

O H R N E T

SHABBAT PARSHAT BO · FOR THE WEEK ENDING 8 SHVAT 5760 · JAN. 15, 2000 · VOL. 7 NO. 15

PARSHA INSIGHTS

EXCUSE ME — WHAT HAPPENS IF I PRESS THIS LARGE RED BUTTON?

*“And it shall be when your child will ask you at some future time, ‘What is this?’ you shall say to him, ‘With a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt from the house of bondage.’ (13:14)*

Every schoolboy’s dream is to be invited into the cabin of a large airplane flying at 35,000 feet above an azure sea, sailing by fluffy cumulus clouds as high as the Empire State building. Sitting in the captain’s seat, he watches the joy-stick being moved by some unseen hand as the auto-pilot eerily corrects the smallest deviation in the aircraft’s altitude...

But it’s not only aircraft that need the correct attitude.

Imagine our young schoolboy turning to the pilot and nonchalantly asking:

“Excuse me captain, but what is the purpose of the third green button in the fourth array of the second bank in the left-hand rear panel above the copilot’s seat?” The captain replies, “And the function of all the other 532 buttons in this cockpit are self-explanatory?! You understand what every button, lever and dial does in this cockpit except for that one?!”

*And it shall be when your son will ask you at some future time, ‘What is this?’ you shall say to him, ‘With a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt, from the house of bondage.’*

Rashi says that the question “What is this?” characterizes the son as a fool. This is problematic. For this exact same question — “What is this?” — is asked by another son. The wise son. How can the same three words connote both foolishness and wisdom?

Imagine a different schoolboy in the

cabin of that 747. He says to the pilot “What an incredible array of buttons, levers and switches. It would be wonderful if you would tell me a little of what they all do...”

The wise son asks “What is this,” meaning “What are these amazing buttons levers and switches by which we can affect ourselves and the world along with us?” He is asking his father to explain to him, as much as possible, the laws, the statutes and the commandments of the Torah. When the foolish son says “What is this,” by singling out one *mitzvah*, he isn’t impressing anyone with his knowledge, he is merely revealing his ignorance.

His question reveals that there’s no one behind the control column. It’s just the autopilot speaking.

Sources:

*Devarim 6:20; Rabbi Shimon Schwab in Maayan Beit Hashoeva as heard from Rabbi C.Z. Senter*

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Hashem tells Moshe that He is hardening Pharaoh’s heart so that through miraculous plagues the world will know for all time that He is the one true G-d. Pharaoh is warned about the plague of locusts and is told how severe it will be. Pharaoh agrees to release only the men, but Moshe insists that everyone must go. During the plague, Pharaoh calls for Moshe and Aharon to remove the locusts, and he admits he has sinned. Hashem ends the plague but hardens Pharaoh’s heart, and again Pharaoh fails to free the Jews. The country, except for the Jewish People, is then engulfed in a palpable darkness. Pharaoh calls for Moshe and tells him to take all the Jews out of Egypt, but to leave their flocks behind. Moshe tells him that not only will they take their own flocks, but Pharaoh must add his own too. Moshe tells Pharaoh that Hashem is going to bring one more plague, the death of the firstborn, and then the Jews will leave Egypt. Hashem again hard-

ens Pharaoh’s heart, and Pharaoh warns Moshe that if he sees him again, Moshe will be put to death. Hashem tells Moshe that the month of Nissan will be the chief month. The Jewish people are commanded to take a sheep on the 10th of the month and guard it until the 14th. The sheep is then to be slaughtered as a Pesach offering, its blood put on their door-posts, and its roasted meat eaten. The blood on the door-post will be a sign that their homes will be passed-over when Hashem strikes the firstborn of Egypt. The Jewish People are told to memorialize this day as the Exodus from Egypt by never eating *chametz* on Pesach. Moshe relays Hashem’s commands, and the Jewish People fulfill them flawlessly. Hashem sends the final plague, killing the first born, and Pharaoh sends the Jews out of Egypt. Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon the laws concerning the Pesach sacrifice, *pidyon haben* (redemption of the first born son) and *tefillin*.

EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY

Much attention is given in the Torah to the ten plagues and to Egypt's downfall. We are not rejoicing at our enemies' ruin. Rather, this is part of Israel's education: We had to learn that even the great super-power, Egypt, could fall. Each plague demonstrated how the mighty empire was like putty in G-d's hands.

This was not the last time Egypt would suffer devastation. The Prophet Yirmiyahu foretells Egypt's fall to Babylon. Her

armies will turn and flee from the invaders who will appear more numerous than locusts; they will cut her down like so many axes reducing a forest to nothingness.

Egypt gives way to Babylonia, and Babylonia later falls to Medio-Persia. All are transient. They rise to the greatest of heights, but disappear without a trace when G-d so decrees.

Israel, however, will never be wiped out. We live on to fulfill our eternal mission as the Chosen People.

There is no human super-power for us to put our trust in. The higher they rise, the bigger their fall.

LOVE OF THE LAND

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

ZICHRON YAAKOV

One of the first Jewish settlements in the country, Zichron Yaakov was established by Baron Edmond de Rothschild and named in honor of his father Yaakov (James). It is the home of "Carmel" and other wineries, where the grapes that grow in the vicinity produce the wine sold throughout the country and the world. Its altitude, proximity to the coast and natural beauty has made it a popular



vacation area.

The population of Zichron Yaakov is a combination of veteran settlers and new immigrants. There is a sizeable religious community with a wide range of educational institutions, including Yeshivat Ohr Yaakov that was established by Ohr Somayach and attracts English-speaking students from all over the world.

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General Editor:  
**Rabbi Moshe Newman**  
 Editorial & Web Advisor:  
**Rabbi Reuven Laufer**  
 Associate Editors:  
**Rabbi Mordechai Becher,**  
**Rabbi Reuven Subar**  
 Contributing Writers:  
 Weekly Daf, Love of the Land:  
**Rav Mendel Weinbach**  
 Insights, Overview:  
**Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair**

Web Production: **Eli Ballon, Michael Treblow**

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**Rabbi Eliezer Shapiro, Director**

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I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

**"At approximately midnight I will go out amidst Egypt, and every first born will die..." (11:14)**

Hashem's "clock" is set to Jerusalem time. The plague of the first-born took place at exactly midnight, Jerusalem time. But because Egypt is west of Jerusalem, midnight there occurs later. When Moshe said the plague would be at "approximately midnight," he was referring to local Egyptian time.

• *Kehillat Yitzchak; thanks to Rabbi Sholem Fishbane*

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## PROPHETIC PARAMETER

When can a prophet influence a ruling on a halachic prohibition and when not? The line of demarcation is clearly drawn in our gemara's distinction between two cases of yibum. One is the situation of a man who married one of two sisters but a doubt arises as to which one is his wife. Should he subsequently die childless, his brother cannot perform yibum with either of them, for he may unknowingly be marrying the sister of the woman he is indeed supposed to marry (whom the Sages prohibited because of her similarity to a wife's sister.) Since yibum is not possible unless witnesses appear to clarify which is the real widow, he is required to perform chalitzah with both women in order to make it possible for both of them to marry outside the family.

The other case is that of a man who came before Rabbi Yossi and asked to perform chalitzah before three months had passed since the death of his brother. He was told that he could not do so because the mishna tells us that neither yibum nor chalitzah can be performed before three months have elapsed. Yibum cannot be performed because it is not evident that the widow is pregnant until three months pass. Should she indeed be pregnant and bear a live child, she is forbidden to her dead husband's brother, for yibum was permitted only if there is no surviving child. But why, asks the gemara, should chalitzah not be performed before three months, since there is no violation involved even if the widow is found to have been pregnant? The answer given is that the Torah linked yibum to chalitzah, and whenever yibum cannot be performed neither can chalitzah.

