving and they’re eaten the thorns that were this poor camel’s lunch and dinner and breakfast.”

That’s the second kind of Jewish joke.

The first kind is a defense against an unkind world, a world of suffering and rejection — a world of exile.

Belorussia. Mid-winter. Temperature: -45° Fahrenheit. Moishe and Shloime are lying shivering in their tattered coats on two iron beds.

Moishe: “Shloime, close the window, it’s cold outside.”

Shloime: “Moishele, and if I close the window, it should be warm outside?”

Behind every Jewish joke there’s a Jewish tear. A wry bitter-sweet feeling of two thousand years of exile. Tears of sadness. Tears of hope.

It’s ironic that the Yiddish theater excelled at the kind of Jewish jokes of which the ancient Greeks and Romans would have been proud. Their favorite target was the un-worldly yeshiva student let loose in ‘the big wide world.’

Can there be a surer sign of the depths of our exile than when Jews view Jews through the eyes of anti-Semitism?

Mind you, the Yiddish theater is today an arcane backwater in the history of the theater, while “The Yeshiva Student” is an international hit from Bnei Brak to Gateshead.

So it’s not too difficult to work out the end of the plot.

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

When *Bnei Yisrael* dwell in the Land of Israel, the first fruits are to be taken to the Temple and given to the *kohen* in a ceremony expressing recognition that it is G-d who guides Jewish history throughout all ages. (This passage forms one of the central parts of the Haggadah that we read at the Passover Seder.) On the last day of Pesach of the fourth and seventh years of the seven-year *shemita* cycle, a person must recite a disclosure stating that he has indeed distributed the tithes to the appropriate people in the prescribed manner. With this *mitzvah*, Moshe concludes the commandments that G-d has told him to give to the Jewish People. Moshe exhorts them to walk in G-d's ways because they are set aside as a treasured people to G-d. When *Bnei*

Yisrael cross the Jordan River they are to make a new commitment to the Torah. Huge stones are to be erected and the Torah is to be written on them in the world's seventy primary languages, and they are to be covered with a thin layer of plaster. Half the tribes will stand on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Eval, and the *levi'im* will stand in a valley between the two mountains. There the *levi'im* will recite 12 commandments and all the people will say "amen" to the blessings and the curses. Moshe then details the blessings that will be bestowed upon *Bnei Yisrael*. These blessings are both physical and spiritual. But if the Jewish People do not keep the Torah, Moshe details a chilling picture of destruction, resulting in exile and wandering among the nations.

ISRAEL Forever

BLESSINGS OR CURSES

One of the most difficult things for both individuals and nations is to face the fact that the troubles they endure are the consequences of their actions. Instead of interpreting their setbacks to Heavenly warnings to change their sinful ways, they prefer to shrug their shoulders and make some inane statement such as "that's the world we live in".

This week's Torah reading devotes much space to blessings and curses. This *tochacha*, which is traditionally read in a lower voice to accentuate its gravity, makes

it clear that it is our deeds, for good or evil, which bring upon us either blessings or curses.

Israel has gone through what was probably the most trying experience in its history. We have no prophet to inform us where we collectively went wrong to deserve such a curse, but the *tochacha* should serve as a stern reminder that things don't "just happen" and that there is an urgent need for every one of us to improve in our relations with G-d and our fellow man in order to secure only blessings for Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE WISDOM

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

“THE ONLY TRULY FREE MAN IS THE ONE WHO LEARNS TORAH. EVERYONE WHO CONSTANTLY LEARNS TORAH IS ELEVATED.” — RABBI YEHOSHUA BEN LEVI (AVOT 6:2)

Only one who learns Torah is not subservient to material matters. Such freedom, in which the spirit is not enslaved by physical appetites, is the only true freedom.

Let one think that he can aspire to the crown of Torah only if he has great intelligence and applies it to



learning, the Sage informs us that everyone, even someone who is not brilliant, can achieve this goal if he is constantly dedicated to learning Torah.

• *Tiferet Yisrael*

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PARSHA Q&A ?

1. When historically did the obligation to bring *bikkurim* begin?
2. *Bikkurim* are from which crops?
3. How does one designate *bikkurim*?
4. Who shakes the basket containing the *bikkurim*?
5. What does “*v’anita v’amarta*” mean?
6. Which Arami “tried to destroy my father?”
7. When during the year may *bikkurim* be brought? Until when are the special verses recited?
8. Someone declaring that he separated *terumah* and *ma’aser* says: “And I didn’t forget.” What didn’t he forget?
9. What were the Jewish People to do with the 12 stones on Mt. Eval?
10. Six tribes stood on Mt. Eval and six on Mt. Gerizim. Who and what were in the middle?
11. Who “causes the blind to go astray?”
12. How does one “strike another secretly?”
13. Eleven curses were spoken on Mt. Eval. What is the significance of this number?
14. Why are sheep called “*ashterot*”?
15. How is the manner of expressing the curses in *Parshat Bechukotai* more severe than in this week’s *parsha*?
16. What is meant by “the Jewish People will become a proverb?”
17. Why did all the curses expressed in 48:16-44 befall the Jewish People?
18. “In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were (last evening)’ and in the evening you will say, ‘If only it were (this) morning.’” Why?
19. To which tribe did Moshe give the Torah first?
20. How long does it take to understand the depth of one’s teacher’s wisdom?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week’s Questions!

