



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. Apocalypse Now? The Hale-Bopp Comet
2. Answer to Yiddle Riddle



David A. Schiffmann < das1002@cus.cam.ac.uk > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I heard that a letter published in the 'New Scientist' magazine refers to a statement in the Talmud that if a comet passes through the constellation of Orion, it signifies the end of the world, and that the 'Hale-Bopp' comet will pass through this constellation on 23 April. I would be grateful if you could confirm if there is such a passage in the Talmud, and how one should understand it. Thank you for your help.

William Zambrano MD < eyedocor@worldnet.att.net > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Shalom, Shalom. According to the November 1995 issue of 'Sky & Telescope,' Comet Hale-Bopp will pass through the constellations of Perseus, Taurus, and Orion. The fact that it passes through Orion is a very ominous sign. The Talmud states that "if a comet would pass through the constellation of Orion the world would be destroyed."

Hale-Bopp will pass through Orion starting the day after Passover, during the counting of the Omer, and will complete the transit on Shavuot, June 11, 1997. An earlier celestial sign occurred on the 9th of Av, 1994 when the 21 fragments of the Shoemaker-Levi comet slammed into Jupiter for 7 days. Is there any increase in Messianic expectation as a result of the above? Any comments on these spectacular affairs in the heavens? Respectfully,

Dear David A. Schiffmann and Dr. Zambrano,

Talmudic teachings can be divided into two categories: Halacha and Aggada. While the halachic teachings are always meant to be taken literally, the aggadic teachings are not always meant to be taken literally.

According to the Maharal of Prague, one of the most authoritative commentators on the aggadic portions of the Talmud, they are always, with only a few exceptions, meant as metaphors. He writes that the Talmudic statements in Tractate Berachot 58b regarding astronomical events should be understood as metaphors as well.

Some commentaries explain that this Talmudic passage is not referring to comets at all, but rather to meteors ('shooting stars'). If so, this passage is irrelevant to the Hale-Bopp comet.

This is not to say that comets have no 'gravity.' According to traditional sources, a new star appeared in the sky 4,100 years ago. That was the year the world was destroyed by a flood in the time of Noah. This star, apparently a comet, traveled through all the constellations in a month's time. It was an omen for the people in the world to reconsider their wicked

lifestyles and practices. (Interestingly, NASA reports that Hale-Bopp last appeared about 4,200 years ago [Astronomy Magazine Feb. '97].)

Whether or not this comet is a sign of destruction, I think it's important to point out another Talmudic teaching: "When the People of Israel do the will of Hashem, they need fear none of these astronomical omens, as indicated by the following verse: 'So says Hashem: Don't imitate the ways of the wicked, and don't be afraid of heavenly omens.'"

Sources:

- Talmud Berachot 58b
- Be'er Hagolah, Rabbi Yehuda Loewe of Prague
- Netzach Yisrael, Chapter 60
- Mishna Berurah 227:1
- Seder Hadorot
- Talmud Sukkah 29a
- Research Credit: Rabbi Zev Rosen

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked: There is a person mentioned in Tanach whose last part of his name is the English translation of the first part of his name. Who is this person?

Andy & Roochie Kohlenberg < akohl@netmedia.net.il > from Efrat, Israel wrote:

"The answer is Michayhu of Kings 22:8. 'Hu' (who) in English is 'mi' in Hebrew."

Thanks! We didn't think of that one. Our answer is: Yonadov! The English translation of Yona is dove! Yonadov ben Rachav was originally named Yehonadov, but his name was shortened to Yonadov when he joined with King Yehu.

Sources:

- Jeremiah 38:19
- II Kings 10:15
- Midrash Hagadol Shemot 18:1

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