

O H R N E T

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SPECIAL SHAVUOT ISSUE

PARSHA INSIGHTS

A PIANO LESSON

“...every man at his camp and every man at his banner...” (1:52)

As a small boy, I remember the first time I saw a concert pianist in action. I was fascinated how his hands could coax the most sublime sounds from a few dozen ivory sticks. Being a persuasive sort, I managed to talk my parents into buying a piano so that I could perform the same trick. When the piano arrived, I positioned myself carefully on the piano stool. (Had I been wearing tails, I would, no doubt, have given them a nonchalant flick as I seated myself.) I opened the lid, rubbed my hands to warm them, and held them poised over the center of the keyboard just like I had seen the maestro do.

My hands plunged into the unfortunate keys with a loud and highly unmusical ‘splang’. This was followed by several more ‘splangs’, a few ‘splongs’ rounded off with a ‘grong-grang-grong’ and a long ‘frannngggggggg’ down to the nether depths of the keyboard.

This was not the magic that I had hoped for. My mother arranged for me to have lessons.

“Now,” said Mr. Szfotzo, my new piano teacher, “...the first thing we need to learn is order...”

“But I want to be a child prodigy,” I protested.

Realizing the sort of a pupil with whom he had been blessed, Mr. Szfotzo rolled his eyes heavenward. After a

few seconds of contemplation, he began to speak.

“To achieve anything, a person must have order. Music is all about order. One note has to follow the other in the correct order. One movement must follow the next in the correct order. In order to get anywhere in music – sorry no pun intended — (he grinned), you must order your day so that every day you will be able to sit down and practice your scales, the basic order of music. You can’t just pick up your hands and expect them to produce Rachmaninoff!”

Of this last fact, I was already painfully aware.

“Order, Order, Order.”

“...every man at his camp and every man at his banner...”

The whole Torah is based on order. A split-second divides Shabbat from the weekdays. A hairsbreadth between kosher and *treif*; one drop of water divides a kosher *mikveh* from one that is unfit; a separation divides the camp of the *Kohanim* from that of the *Levi'im*. A Levi must not do the service of a *kohen* and vice versa, nor may a Levi do the service of his fellow.

With “every man at his camp and every man at his banner,” the Jewish People are able to give a flawless performance of our Sonata of life – the Holy Torah.

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

The Book of Bamidbar — “In the desert” — begins with G-d commanding Moshe to take a census of all men over age twenty — old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *levi'im* are counted separately later because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the *Mishkan* and its furnishings and assembling them when the nation encamps. The 12 Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the *Mishkan* in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp. A formal transfer is made between the first-born and the *levi'im*, whereby the *levi'im*

take over the role the first-born would have had serving in the *Mishkan* if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the *Mishkan*. The remaining first-born sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our first-born today. The sons of Levi are divided into three main families, Gershon, Kehat and Merari (besides the *kohanim* — the special division from Kehat’s family). The family of Kehat carried the *menorah*, the table, the altar and the holy ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the ark and the altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *levi'im* prepare them for travel.

ISRAEL Forever

GIVING AND RECEIVING

“The Season of the Giving of the Torah” is how we describe in our prayers the Festival of Shavuot which follows Shabbat this week.

The question has often been asked why we focus on the *giving* of the Torah, which was G-d’s role, rather than the *receiving* of the Torah, which was ours.

Perhaps the message here is that the Torah was given to the Jewish People only once – on Shavuot – but it is received anew in every generation and by every individual Jew. Every

time a Jew who has drifted from a Torah way of life decides to return to it, he is veritably receiving the Torah. And every time a student of Torah or an accomplished scholar discovers a new insight into the scope and depth of Torah wisdom, he is also receiving the Torah.

Since receiving of any kind is dependent on the giving, we joyfully celebrate Shavuot as the Season of the Giving of the Torah.

LOVE OF THE LAND

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

THE GOOD LAND

Both in the Torah and in our *birkat hamazon* blessings after a meal, Eretz Yisrael is referred to as “the good land”.

In a literal sense this is a reference to the material qualities of the Land, just as the other titles of “desir-



able” and “expansive” mentioned in our blessing after meals pay tribute to those qualities. But “good” is far more encompassing than those other titles and certainly includes the spiritual advantages that Eretz Yisrael offers its inhabitants.

לע"נ

מרת פייגה בת ר' דוד ע"ה

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

PARSHA Q&A?