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

1. 26:1 - After the Land was conquered and divided.
2. 26:2 - The seven species for which *Eretz Yisrael* is praised: Wheat, barley, grapes, olives, figs, dates, and pomegranates.
3. 26:2 - When he sees the first fruit ripen on a tree, he binds a piece of straw around it to mark it as *bikkurim*.
4. 26:4 - The *kohen* places his hands under the hands of the one bringing it, and they wave the basket together.
5. 26:5 - Speak loudly.
6. 26:5 - Lavan.
7. 26:11 - *Bikkurim* are brought from Shavuot until Chanukah. The verses are recited only until Succot.
8. 26:13 - To bless Hashem.
9. 10. 27:2 - Build an altar.
10. 27:12 - *Kohanim*, *levi'im* and the Holy Ark.
11. 27:18 - Any person who intentionally gives bad advice.
12. 27:24 - By slandering him.
13. 27:24 - Each curse corresponds to one of the tribes, except for the tribe of Shimon. Since Moshe didn’t intend to bless the tribe of Shimon before his death, he did not want to curse them either.
14. 28:4 - Because they “enrich” (*m’ashiro*) their owners.
15. 28:23 - In *Bechukotai* the Torah speaks in the plural, whereas in this week’s Parsha the curses are mentioned in the singular.
16. 28:37 - Whenever someone wants to express the idea of extraordinary suffering, they will use the Jewish People as an example.
17. 28:47 - Because they did not serve Hashem with gladness when everything was abundant.
18. 28:67 - Because the curse of each hour will be greater than that of the previous hour.
19. 29:3 - To the Tribe of Levi.
20. 29:8 - 40 years.

- Measurements for Torah laws
- How many complete walls are needed for a succah
- Where the virtual succah wall is placed
- The status of the virtual succah wall on Shabbat
- How permanent a structure the succah must be
- The roofless succah and the round one
- Eight structures not built as a succah but still qualify
- Succah built too early or too late or a stolen one
- Succah under a tree or another succah
- Obstruction between the person and the *schach* covering succah
- What qualifies *schach* to cover the succah
- *Schach* and *tzitzit* that started off without intention
- What was the succah of our ancestors in the wilderness
- The problem of bundled *schach*
- What is considered as a vessel to disqualify it as *schach*

How Low May You Go?

A person can be in one succah with less than the minimum amount of standing room and still fulfill this mitzvah, and in another with a similar problem and fail to achieve such fulfillment.

The minimum height of a succah is ten *tefachim* (handbreadths). In an earlier *gemara* (4a) the Sage Rava disqualified a succah even if the *schach* covering it is higher than ten *tefachim* if there are ends of the *schach* material hanging down to below ten *tefachim*. In our *gemara*, however, we encounter the case of a succah with the

minimum height whose *schach* is decorated with objects which hang to below the minimum height. The ruling here is that the succah is still considered high enough to qualify.

The explanation offered by Tosefot is that Rava disqualified the succah with *schach* ends hanging too low since such a succah is considered a “wretched residence” because of its cramped condition. This does not apply to a succah that has a minimum height and the reduced airspace is the result of beautifying the succah.

This distinction serves as the basis of the law codified in *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 633:9.

• *Succah* 10b

WHAT THE Sages SAY

“The *succot* in which our ancestors dwelled upon leaving Egypt were clouds of glory which G-d provided for them as shelter from the elements.”

• *Rabbi Eliezer - Succah* 11b

“From the words in the Song at the Sea: ‘This is my G-d and I shall glorify Him’, we learn that we must do *mitzvot* in the most beautiful way.”

• *Anonymous Sages Succah* 11b

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PERSISTENT PENTATEUCH PINKIE POINTING PEOPLE

From: Mr. Irv Oxlander

Dear Rabbi,

What is the source for and the meaning of the custom to point the pinkie at the Torah during *hagbah* — the lifting of the Torah Scroll after reading from it in public?

Dear Mr. Oxlander,

Your question is interesting because it relates to a widespread custom whose source is rather obscure.

Nachmanides remarks that the verse “*accursed is the one who will not uphold the words of this Torah...*,” is the source for the obligation to show the written text of the Torah to the whole congregation.

The Shulchan Aruch states: It is a mitzva for all men and women to see the written text of the Torah, to bow, and to say, “*This is the Torah that Moshe placed before the Children of Israel.*” Halachic authorities explain that this verse is to be said only upon seeing the actual text of the Sefer Torah.