If this is the rule, asks Rabbi Chanina, why do we permit chalitzah to be performed in the case of the two sisters where yibum cannot be performed?

The solution to this problem is thus expressed: Should the Prophet Eliyahu come and reveal to us which sister is the widow, there would be no obstacle to yibum. We therefore consider her eligible for yibum; and even if actual yibum cannot be performed, she is still eligible for chalitzah. Should Eliyahu come, however, and reveal to us that the widow is not pregnant, we still would not permit yibum before three months because the Sages established an inflexible waiting period of three months in every case, even if the widow was a minor incapable of conceiving.

This gemara is cited by the commentaries as one of the sources for distinguishing between the power of the prophet to intervene in halachic matters and his power to clarify the facts of a case, such as in the situation of the two sisters. Where the facts are not the issue, such as in the case of the waiting period which applies even when we are aware of the facts, the prophet's intervention in the halachic process is

ruled out, because once the Torah was given through Moshe, no prophet was empowered with prophecy to affect the halachic process.

• Yevamot 41b

## YOUR PEOPLE ARE MY PEOPLE

In addition to circumcision and immersion in a *mikveh*, a non-Jew who wishes to convert to Judaism must commit himself to fulfilling all the *mitzvot* incumbent on Jews. As a source for the sort of basic instruction given to the conversion candidate, the *gemara* cites the dialogue between Naomi and Ruth, which is only hinted at in the words of Megillat Ruth (1:16-18).

"*Amech ami* – Your people are my people," Ruth says to the mother-in-law who is pointing out the difficulties of being a Jew. This, explains Rabbi Elazar, was a response to Naomi's informing her that Jews are obligated to fulfill 613 *mitzvot*.

Where, ask the commentaries, is it hinted in these words of Ruth that she was expressing a commitment to this large body of commandments?

Maharsha offers two approaches, one based on the numerical value of the letters in the Hebrew word "*amech*," and the other on the connotation of the words as a distinctive hallmark of the Jewish people.

"*Amech*" consists of three letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The first, "*Ayin*," has the numerical equivalent of 70, and the second, "*Mem*," equals 40. The final letter, a "*final Chaf*" has a numerical value of 500 (after the last letter "*Taf*" which equals 400 come the five letters which have a different form when they appear at the end of a word, and their numerical equivalents range from 500-900). Combine these three numerical equivalents and add three, representing the number of Hebrew letters in "*Amech*," and you arrive at 613.

The second approach refers us to a derisive comment about Jews made by heathen critics (*Mesechta Shabbat 88a and Mesechta Ketuvot 112a*) to the effect that we are "an impulsive people" because we "put our mouths before our ears." Unlike the other nations who rejected the offer of the Torah, we accepted so many commandments upon ourselves even before hearing what they involved by saying "we shall do" even before saying "we shall hear."

This "impulsiveness," which the Sage Rava (*Shabbat ibid.*) explains as the result of our having confidence that the Creator would not obligate us in anything beyond our ability, is what made us a people unique in the range of its obligations. Ruth's response to this was that "your people are my people" and I am prepared to assume responsibility for all that you took upon yourselves at Sinai.