1. Why were the Jewish People counted so frequently?
2. What documents did the people bring when they were counted?
3. What determined the color of the tribal flags?
4. What is the difference between an “ot” and a “degel”?
5. How do we see that the Jews in the time of Moshe observed “*techum Shabbat*” - the prohibition against traveling more than 2,000 *amot* on *Shabbat*?
6. What was the signal for the camp to travel?
7. What was the sum total of the counting of the 12 tribes?
8. Why are Aharon’s sons called “sons of Aharon and Moshe”?
9. Who was Nadav’s oldest son?
10. Which two people from the Book of Esther does Rashi mention in this week’s Parsha?
11. Why did the *levi'im* receive *ma'aser rishon*?
12. Which groups of people were counted from the age of one month?
13. Name the first descendant of Levi in history to be counted as an infant.
14. Who assisted Moshe in counting the *levi'im*?
15. Why did so many people from the tribe of Reuven support Korach in his campaign against Moshe?
16. Why did so many people from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun become great Torah scholars?
17. In verse 3:39 the Torah states that the total number of *levi'im* was 22,000. The actual number was 22,300. Why does the Torah seem to ignore 300 *levi'im*?
18. The first-born males of the Jewish People were redeemed for five *shekalim*. Why five *shekalim*?
19. During what age-span is a man considered at his full strength?
20. As the camp was readying itself for travel, who was in charge of covering the vessels of the *Mishkan* in preparation for transport?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week’s Questions!

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

1. 1:1 - They are very dear to G-d.
2. 1:18 - They brought birth records proving their tribal lineage.
3. 2:2 - Each tribe’s flag was the color of that tribe’s stone in the breastplate of the *kohen gadol*.
4. 2:2 - An “ot” is a flag, i.e., a colored cloth that hangs from a flagpole. A *degel* is a flagpole.
5. 2:2 - G-d commanded them to camp no more than 2,000 *amot* from the *Ohel Mo'ed*. Had they camped farther, it would have been forbidden for them to go to the *Ohel Mo'ed* on *Shabbat*.
6. 2:9 - The cloud over the *Ohel Mo'ed* departed and the *kohanim* sounded the trumpets.
7. 2:32 - 603,550.
8. 3:1 - Since Moshe taught them Torah, it’s as if he gave birth to them.
9. 3:4 - Nadav had no children.
10. 3:7 - Bigtan and Teresh.
11. 3:8 - Since the *levi'im* served in the *Mishkan* in place of everyone else, they received tithes as “payment.”
12. 3:15, 40 - The *levi'im*, and the first-born of *B'nei Yisrael*.
13. 3:15 - Levi’s daughter Yocheved was born while the Jewish People were entering Egypt. She is counted as one of the 70 people who entered Egypt.
14. 3:16 - G-d.
15. 3:29 - The tribe of Reuven was encamped near Korach, and were therefore influenced for the worse. This teaches that one should avoid living near the wicked.
16. 3:38 - The tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun were encamped near Moshe, and were therefore influenced for the good. This teaches that one should seek to live near the righteous.
17. 3:39 - Each *levi* served to redeem a first-born of the Jewish People. Since 300 *levi'im* were themselves first-born, they themselves needed to be redeemed, and could therefore not redeem others.
18. 3:46 - To atone for the sale of Yosef, Rachel’s first-born, who was sold by his brothers for five *shekalim* (20 pieces of silver.)
19. 4:2 - Between the ages of 30 and 50.
20. 4:5 - The *kohanim*.

- The woman who sees blood and her effect on what she touches
- When we assume that no change has taken place in status
- The conflicting positions of Hillel and Shamai
- The rabbinical guideline for when a woman must examine herself regarding purity
- When a doubt arises in regard to purity status
- Four women who need not have to be concerned about retroactive impurity
- Rabbi Eliezer the “Shamuti”
- Three kinds of “virgins”
- When pregnancy becomes visible

THE REJECTED SAGE

Rabbi Eliezer’s position on a *halachic* matter discussed in our *gemara* was rejected because he was a “shamuti”. According to Rashi this is a reference to the famous debate between Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues described in *Bava Metzia* (59b) which ended in his being “blessed” (a euphemism for a curse) for failing to concede to the majority of Sages opposing him. This approach defines the “blessing” as excommunication and explains why his position was

here rejected.

Tosefot takes issues with this approach, pointing out that a curse is not an act of excommunication. Rather than define “shamuti” as a derivative of the word “shamta” meaning excommunication, it is suggested that it is a derivative of the name “Shamai” and refers to the fact that Rabbi Eliezer was a disciple of the Sage Shamai. It was because the majority of the Sages ruled like the Sage Hillel and not like Shamai that Rabbi Eliezer’s rulings were rejected.

