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PARSHA INSIGHTS

THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE NIGHT

“...and have not withheld your son...” (22:16)

It's difficult for us to experience what real night is anymore. Nowadays, the electric light has vanquished the night, and night is more or less like a rather overcast day. We live in a twenty-four hour, round-the-clock world that never slumbers or sleeps.

But it wasn't always so. Not more than a couple of hundred years ago the day ended when the sun went down, and whatever artificial light existed was meager, expensive, and difficult to generate.

Imagine yourself in total darkness. A darkness where all outside stimuli have been removed; a darkness so deep that all you can perceive is your own existence. The existential truth that you are there. The sort of darkness where everything else is withheld from you.

The word for darkness in Hebrew is *choshech*, whose root is connected to the verb “to withhold” as it says in this week's Torah portion, “*And you have not withheld your son...*”

In real darkness we experience the withholding of every other existence save the sense of our own being.

“*To relate in the morning Your kindness, and Your faith, in the night...*” (Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbat)

Faith is something that takes place in the night, in the absence of any other reality than the surety of our own existence.

Everything we know, all knowledge, can be discussed, examined, argued about, refuted, proved, dissected, and

shared.

With one exception.

There is one piece of knowledge that is beyond all refutation or controversy, beyond doubt and beyond proof.

And that is the certainty of our own existence.

No one can tell us that we are not here, and we need no proof that we exist. The truth of our own existence is irrefutable and intuitive, beyond all logic or discussion. It is the deepest form of knowledge, and deeper than knowledge itself.

It is the knowledge of the night; the certainty of our own existence when all outside-stimuli have been removed.

The Rambam writes that in the last syllable of the *Shema*, we should be *moser nefesh*, literally we should “give over our souls” to G-d. This doesn't just mean that we are prepared to give up our lives rather than betray our faith; it means that in the *Shema*, despite our total certainty that we exist — that we are ‘one’ — we submit that certainty to His Oneness. We surrender that irrefutable certainty of our own existence and declare that that we are no more than just one expression of what G-d wishes to reveal in His world.

This is the meaning of the verse “...and Your Faith, in the night.”

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by G-d. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. G-d reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. G-d agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham “bargains” G-d down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot’s wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot’s daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After G-d appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases

Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar’s son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but G-d tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel and G-d promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation. Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that G-d is with him. In a tenth and final test, G-d instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, G-d sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham’s unquestioning obedience, G-d promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The parsha ends with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

ISRAEL Forever

KEEPING OUT YISHMAEL

The expulsion of Yishmael from the home of Avraham and Sarah is introduced in this week’s Torah portion as a result of our Matriarch’s observation of the son of Hagar “mocking”.

Our Sages saw in this term a reference to the three cardinal sins of idolatry, adultery and murder. Sarah was afraid that Yishmael’s corrupt ways would exercise a bad influence on her son Yitzchak and insisted that both he and his mother be sent away.

The influence of corrupt cultures on the descendants of

Yitzchak has always been a problem and continues to be one in our own day. While there is no idol worship among us, so many of our alienated Jews have abandoned any connection with G-d. The loose morals in manner of dress and conduct reflect a world devoid of self-control and the growing violence of speech and action are mirrors of the crime and terror so rampant in the world.

Just as our forefathers saw the need to avoid the negative influence of foreign cultures, so must we preserve the unique holiness of our people and thus secure Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PLACES

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

HAR HABAYT – TREELESS MOUNTAIN

The mountain in Yerushalayim on which stood the *Beit Hamikdash* was bare of trees. This condition was mandated by the Torah when it ordered (*Devarim* 16:21): “You shall not plant an idolatrous *asheira* tree, nor any tree near the altar of the Lord your G-d which you shall erect.”

Not only trees were forbidden at this holy site but also any permanent wooden structure. The only excep-



tion was the wooden platform which was built there once in seven years for the king to stand upon and read to the entire nation gathered there from the Torah in fulfillment of the mitzvah of *hakheil* (*Devarim* 31:12-13).