• Yevamot 47b

## PARSHA Q&A ?

1. What was Pharaoh's excuse for not releasing the Jewish children?
2. How did the locusts in the time of Moshe differ from those in the days of Yoel?
3. How did the first three days of darkness differ from the last three?
4. When the Jews asked the Egyptians for gold and silver vessels, the Egyptians were unable to deny ownership of such vessels. Why?
5. *Makat bechorot* took place at *exactly* midnight. Why did Moshe say it would take place at *approximately* midnight?
6. Why did the firstborn of the animals die?
7. How did Moshe show respect to Pharaoh when he warned him about the aftermath of the plague of the firstborn?
8. Hashem told Moshe "so that my wonders will be multiplied" (11:9). What three wonders was Hashem referring to?
9. Why did Hashem command the *mitzvah* of *Rosh Chodesh* to Aharon, and not only to Moshe?
10. Up to what age is an animal fit to be a *Pesach* offering?
11. Prior to the Exodus from Egypt, what two *mitzvot* involving blood did Hashem give to the Jewish People?
12. Which parts of the *Pesach* offering (as distinguished from other offerings) were the Jewish People forbidden to eat?
13. Why were the Jews told to stay indoors during *makat bechorot*?
14. What was Pharaoh screaming as he ran from door to door the night of *makat bechorot*?
15. Why did Pharaoh ask Moshe to bless him?
16. Why did the Jewish People carry their *matzah* on their shoulders rather than have their animals carry it?
17. Who comprised the *erev rav* (mixed multitude)?
18. What three historical events occurred on the 15th of Nissan, prior to the event of the Exodus from Egypt?
19. What is the source of the "milk and honey" found in *Eretz Yisrael*?
20. The only non-kosher animal whose firstborn is redeemed is the donkey. What did the donkeys do to "earn" this distinction?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this Week's Questions!

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

1. 10:11 - Since children don't bring sacrifices there was no need for them to go.
2. 10:14 - The plague brought by Moshe was composed of one species of locust, whereas the plague in the days of Yoel was composed of many species.
3. 10:22 - During the first three days the Egyptians couldn't see. During the last three days they couldn't move.
4. 10:22 - During the plague of darkness the Jews could see and they searched and found the Egyptians' vessels.
5. 11:4 - If Moshe said the plague would begin exactly at midnight, the Egyptians might miscalculate and accuse Moshe of being a fake.
6. 11:5 - Because the Egyptians worshiped them as gods, and when Hashem punishes a nation He also punishes its gods.
7. 11:8 - Moshe warned that "All these servants of yours will come down to me" when, in fact, it was Pharaoh himself who actually came running to Moshe.
8. 11:9 - The plague of the firstborn, the splitting of the sea, the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers.
9. 12:1 - As reward for his efforts in bringing about the plagues.
10. 12:5 - One year.
11. 12:6 - Circumcision and *Korban Pesach*.
12. 12:8 - The bones and the sinews.
13. 12:22 - Since it was a night of destruction, it was not safe for anyone to leave the protected premises of their homes.
14. 12:31 - "Where does Moshe live? Where does Aharon live?"
15. 12:32 - So he wouldn't die, for he himself was a firstborn.
16. 12:34 - Because the commandment of *matzah* was dear to them.
17. 12:38 - People from other nations who became converts.
18. 12:41 - The angels came to promise that Sarah would have a son, Yitzchak was born, and the exile of the "covenant between the parts" was decreed.
19. 13:5 - Goat milk, date and fig honey.
20. 13:13 - They helped the Jews by carrying silver and gold out of Egypt.

## KASHA! (KASHA MEANS "QUESTION")

**Kasha:** "And B'nei Yisrael did as Moshe told them, and they borrowed from the Egyptians vessels of silver, vessels of gold, and clothing." (*Exodus 12:35*)

How could the Israelites borrow from the Egyptians, knowing that they would not repay? Isn't that stealing?

**Answer:** In Hebrew, "borrow" and "ask for" are the same word. Thus, some commentaries explain that the Jews didn't "borrow," but rather "asked for" these items as outright gifts.

The Talmud notes that the Egyptians owed the Jews wages for centuries of

unjust slavery, and that the Jews took only what was rightly theirs as partial payment. This money also partially compensated them for their lands and homes in Egypt which the Egyptians confiscated.

Sources:  
*Rashbam, Tractate Sanhedrn 91, Genesis 47:27*

Do you have a KASHA? Write to [kasha@ohr.org.il](mailto:kasha@ohr.org.il) with your questions on any Parsha!