• *Nidah 7b*

WHAT’S THE RIGHT THING TO DO?

REAL-LIFE QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND BUSINESS ETHICS

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Question: A young man of my acquaintance started off his marriage on the wrong foot. The truth is that he and his wife make a compatible couple and the trouble is that he doesn’t know how to properly treat her. What is the right thing to do in order to restore harmony to this home?

Answer: The same challenge once faced the saintly Torah scholar Rabbi Moshe Kliers, head of the Tiberias community. A young newlywed Jerusalemite left his wife after a blowout and made his way to Tiberias to get away from it all. The rabbi saw him in the synagogue and invited him to stay at his tiny home which consisted of one spacious room divided in two, with his family sleeping in one half and guests in the other. At daybreak this guest saw his host straining to set up a kerosene stove and preparing a cup of tea for his

wife. When this scene repeated itself the next day the guest concluded that the rabbi’s wife must be ill in bed and insisted on moving out to a hotel so as not to impose on his host and family.

The rabbi’s reaction was to firmly deny that his wife was ill and that the cup of tea he brought her each morning was his way of demonstrating how much he respected her and cared for her. The Jerusalemite got the message and returned home a changed husband.

Take a cue from Rabbi Kliers for your own situation and invite your young man to spend some time with you so that he can learn from you how to treat his wife. This experience will be more effective than a thousand sermons.

And who knows, it may even have an indirect effect on you as well!

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

From: Brian

Dear Rabbi,

I am not quite convinced that it really matters to G-d whether we eat kosher or not and whether eating kosher really has an effect on us that would be different than eating non-kosher food. Any thoughts you might have to share with me would be much appreciated.

Dear Brian,

When G-d addresses diet in the Torah, greatly elaborating on the types of foods we may eat and under what conditions we can consume them, it's because it really does matter to Him.

However, I assume you mean to question what good our keeping kosher does for Him. That's a valid question. And the answer is: It's not for Him; it's for us.

In the realm of physical health, the adage "You are what you eat" makes perfect sense. Indisputably, the quality and quantity of foods we eat has a direct effect on our physical well-being.

The same applies in the realm of spiritual health. Just as every food has a unique nutritional value, lack thereof or even danger, so foods can either contribute to one's spiritual well-being, have little or no effect, or be outright harmful.

Yet long before the above-mentioned adage, our Sages taught that the G-d-given kosher laws prohibiting many of the things humans generally eat, or at least are not particular to avoid; or proscribing specific requirements beyond which most people are concerned, are designed to engender and maintain spiritual sensitivity and sensibility.

Thus, the Torah verse forewarning us from eating non-kosher food and thereby rendering ourselves impure (Lev. 11:43) is simultaneously understood to mean not only "impure" but also "occluded". Eating non-kosher food makes one spiritually course (Yoma 39a).

There was once a man who was collecting charity for a certain cause. He arrived to the office of a particular community leader and noticed there was only one picture on the wall of a particular saintly rabbi. The man asked why there was only one

such picture, and why that specific rabbi. The man behind the desk replied with a story:

Before the War (WWII), a certain Jewish family in Hungary strayed away from the traditional Jewish community. Eventually, their cherished son was accepted to the University, becoming the pride of the family and expression of the measure of their success in assimilation. While away at school, the son strayed even further from his Jewish roots until he completely departed from observing Shabbat and the dietary laws.

After finally returning home for a visit, he was estranged from the "boredom" of Shabbat, until on Saturday night, with nothing else to do, he wandered into the local shul where a festive "Melave Malka" – celebration extending the Shabbat into Saturday night – was taking place. Despite his initial apprehension, he ended up enjoying the traditional Jewish food, music, dancing and Torah discussions that continued till morning.

The next day, he found that he was unable to eat, which continued through the coming days. His family, justifiably alarmed, took him to a particularly renowned doctor who could find no source for the ailment, but could only suggest that it had something to do with the food the young man last ate.

When the family found out that their son had last eaten at the grand Melave Malka, they immediately took him to the rabbi, accusing him of poisoning their son. The rabbi noted that hundreds of people attended the celebration, and none became "ill". He then ordered food to be brought before the young man, who, at his parents' great surprise and relief, began to eat.

The rabbi exclaimed, "You see, your son is cured! Not that he was ill before you brought him here, but rather he was ill before he first arrived. But since then he's been cured of the non-kosher foods and habits he's indulged in, which, after having partaken of the holy, kosher food here, he's no longer able to stomach. If you want him to eat, then, give him kosher food!"

