



# Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

## This Issue Contains:

1. A Slave Nation
2. Sephardi Sources
3. Assisted Suicide Law
4. Who's Blessing Whom?
5. Angelic Names
6. Yiddle Riddle
7. Public Domain



## A SLAVE NATION

Professor William Small, U. of Maine, Orono, ME  
< wsmall@maine.maine.edu > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

A student came to me the other day with the following question in reference to Genesis 15:13: "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them 400 years." The young man is a Russian Jew who has become very interested in Judaism and is trying very hard to understand things from a Jewish perspective. Perhaps you would be willing to send me an opinion on this passage? He was very disturbed by it, commenting that he could not understand how G-d would willingly allow his people to be enslaved for 400 years. I would very much appreciate an answer from one of your rabbis on this. Many thanks.

Dear Professor William Small,

The purpose of this enslavement was for the establishment of the Jewish nation. Age-old Jewish philosophy states that there can't be an existence without a previous nihilo, like a plant that cannot grow before the seed decays.

First of all, the communal suffering caused solidarity and love between people sharing the same fate.

Second, the enslavement was the catalyst for the salvation and the great miracles of the Exodus that brought about the belief in one omnipotent G-d and based the Jewish faith.

Third, the generations of physical work caused a national hunger for spirituality which enabled them to receive with vigor the entire Jewish law at the Sinai revelation.

Fourth, dwelling in Egypt, the cradle of ancient culture, the Jewish nation learned and excelled in the

sciences and the professions of the era, which helped them build up the Promised Land.

## SEPHARDI SOURCES

Jo Anne Crowson from California  
< jamc1907@succeed.net > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Shalom! Can you please give me some information on the origins and history of Sephardic Jews? Though I am not Jewish, I enjoy your posts, and think you have a delightful sense of humor! Blessings and thanks.

Dear Jo Anne Crowson,

After the Destruction of the First Temple, around 450 BCE, the Jews were exiled to Babylon (modern day Iraq). After the 70-year exile many returned.

However, the majority of the Jews did not return, preferring Babylon instead. The Jews in Israel were again exiled in 70 CE, this time by the Romans. The Roman exile created communities in Europe and North Africa. The European communities were mainly in France, Spain and Rome, some in Germany as well. The Jews in France and Germany became known as *Ashkenazim* (Hebrew for "Germans") and the Jews in Spain became known as *Sephardim* (Hebrew for "Spaniards"). The Jews in Spain, which for hundreds of years was under Arab rule, had connection and communication with the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East, and hence all the Jews of these lands became known as *Sephardim*. Differences in custom developed over many years; some had their origin in halachic disputes among the Rabbis of the various communities, and some in outside cultural influences.

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## ASSISTED SUICIDE LAW

Jonathan from Grand Rapids, MI < Modelcov@aol.com > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

We vote here Tuesday. There is an "assisted suicide" proposal on Michigan's ballot this year. I know it's not right, but it's hard to say it's wrong. People really do suffer so terribly much at the end of certain terrible diseases. A guy was telling me the other day how much his mother suffered, although medication provided some relief. Your comments, dear Rabbi, are welcome; before Tuesday would be nice.

Dear Jonathan,

It is forbidden to commit suicide. G-d told this to Noah by saying, "Even your own blood, that of your own lives, will I demand (accountability for)" (*Bereishet* 9:5). Our unbroken tradition explains that this was a prohibition against suicide and that it is part of the "Seven Noachide Laws."

The idea is basically this: A person's life isn't "his" — rather, it belongs to the One who created it, G-d. Therefore, only its true Owner may reclaim it. Despite one's noble intentions, "mercy-killing" is an intervention into a forbidden domain. This does not mean that one should be lax about relieving the person's pain.

Now, among the laws that G-d gave Noah was a command to set up courts to enforce these "Seven Noachide Laws." Therefore, the "assisted-suicide law" can't be considered merely a "privacy-of-your-own-home" issue, because society as a whole is responsible to enforce the Noachide laws. Therefore, the right thing to do is to vote against assisted suicides. Voting for them, or staying home on Election Day, would be helping people to transgress.

There are other considerations that are beyond the scope of this column, such as passive/active intervention, and the exact definition of death. For these and related topics, see the list of sources below.

Sources:

- Practical Medical Halacha - Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists," Feldheim Publishing
- Medical Halacha for Everyone," Abraham S. Abraham, Feldheim Publishing
- Jewish Ethics and Halacha for Our Time," Basil F. Herring, Ktav Publishing
- Judaism and Healing," J. David Bleich, Ktav Publishing

## WHO'S BLESSING WHOM?

Daniel Haruni of Toronto & Herzelia < dharuni@netvision.net.il > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

What is the meaning of "baruch" in the prayers? If it is to bless, then what does it mean when we mere mortals say "Baruch ata Hashem? — Blessed are You Hashem." How can we bestow blessings on Him who is the source of all blessings?