The reason for this exception was that this platform was only a temporary structure that was dismantled after serving its purpose.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the *brit mila*?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels *matza*. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the *akeidah* (binding)?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

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

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of *mitzvot*.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

לע"נ

מרת יוטא רחל בת ר' יוסף חיים ע"ה

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

- Status of contents of property donated to Sanctuary
- Transactions involving items not yet in existence
- What must be left behind in purchase of doves, bees or olives
- The halachic status of a honeycomb
- Comparison of the righteous to palm trees and cedars
- How many trees must one purchase to gain ownership of the land around them
- *Bikurim* from purchased produce
- How much of a tree extending into another's property can be cut down
- How much land goes along with purchase of three trees
- When is there a problem of *kilayim* in regard to a vineyard
- What is included in sale of an animal part
- The right to back out of a sale when there is a misrepresentation of the item sold
- Finalization of a transaction of movable property

FLYING THE COOP

One who purchases the doves that will be born each month (each month of the year except for Adar a male and female dove was born) must leave the first pair with the mother. The reason for this is so that the mother bird will have the company of her offspring and not be tempted to fly away from the nest.

To this rule stated in the *mishna* the *gemara* adds that the buyer must also leave behind the first pair born to the original pair. Once again the reason given is the need for company. Should the offspring of the original pair leave

the nest its parents will be without their company and be tempted to leave as well. The chain reaction of such a departure would lead to the mother dove's leaving, thus destroying the purchased nest.

But why, asks Rabbi Cahana, is the original pair dependent on the company of its own offspring if it has the company of its mother? The answer he gives is that a mother is content with the company of its offspring while the offspring is not content with the company of its mother.

• *Bava Batra 80a*

What the SAGES Say

"If wine sold turns out to be vinegar, or vice versa, both buyer and seller can back out of the deal because some people prefer wine and others vinegar."

• *Mishna and Gemara - Bava Batra 84b*

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PLAYING WITH 'FIRE'

From: Steven

Dear Rabbi,

My daughter recently received a "glow in the dark toy," i.e. a fluorescent toy. I was wondering if it would be permitted to put the toy near a light on Shabbat to "charge" it, as you are actually moving around electrons, causing them to 'fluoresce' which is basically the same thing that is done with electricity?

Dear Steven,

The subject of using electricity on Shabbat is very complex. Nevertheless, I'll try to shed light on your question despite the limitations of this column. The Halachic authorities prohibit turning on an electric light or com-

pleting an electrical circuit on Shabbat for various reasons: Hava'ara (burning) and/or Binyan (building) and/or Bishul (cooking). These are 3 of the "39 Melachot" — creative activities — that are prohibited on Shabbat.

Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *shlita*, was asked about using a glow in the dark toy on Shabbat, and he answered that it is permitted, since there is no violation of any category of Melacha on Shabbat. In placing the toy near light, there is no halachic form of burning, building or cooking.

"Moving around electrons" is not prohibited unless it involves a transgression of Shabbat, as in the case of an electrical circuit. An act is prohibited on Shabbat only if it violates one of the 39 Melachot, their derivatives, or special Rabbinical prohibitions. If it doesn't, as in your case, then it is certainly permitted.

Source:

- *Shabbat and Electricity* - Halperin/Oratz, Feldheim Publishers, 1993

WHAT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Question: I sometimes read an article in a newspaper or magazine that greatly upsets me. My inclination is to write a letter to the editor in protest but I hesitate to do so because it may be an exercise in futility. What's the right thing to do?

Answer: As the recipient of more than one letter to the editor of this and other Ohrnet columns, I can assure you that such letters are not exercises in futility and do indeed have

an impact.

One word of caution.

If you state your case dispassionately and stick to the facts as you see them you have a good chance of not only scoring your point but also getting your letter printed. Your passion may indeed be justified but it won't help you achieve your goal.

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A HEAD FOR THE BIRDS

In the midst of a shiur in Talmud given to a group of Jerusalem laymen, Rabbi Ezra Attiah, the Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshivat Porat Yossef, faced a challenge from one of his students. The subject being studied was the Torah command for someone who finds a bird's nest on a tree or on the ground to send away the mother bird before taking its eggs or fledglings. A question is raised in the *gemara* whether this obligation also applies to a nest on a person's head.

"How is such a thing possible?" asked the challenger. "Why should the Sages deliberate about such an impossible scenario?"

Before the rabbi had a chance to respond, there entered the room a Jew who had been absent for a considerable amount of time from the shiur in which he was a regular participant.

"Welcome back," the rabbi greeted him and asked him where he had been.

"I was away in the Far East on business," was the reply. "I saw many strange things, but what struck me most was seeing a man who had been motionlessly meditating for days until a bird built its nest on his head!"

The rabbi smiled as the challenger learned his lesson.

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