Having finished his story, the man behind the desk meaningfully leaned toward his inquisitive guest and whispered with great emotion, "The young man was my father, he is the rabbi who is pictured on the wall, and regarding your question, 'Why him and only him?' — because thanks to him, and only him, I am here and who I am today!"

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

THE PRICE OF A TEARDROP

A strange will came before the rabbi. It was the last will and testament of a woman who divided up her wealth among her children and grandchildren. What was puzzling was a line directing that ten thousand dollars should be awarded to one particular granddaughter above and beyond what the others would inherit.

This unexplained favoritism raised doubts about the reliability of the entire will. After some serious investigation the reason came to light.

A letter was found in which this grandmother emotionally described the night she sat together with all her grandchildren and told them what she experienced in the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jewish people during that period. All her grandchildren listened attentively but one granddaughter actually wept. As a reward for those tears she was awarded a great inheritance by the grandmother who so appreciated her compassion.

Milk & Honey, Honey & Milk

BY RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

Torah and Eretz Yisrael – what a combination! Both are exclusive to the Jewish People and both are described in our sacred sources in similar terms. Eretz Yisrael is described in the Torah more than once as “a land flowing with milk and honey”. The Torah’s sweetness is poetically described in *Shir Hashirim* as being “like honey and milk under your tongue (4:11).”

Why is the order of milk and honey switched when it comes to Torah?

Milk is indispensable for nutrition, especially for an infant, while honey may make life sweeter but it is expendable. When it comes to promising Jews a land of their own it is crucial to stress the abundance of life-sustaining milk. But when King Solomon wished to laud the virtues of Torah he deliberately put honey first, because

one can only acquire the milk – like nourishment of Torah knowledge – if he appreciates the honey – like sweetness of learning Torah.

This is why one of the blessings that a Jew is supposed to make every morning before learning Torah is “Make pleasant for us, G-d, our L-rd, the words of Your Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of all of Your people, the House of Israel.”

Learning Torah is an obligation but must be viewed as a privilege. It is hard work but it is a source of exquisite pleasure. On Shavuot, the Festival of the “Giving of the Torah”, it is customary to eat milk products and honey to remind ourselves of this combination of spiritual nourishment achieved through the sweetness of challenging study.

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Sanctifying the Material NOT REJECTING IT

BY RABBI YITZCHOK BREITOWITZ

Immediately before G-d gave the Ten Commandments, the Torah describes the lights and sounds the people experienced. They saw *lightning* and heard *thunder*. In fact, according to the *Midrash*, they somehow heard the lightening and saw the thunder as well.

After *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah), a nearly identical experience is described, but this time, the wording is slightly different. It says they saw *torches* and heard the *thunder*. Why is there this difference? What is the significance of the change from lightning to torches?

Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin offers a fascinating and profound insight. The change in visualization symbolizes a spiritual transformation in the way the Jewish people perceived holiness, and this transformation was a direct result of the experience of *Matan Torah*.

Before the Torah was given, spirituality could be achieved only through divorcing oneself from the world. All human souls yearn for transcendence; everything yearns to return to its source. Our source is G-d, and, therefore, it is a natural human urge to yearn for the Divine, for meaning. However, the only way to achieve this in the pre-Sinai world was to separate from the physical. This form of spirituality is compared to a lightning flash. It allows you to reach a very high level, but then, like the lightning, that flash of transcendence is followed by total darkness – because human beings inevitably must eat, must sleep and must live in the material world. We still see this in non-Jewish spiritual-

ity, where people take vows of celibacy and poverty, or remove themselves to a mountaintop.

After the Torah was given, the image was no longer of the lightning, but of the torch. That image is a much different one. And it is a somewhat tragic image, in its way. A torch will never give the brilliant light of a lightning bolt. But a torch is steady and enduring. The lesson the people learned through *Matan Torah* was that spirituality could indeed be contained in daily life. The physical world, the mundane, could be elevated and infused with the spiritual. They were not mutually exclusive. We serve G-d not only when we learn or pray, but also in the way that we eat or drink, conduct our business, earn and spend our money, raise our children and relate to our spouses. Every activity of life can be, and must be, invested with depth, significance and meaning. Yes, the daily life of carpools and laundry and PTA meetings will not offer the transcendence of the moment on the mountaintop, but if one can understand the purpose of even the mundane, then life can hold a holiness that will far outlast the bolt of lightning.

No one would navigate a road filled with dangerous turns by lightning. Even with a torch, it is difficult. But a torch provides the steady light, the warmth and comfort, to help us navigate the difficult turns in life and make it safely to the comfort of home.