Dear Daniel Haruni,

The *Rashba*, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Aderet (Barcelona, Spain, 1235-1310), was asked this question. He explained that "baruch" means "He is the Source of all blessing."

Sources:

- Responsa of the Rashba 5:51

## ANGELIC NAMES

David Levy < dlevy@ee.usyd.edu.au > wrote:

Dear Rabbi

Our group were chatting about angels, their names and their functions or duties. Where can I find out the names of angels and what they do? Could you tell me some of their names? Thank you.

Dear David Levy,

The Hebrew word for angel is *malach*, which means messenger, angelos in Greek. According to traditional Jewish sources, angels are the powers which fulfill the will of G-d.

Our Sages say there are four angels who allegorically accompany man and protect him. Michael on his right, Gabriel on his left, Oriel in front of him, and Rafael from behind. The idea is that there are four "fields" in which one needs continuous help, and man receives this help via certain channels by which G-d conducts the occurrences in this world.

Michael, "*Mi Cael* — who is like the merciful G-d?" is the representative of the attribute of mercy. Gabriel — "my strength is G-d" — represents the attribute of power and judgment; they are therefore on the right and left respectively. Oriel — "my light is G-d," represents the attribute of knowledge by which man wishes to know what lies ahead and how to act accordingly; thus, Oriel "stands before" a man to show him the way. Rafael — "my healer is G-d" — is the attribute by which G-d heals any ill which befalls a man; that is why he "stands behind" man.

# Yiddle Riddle

D. Kurtz <dkurtz@internet-zahav.net> wrote:

In *Bereishet* 24:28, Rivka is asked if she is prepared to go with Avraham's servant, and she responds in the affirmative. Rashi says that she is saying that she will go even if her mother and brother are opposed. Commentators on Rashi say that this is derived from the fact that she answers: "I will go!" instead of a simple "Yes." Of course, this only makes sense if there is somewhere in Scripture that we actually do find the usage of "Yes" in response to a question. The question is, do we find in the Torah a word meaning "Yes?" (The word "*ken*" appears many times in the Torah, as in "*ken b'not tzeldovrot*" and "*Lo ta'asun ken*," but not with its modern meaning of "Yes.")

Answer:

In *Bereishet* 30:34 Lavan says to Ya'akov: "*Hen*." Rashi explain this as "*lashon kabalat devarim*," "Yes" in English. This is an Aramaic word which we would have expected Lavan's sister, Rivka to use in answer to the question of whether or not she was prepared to go.

## THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

Re: Root Riddle (Ohrnet Teruma):

My name is Shira Grossman from Jerusalem. In the Yiddle Riddle for Parshas Teruma, Catriel Blum from Toronto asked: "What verse in the Torah contains the same root four times in a row?" In addition to your answer (*Bamidbar*, 4:47), I found another verse: "*Shofech dam ha'adam, ba'adam damo yishafech* — Whoever spills the blood (*dam*) of man (*adam*), by man (*adam*) his blood (*dam*) shall be spilled" (*Bereshis* 9:6). (This assumes that the word *adam* is from the root word 'dam.')

Shira Grossman, Jerusalem <davidg@mofet.macam98.ac.il>

Re: Top Ten:

I just read the Ohr Somayach top ten lists, and am practically in tears from laughing — especially from the top ten reasons to become an orthodox Jew.

J.M. <email@withheld>

Re: Ask Archives:

I find the commentary in your archived "Ask the Rabbi" material fascinating. Such as the existence of certain pareve "milk" sources. I hadn't known there was such a thing as almond milk, although, of course, I am familiar with coconut milk that I assume has the same status.

Speaking of which, there is the story, true, of the fabulous kosher dinner served in a Chicago hotel under the supervision of a famed glatt kosher caterer. The

caterer was congratulated by an attendee after the affair was complete, who said, "Your dessert was fabulous; how did you do it? It tasted so much like ice cream!" The caterer responded, "The dessert was ice cream. But don't worry. The chicken...it wasn't chicken." Thank you again for your work. Shalom.

Barry D Bayer <bbayernn@counsel.com>

Re: Pyramids:

I learned something the other day and I am anxious to share it "with the world." Contrary to illustrations in innumerable *Haggadot*, the Jews in Egypt did not participate in building the pyramids. Pyramids were built during the Old Kingdom about 2600 B.C.E. the departure from Egypt occurred during the New Kingdom about 1300 B.C.E. The Torah says the Hebrews built storehouse cities.

Edward Simon <esimon@bilbo.bio.purdue.edu>

Re: "Concerning the Jews" (Ohr Somayach Website):

The cartoon "Concerning the Jews" on your website was the cutest, and truest expression of Judaism I have ever seen. It was brilliant! The final quotation pretty much sums it all up: "Sometimes it doesn't matter if you're leading or being chased. Either way, the one in front chooses the direction." Congratulations once again, on bringing obscure Jewish concepts to earth.

Yosef Ashenberg <YosefAshenberg@torahworld.net>

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