



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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OHR SOMAYACH תנוח טאנענבאום קאלעדזש
TANENBAUM COLLEGE
16 January 1999
Issue #222
Parshat Vaera

GRAVE GRAVEL

Eytan M. Rodin from St. Louis, MO <ytan@iqtech.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

What is the significance behind the fact that we put stones on graves that we visit? I've always done it, but never understood what this represents. I know that rather than flowers, we are supposed to give money to tzedaka (charity), which makes sense. It's the stones that puzzle me.

Cosette Sullivan from San Angelo, Texas <zehava3@airmail.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Shalom. I've been asked why Jews place rocks on graves...I don't know! Will you please give me the answer?

Dear Eytan M. Rodin and Cosette Sullivan,

A very early reference to this custom is found in a commentary to the Shulchan Aruch, written by Rav Yehuda Ashkenazi (early 1700s) called the B'er Heitev. He quotes the Maharash, who explains that the custom of placing stones or tufts of grass on the grave is for the honor of the deceased person by marking the fact that his grave has been visited.

Once, when I was touring the Mount of Olives cemetery, my *Yerushalmi* tour guide told me the following story, a story that purports to explain this custom:

Sometime during the Turkish occupation of Israel, on a Shabbat, an Arab was murdered in Jerusalem. Quickly, the rumor spread that he was killed by a Jew, and an immediate expulsion order was declared. The Jews of Jerusalem had to pick themselves up and leave or be killed. A noted *kabbalist* (mystic) came upon the scene of the crime, which was crowded with Arab onlookers. Even though it was Shabbat, the kabbalist wrote one of G-d's names on a piece of paper and placed it upon the body of the dead man. The dead man rose and pointed to one of the Arabs standing in the crowd who became violently

afraid and admitted that he had done the killing. The expulsion order was rescinded.

Shortly afterwards the kabbalist, who was an elderly man, approached the *chevra kadisha* (burial society) and asked that his tombstone be pelted with stones after his death because he had written during Shabbat. He understood that due to the danger to life he had been permitted to desecrate the Shabbat, but he felt that some form of repentance was in order nevertheless. Stoning his grave would symbolize the stoning penalty meted out to Shabbat desecraters. At first the *chevra kadisha* refused because of the implied dishonor the stoning would represent to so righteous a Jew, but the kabbalist persisted. Finally, they agreed to place stones on his grave, but only if they would institute the custom that all graves would have stones placed on them in the future. If stones were placed on everyone's grave, it would not be a dishonor to the kabbalist. From then on, stones were placed on the graves of all Jews buried in Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem the custom spread, and today Jews all over the world place stones on tombstones when visiting a grave.

This may not be the actual source of the custom, but it's an interesting story.

Sources:

- * Rabbi Yehuda Ashkenazi, The B'er Heitev
- * Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 224:8

SHAKY SALUTE

Z. G. <Email@Withheld> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I am female. When I go to a job interview in a non-Jewish firm and the potential employer knows I am Jewish (or even if he doesn't know) am I allowed to shake his hand?

Dear Z. G.,

The major contemporary halachic authorities forbid men and women to shake hands. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *zatzal*, among others, spoke strongly about this issue.

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Production Design: **Eli Ballon**

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I've been in situations where a woman offers me her hand; I explain that I am not permitted to shake hands with women because of religious constraints and I apologize for any embarrassment or discomfort this may cause her — it is nothing personal. My experience has been that usually nobody, neither the woman herself nor the onlookers, feels offended. They may think it's strange — but when you adhere to halacha, there is no *chillul Hashem* (desecration of G-d's honor).

Z. G. replies:

Dear Rabbi,

Thank you for your prompt response. Not shaking hands will very likely cost me the position, and I will incur a great loss of livelihood. I am not asking you to be lenient with me, I would just like you to suggest some possible way that I can prevent a handshake, without having to go into a whole lengthy explanation. In my line of work, employers are looking for professional people who are outgoing and have good presentation skills. Once I am on the job, I have no problem with explaining to clients that I cannot close a deal with a handshake. However, I find it very difficult to do so with a boss (because it may have a negative effect on my overall appearance at the interview). My interview is tomorrow morning, and it would be most helpful if you could reply before then. If not, I may just have to wear a sling on my arm!

Dear Z. G.,

Going to the interview with your arm in a sling is not being quite honest. If the job you are interviewing for requires good presentation skills, what better way to prove it than by explaining in a perfectly lucid way that you cannot shake hands with men?

Z. G. replies:

Dear Rabbi,

My problem was automatically solved! The interviewer was a woman! Just thought that you should know what happened. Thanks a lot for all the help!

ONLY SIXTEEN

Yakov <Email@Withheld> wrote:

Dear Rabbi

I'm sixteen years old in public high school in New York. After a summer in Israel on a kibbutz, I started to become observant. I am trying to pick up "the basics" of Torah learning but I find in my current setting without teachers to guide me I'm not getting very far. There are a few people who are trying to help, but they are so busy that they can not give me serious blocks of time. I can't transfer to a Jewish high school because I don't know enough even to get into the lowest class. I don't feel I fit in my present surroundings and I can't fit into the Jewish day school system. Does any alternative program exist for someone who is in-between like me? I would be very grateful if you could point me in their direction and let me know if there are others in my predicament? Thank you.