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The Challenges of the Cheesecake

BY RABBI YEHUDA SPITZ

The upcoming holiday of Shavuot, aside from its most common name, has several others: *Chag HaKatzir* (The Holiday of the Harvest), *Atzeret* (Assembly), *Yom HaBikkurim* (Day of the offering of the first fruits), and *Zman Matan Torateinu* (The Time of the Giving of the Torah). Yet, in Israel, it has gained a new moniker: *Chag HaGvinah* — The Holiday of the Cheese! Amazingly, and only in Israel, will you find a Jewish custom that has become so commercialized. Although no one really minds paying a lot less for all the various cheeses on sale during the weeks leading up to Shavuot, still, the idea that a “holiday” can be commercially sponsored — by the cheese companies, no less — should give us pause.

Interestingly, having cheesecake on Shavuot is one custom with which many non-practicing Jews are stringent! Have you ever met someone who turned down a piece of cheesecake? But where does this time-honored traditional custom of consuming cheesecake on Shavuot come from?

Korban Cheesecake?!

It seems that the earliest mention of such a *minhag* is by the great Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the authoritative decisor for Ashkenazic Jewry who cites the ‘prevailing custom’ of eating dairy items on Shavuot. Although there are many reasons opined through the ages to explain this custom, the Rema himself provides an enigmatic one — to be a commemoration of the special *korban*, the “Two Loaves” offered exclusively on Shavuot during the times of the *Beit Hamikdash*.

However, since the connection between dairy food and a bread-offering seems tenuous, the Machatzit HaShekel offers a remarkable glimpse as to the Rema’s intent. The *halacha* states that one may not use the same loaf of bread at both a dairy meal and a meat meal. The reason for this is that there may be some (possibly unnoticed) residue on the bread, and one might come to eat a forbidden mixture of milk and meat. Therefore, in order to properly commemorate this unique *korban* that had two loaves of bread, one should have a separate dairy meal besides the traditional meat meal one has on the holiday. In this way he will be mandated to have separate breads for each of these meals since the loaf meant for the dairy meal cannot be used for the meat meal, and vice versa. Therefore, by having an additional dairy meal, the outcome is a suitable commemoration for this distinctive *korban*, since now on Shavuot two separate distinct breads are being served. The venerated Rabbi Moshe Feinstein cites this explanation as the proper one for maintaining two separate types of meals on Shavuot, one milky and one meaty.

Terrific! So now we can appreciate that by eating cheese-

cake on Shavuot we are actually commemorating a special *korban*! But before we sink our teeth into a luscious calorie-laden (it can’t be sinful since it’s commemorating a *korban*!) cheesecake, we should realize that there might be another *halachic* issue involved — the prohibition against baking dairy bread.

Dairy Dilemma

Bread has been mankind’s basic staple since time immemorial. Therefore, Chazal worried that an unsuspecting person might mistake dairy bread for plain pareve bread and eat it together with meat. He would thus inadvertently violate the prohibition of eating a forbidden mixture of milk and meat. They thereby decreed that one may not bake dairy bread unless certain criteria are met. One must either change the shape of the dough prior to baking to make it instantly recognizable to all as milky, or bake dairy bread exclusively in small quantities. The same prohibition and exclusions apply to meaty bread as well, due to bread’s propensity to be eaten with a dairy meal.

Although several authorities extend this prohibition to include other baked goods, such as cookies and burekas, which, if baked milky, might be mistakenly eaten with meat, nevertheless, the prevailing ruling is that the prohibition only applies to bread. Even so, aside from the signs in the bakeries proclaiming which items are dairy and which are pareve, it is nonetheless a widespread practice throughout Israel that bakeries form the dairy baked goods (cheese burekas, anyone?) in a triangular shape and the pareve ones in a rectangular shape as an extra safeguard against mix-ups.

Does this ruling affect our beloved cheesecake in any way?

Actually, not much. In a typical cheesecake, since the cheese aspect of it is quite conspicuous, it would be considered as if produced with a changed shape from standard dough. Additionally, cheesecake is universally recognized as... containing cheese (!), and thus known worldwide as being dairy. No one would make a mistake confusing cheesecake with pareve bread. Therefore, even according to the opinions of those who hold that the prohibition of dairy bread extends to cakes would agree it to be permissible to make plenty of cheesecakes for Shavuot, even in large quantities.

Thankfully, when it comes time to indulge in a piece of traditional cheesecake on the holiday of Shavuot we can “have our cake and eat it too” — both in the literal sense as well as in the spiritual sense — knowing we have fulfilled all of the *halachic* requirements and are even commemorating a unique *korban*.