It is told about the *Arizal* that when the Torah was held up for the entire congregation to see, it was his custom to look closely at the text so that he could read the letters. The *Arizal* was quoted as saying that “by gazing at the Torah closely so as to be able to clearly read its letters, a person is infused by a great [spiritual] light.”

While the Shulchan Oruch obligates reciting the verse: *This is the Torah...*, it is also a *minhag* (custom) to append part of a second verse “*according to the word of Hashem through Moshe.*” In his comprehensive anthology *Me’am Lo’ez*, Rabbi Yaakov Kuli expounds on this custom saying: “The combination of these two verses, though from different sections of the Torah, alludes to the dual nature of Torah — a Written and an Oral Law, both stemming from a single Source.”

Also, the *Me’am Lo’ez* is the only source that mentions the custom of pointing the pinkie finger towards the text, adding that it is customary to kiss the pinkie after pointing. However, this is not a universal custom, and is not mentioned in other halachic sources.

In reply to our inquiry as to the source of this custom, Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *shlita*, gave the fol-

lowing explanation: The Torah lists the ten generations from Noah until Abraham, including *Yoktan*, who established the largest number of families. Rashi notes that *Yoktan* merited establishing so many families due to his great humility, as his name indicates (from the root *katan* - little). Rabbi Scheinberg went on to explain that when pointing at the Torah we take this lesson to heart and we point with our smallest finger — the pinkie — to indicate that we should reach out to try to gain understanding of the Torah with the utmost humility and thus merit to succeed in this aspiration.

Rabbi Chaim Falagie expounds on a second variation of the custom in which the index finger is used for pointing towards the Torah rather than the pinkie. He bases this custom on six consecutive statements in *Tehillim*, the first of which is, “*The Torah of Hashem is perfect reviving the soul...*”. Each one of these statements is composed of five words, corresponding to the number of fingers of one hand. The second word of *each* statement is *Hashem* corresponding to the second, namely the index finger. In pointing towards the Torah with the index finger we are indicating that *every word* of the Torah is a Name of Hashem. For that same reason, Rabbi Falagie points out, during the wedding ceremony the ring is placed on the index finger to signify that Hashem is the unifying force binding husband and wife.

The significance and the symbolism that our Sages attach to every finger and to each part of our body is most instructive. Rabbeinu Bechaye discusses the utility of each organ and in particular the fingers, each of which serves to facilitate one of the five senses. The pinkie finger is associated with the sense of *hearing* and we may conjecture that this is related to the custom of pointing towards the Torah with the pinkie.

Sources:

- *Nachmanides — Ramban on the Torah — Devarim 27:26*
- *Tractate Sofrim 14:14*
- *Shulchan Aruch — Orach Chaim (134:2); and Ba’er He’tev 6*
- *Devarim 4:44*
- *Sha’ar Hakavanot (Sefer Torah — Drush 1)*
- *Bamidbar 9:23*
- *Me’am Lo’ez — Devarim (27:26).*
- *Bereishet 10:26-29*
- *Lev Chaim (Responsa) — Orach Chaim (167:6).*
- *Tehillim 19:8-10*
- *Rabbeinu Bechaye — Vayikra 8:23*

IN SEARCH OF A KNIFE

“A holocaust survivor with a sense of mission.” This is the capsule description of the late Moshe Dovid Reisner who settled in Bnei Brak after World War Two.

Many stories have been told of his heroic behavior in a Nazi concentration camp. No sooner was he released than he began performing circumcisions as the only *mohel* in the Bohemian region of Czechoslovakia.

Once upon arriving in one of the area cities to perform a *brit*, he discovered that he had left his knife at

home. Hours passed of a fruitless search for a knife since life had not yet returned to that liberated community and all the shops were closed. Reisner then came up with a bold idea. He went to the local police station and asked the non-Jewish officers to break open one of the shops where a suitable knife might be found. To everyone's surprise the police agreed to do so, a proper knife was indeed located and the *brit* performed.

Needless to say, the shop owner was subsequently informed and compensated.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

A DISAPPOINTING REPORT CARD

Question: My son came home from school with a rather poor report card that was a big disappointment for his parents. I am certain that the boy is capable of much better grades as he has demonstrated in earlier grades so I don't know whether to be upset with him or with his teacher. What is the right thing to do?

Answer: Don't waste your breath scolding your son or challenging his teacher. And don't panic because it is not uncommon for even a very good student to have a bad

patch in his scholastic career for a wide variety of reasons.

Your surprise at seeing grades which reflect the problem your son is facing indicates that you have not been very careful in monitoring your son's progress in school and his teacher has perhaps been too overburdened to communicate with you about the situation. It would be wise for you to write a note to the teacher expressing your disappointment with your son's grades and requesting that he communicate with you so that you can work together for improvement.

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