



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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OHR SOMAYACH אוֹר שׁוֹמַיַח
TANENBAUM COLLEGE

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Issue #237

Parshat Bamidbari

THE MITZVAH SYSTEM

Gregory Cissell, from Milwaukee, WI
<4t74cissellg@vms.csd.mu.edu> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I am taking a class at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, so that I can better understand Judaism. My question for you is this: Why is the mitzvah system (by mitzvah system, I mean the 613 commandments that Jews are obligated to observe) considered so important? It has not been my experience that these commandments carry the same significance in other religions as in Judaism. Thank you.

Dear Gregory Cissell,

G-d gave the 613 commandments to our nation at Sinai. They are so important because they are "the King's decrees."

Let me explain with a parable. Imagine that the president calls you to his office and gives you 10 million dollars and a strange gadget. He tells you to take the gadget home, put it by the open window, and turn it on every day between four and five in the afternoon, and that it's a matter of national security. He tells you that the 10 million is yours so long as you continue to do your task faithfully every day. You would certainly do it, even though you didn't understand why, because you know that the president has access to special information and technology that you don't have. You would feel sure that somehow this gadget has some function that, even though you don't understand it, is crucial for national security.

So too, even though we don't understand the ultimate reason for all the commandments, but since G-d Himself told us to do them and told us that they are so important, we certainly believe Him. He took us out of slavery in Egypt and gave us the Land of Israel in order for us to do the commandments; as the Torah says regarding the laws of keeping kosher, that we should

observe them, "Because I am the Lord your G-d, who raised you up out of the land of Egypt to be your G-d." (*Leviticus 11:45*)

We are not to "pick and choose," but rather to do *all* the commandments, as G-d said: "You shall observe *all* My statutes and *all* My laws and do them, so that the Land to which I am bringing you to settle upon will not vomit you out." (*Leviticus 20:22*) We see from this verse that our national security in the Land of Israel depends on fulfilling these laws. Not only that, but they are also our ticket to life in the Next World, as the verse says, "You shall keep My statutes and My laws, which a person will do them and live eternal life through them." (*Leviticus 18:5*)

RIGHT SHOULDERING

Harold Crandus from Illinois
<hcrandus@aol.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

When the Torah is removed from the Ark and carried through the synagogue, over which shoulder should it be carried and why?

Dear Harold Crandus,

The Torah scroll is held with the right hand against the chest and right shoulder. This shows honor and love of the Torah, as expressed in the verse in Song of Songs: "His right hand embraces me." Carrying it in the right hand is also reminiscent of the verse "From His Right Hand, He gave a Law of fire to them."

Sources:

- Shulchan Aruch 134:2, Mishneh Berura 14

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to info@ohr.org.il. Or use our form at <http://www.ohr.org.il/ask/page/ask.htm>. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

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ALL NIGHTER

Sam from Chicago wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

This is my first time experiencing Shavuot in a yeshiva environment. I'm told that everybody stays up all night studying Torah, which sounds fun but at the same time I'm a little wary of doing so. In school I once had a paper due the next day which I stayed up the entire night writing; in the morning my brain felt like fried tofu and I could hardly function. How important is it to stay up all night on Shavuot and why; or perhaps it's more important to get a good night's sleep?

Dear Sam,

Many, especially in the Yeshiva world, have the custom to stay awake and study Torah the entire night of Shavuot.

Shavuot celebrates the day when G-d gave us the Torah on Mount Sinai. By studying all night, we show our love and enthusiasm for this precious gift.

Another explanation is that the Jews at Mount Sinai slept late on that historic Shavuot morning! G-d had to "wake them up" to teach them the Torah (sound familiar?). We rectify this by staying up all night, to ensure that we won't sleep late on this day.

Staying up all night is not a halacha or a Jewish law, but rather a custom for those who feel they are physically up to it. If you won't function properly the next day, you should not stay up the whole night.

CHOSEN LAST

Frederick Barry from Canada wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

According to the Midrash, G-d went to all of the other nations before the Jews and offered them the Torah and they refused. If so, then why are we called the chosen nation? It seems like all of the others were chosen first, only they refused.

Dear Frederick Barry,

G-d already chose Jacob and his offspring long before the giving of the Torah. G-d told Jacob: "The Land which I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, to you shall I give it, and to your offspring after you." (*Genesis 12*) The Land was to be given to the Chosen People, as G-d said to Abraham, "I have given you and your seed after you the Land of your dwelling, the whole Land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and I will be their G-d." Thus, we see that Jacob and his seed were chosen already as "G-d's people."