Dear Yakov,

I don't know of any such program. We are publishing your message in "Ask the Rabbi." If anyone knows of such a program, we ask them to please contact us.

APPRAISING PRAISE

Lee Kong Giap from Johor Bahru, Malaysia <kong_giap@yahoo.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Is the word "hallelujah" constructed by four words or one word? Because it is constructed by four words in Chinese, and I hear my teacher said "halle" means praise, "lu" means "your," "Jah" means "G-d," and the word "Hallelujah" sounds a bit commanding. It that true? Does the word come from Hebrew or Greek? I look forward to your reply.

Dear Lee Kong Giap,

The word *hallelujah* mentioned in Psalms is the Hebrew word for requesting a congregation to join in praise. "*Hallel*" means to recite praise, "*hallelu*" is the plural form. The grammatical extension "*yah*" is a way of expressing magnanimity. For example "*merchav*" means space, "*merchavyah*" means a vast space (*Psalms 118:5*); "*shalhevet*" means flame, "*shalheveyah*" means a colossal flame (*Song of Songs 8:10*). Hence, *halleluyah* means "a great praise."

There are other ways of interpreting this word, as the Hebrew language does include the possibility for many meanings in the same word; thus it can also be understood to mean "praise G-d."

Sources:

- Midrash Talpiyot
- Pesachim 117a

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked : Which verse in the Torah has all the letters of the *Aleph-Beis*?

Answer: Exodus 16:16. This verse, which contains all the letters of in Hebrew alphabet, describes the gathering of the miraculous manna which fell in the desert: "This is the thing that G-d commanded: Each person should gather of it as much as he needs to eat, an *omer*-measure per person, according to the number of people each man has in his tent." This teaches that whoever fulfills the Torah in its entirety — "from *aleph* to *taf*" (the first and last letters in the *Aleph-Beis*) — will be assured of his sustenance by G-d.

Source: *Ba'al Haturim*

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*Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features*

Re: *Hamakom* (Ohrnet Vayigash):

As an interesting sidelight to your excellent explanation as to why *Hamakom* is a reference to Hashem's Name, I heard the following idea: Take each letter of the *Shem Havayah* (the Tetragrammaton) and square it, thus:

Yud 102 = 100; Heh 52 = 25; Vav 62 = 36; Heh 52 = 25

TOTAL 186 = the gematria (numerical value) of *Makom*.

Raphael N. Levi <rnlevi@earthlink.net>

Re: Two Names (Ohrnet Miketz):

Regarding Mr. Rosenthal's riddle: "Name four people in the Book of Genesis who have two names," you responded by pointing out two cases he had omitted. I might mention that the names you cited, Ben-oni and Malki-Tzedek, are fundamentally different from those he mentioned, in that the two you mention are always hyphenated in the Chumash, and can thus be considered as one word each, so that they do not fulfill the conditions set forth. Whereas each name that Mr. Rosenthal mentioned is found at least once as two distinct words.

Of course, another question arises: Why was *Baal Chanan* (Genesis 36:38) omitted?

Michael (Menashe) Hamm, NY <msh210@nyu.edu>

[Ohrnet notes that there are no hyphens in the actual Torah scroll.]

Re: Page Two, Take Two (Ohrnet Miketz):

I heard a different reason why there is no "page 1" in the Talmud: So that nobody can ever claim that they have mastered the entire masechet, from the first page to the last. That is, there's always more to learn!

Rachel Fyman, Ottawa, Canada <fyman@magma.ca>

Other answers I have heard are as to why the Talmud starts on page "bet" and not on page "aleph": Just as the Torah begins with the letter "bet" (*Bereishet*), so the Talmud begins on page "bet." A reason for both is that "alef" stands for the "Aluf" — The Commander, Hashem, and Hashem comes before the Torah and before the Talmud. Also it teaches us that while we may (indeed ought to) study and question, we should know that we aren't starting from scratch, rather we are building on what has come before.

Nancy Wells, Baltimore, MD <nwells@objs.com>

One does not know everything, and even when one has finished studying, one must review — but if it were from the beginning, it would make a person feel despondent!

Andrew <toytenbankes@kosher.com>

Re: Cowboy Riddle:

Let me thank you for an incredible resource. Although I wouldn't think of myself as ignorant, not a week has gone by since I signed up for this weekly email that I haven't learned something.

And here's a quick Yiddle Riddle: Many years ago, I was asked at cheder why *Adon Olam* was known as the Cowboy's Prayer. When I admitted my ignorance, I was told that it includes three Cowboys' names: Billy Raishis, Billy Sachlis and Kid Roochee....(You may now groan).

Lee "Budgie" Barnett <budgie@compuserve.com>

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