King David referred to this when he wrote: "For G-d chose Jacob, Israel as His treasure (*Psalms 135:4*)"

Furthermore, G-d knew the other nations would decline; He only offered it to them so that they couldn't later claim that they never had a fair chance.

CLEAN TORAH

Michael D. Moroney Jr. from Grafton, MA
< miach@ibm.net > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

If a person is ritually impure or dirty and they handle a copy of the Torah, does this defile the Torah permanently and if so is there any way to rectify this desecration? I am anxious to hear your thoughts on this.

Dear Michael D. Moroney Jr.,

A person who is ritually impure may touch a Torah scroll. A person who has dirty hands should not. In either case the Torah scroll does not become defiled or impure. This law, according to the Rambam, has its source in the Talmudic statement that "words of Torah cannot become impure."

TWO TROP TUNE

Matthew Schutz from Three Bridges, NJ
< matt613@worldnet.att.net > wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I notice in Parshat Yitro two different trop [cantillation or "tune" markings associated with each word] were given — one for Shabbat and one for Shavuot. Why is this?

Dear Matthew Schutz,

There are two kinds of *trop* by means of which the Ten Commandments are read. They are called *ta'am elyon* and *ta'am tachton* (lit. the "uppermost meaning"

and the "undermost meaning"). The difference between the two is "musical" but not only musical.

Ta'am tachton is the regular *trop* of this passage as part of the Scriptures. The special *trop* — *ta'am elyon* — breaks up the sentences in a different way, joining all Ten Commandments into one long sentence, and is used only in the public Torah reading, resembling the revelation at Sinai. As you noted, most communities use it only on Shavuot, the Festival celebrating G-d giving us the Torah.

Yiddle Riddle

Since the Torah was given with Hebrew letters, here's a Shavuot riddle:

Dovid Solomon < dsolomon@actcom.co.il > wrote:

I have a Yiddle Riddle to suggest: What three characteristics do the Hebrew letters "*mem*" and "*noon*" have in common? One characteristic is shared by three other Hebrew letters (easy), one is shared by one other Hebrew letter (harder), and one is peculiar to these two (now that's hard!).

Answer:

- They have two forms: middle and final. This characteristic is shared by the letters "*tsadi*, *peh* and *kaf*."
- Their names begin and end with the same letter. This characteristic is shared by the letter "*vav*." (The letter "*hey*" is normally spelled "*hey alef*.")
- They both require use of the nostrils to be pronounced. If you have a stuffed nose, every "man" is "bad." (see *Radak in Michlol*, Lyck edition, pg. 70a)

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

Georgia on My Mind:

Shalom aleichem! I am a yeshiva student in Tbilisi, Georgia. I have been your subscriber since 1997 and like very much your issues. I have been inspired with the idea to relay your issues to other people here as well. But since not everyone of them masters English so good I think it would be useful to translate them into their native languages. So, may I get permission from you to do that and put out translated issues of Ohrnet at our yeshiva? Thank you again for so good work you do.

Shalva Davitashvili, Tbilisi < shabby@mmc.net.ge >

Ohrnet responds:

Yes, please translate our material into other languages and distribute it. We ask that you please credit us by name, location, e-mail and website. That is: Ohr Somayach, 22 Shimon Hatzadik St., POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, info@ohr.org.il, www.ohrnet.org

On Impact:

Keep up the excellent work— you are having an amazing impact on world Jewry. In the *zechus* of your good work may we merit the speedy arrival of *mashiach*.

Binyomin Freilich < ejs@mweb.co.za >

The French Connection:

Another success for your site. We are going to use Parsha Q&A between "Sefer Torah aliot" in order to maintain attention to Torah reading. Many thanks for your work and please keep Parsha Q&A as it is today, because I am responsible for relaying it to my community. I translate your questions in French (Rashi's language).

Raphael Benshimshon, Paris, France <rbe@quotient.net>

Your Staff Comforts Me:

I must tell you that I enjoy and appreciate your weekly e-mails, and just the fact that you are open anytime to any type of question. When I was in school my classmates didn't know what to do with me sometimes, because I

couldn't just listen — I had to question. And I thrived on learning. Now that I've graduated from seminary, I don't have the availability of the wonderful staff around anymore and I miss it terribly. I've found for myself just what I need in your "Ask the Rabbi" service! Thank you and *tizku l'mitzvos!*

Name@Withheld

Ohrnet responds:

We're grateful for the opportunity to educate and inspire. But your former teachers have addresses and phone numbers, don't they? Call them, and go visit them.

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