## JEW SPEAK

**From: Chica Brown from San Jose State University <chicab@pacbell.net>**

Dear Rabbi,

Hello, my name is Chica Brown and I'm a senior at San Jose State University and I'm looking for some information on the Jewish community for a presentation I'm doing. My class is in communications — language, meaning and culture — and the group I'm working with chose the Jewish community. How does the Jewish community communicate? Verbal, non-verbal? What language is used?

Dear Chica Brown,

Jews usually talk with their hands (just kidding). We communicate in all languages, since there are Jews all over the world. Jews speak a variety of languages, including English, Spanish, French, Arabic, German, Russian, even Chinese and Japanese. In Israel, the main language is Hebrew.

Jews in Europe and Spain developed their own language. In Europe the Jews spoke Yiddish, which is based on German, and in Spain they developed Ladino, which is based on Spanish.

**Chica Brown responds:** Thank you so much, I gave my speech on Monday and it turned out very interesting and I'm sure I got an "A."

## BEN BAG BAG

**From: Benny Leon from Zimbabwe, Africa <vleon@mango.zw>**

Dear Rabbi,

I make 20 copies of *Ohr Somayach's Ohrnet* publication each week and distribute them in the synagogue. We are a small community of about two hundred souls and we hold Shabbat services every Friday night and Saturday morning. We have the sister Ashkenazi Congregation of about 400 souls.

I have a query and this refers to the *Sayings of the Fathers*, as printed in our prayer books. There is a reference to *Ben Bag Bag* and *Ben Heh Heh*. Please inform us — who are these gentlemen? Thank you again for your wonderful email.

Dear Benny Leon,

*Ben Bag Bag's* full name was Rabbi Yochanan Bag Bag. Both he and *Ben Heh Heh* were descendants of converts; their names were disguised to protect them from informers who would have turned them over to the Romans. Some explain that *Bag Bag* is an acronym for "*ben ger, ben giyoret* — "the son of male and female converts." It is also explained that *Heh Heh* refers to the first "converts," Abraham and Sarah, to each of whose names G-d

added the letter *Heh* — Abram became Abraham, and Sarai became Sarah.

## COMMON ERROR

**From: Viviane Prager <prager8@yahoo.com>**

Dear Rabbi:

I would like to know why we say "before the Common Era" and "Common Era" (BCE and CE). I mean, why do we call it "common?" Some Jews object to it on grounds that the "C" in CE could be misconstrued as standing for "Christ." I would very much appreciate if you could help me answer their objections. Thanks for your wonderful work.

Dear Viviane Prager,

When I was a school boy I thought that CE stood for "The Common Error."

Now, 25 years and a number of common errors later, I assume that Common Era simply means "the date commonly accepted and used." But the truth is that I don't know, so I asked your question to a professor of European history. He didn't know either.

Is there a reader out there with more insight into this? Write to <info@ohr.org.il>

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

### Giving People the Benefit of the Doubt

*Judging favorably can turn a "bad" act into a good one, but it can also turn a good act into better one! When someone does you a favor, think: Did he sacrifice in order to help me, or did he simply pull a kind act out of a...*

## GRAB BAG

**M**y children and I were walking home shortly before sunset carrying four bags of groceries. The two older kids, age seven and nine, were carrying three of the packages. Sheindele, almost four, had had enough walking and was extremely hungry, so I had pity on her — and on the ears of everyone on the street — and picked her up along with the bag of sweets she was holding.

We were about three blocks from home when a man came by, grabbed the two packages my older son was hold-

ing and asked which building we lived in. We told him and he took off running. I vacillated between shock and paranoid feelings that he had just run off with our groceries.

We watched him run down the street with our packages. Then he ran back and passed us, running in the direction from which he had come. As he passed he told us he had put the bags next to the elevator, and I thanked him.

And this all occurred just before sunset, when there is a good possibility that the man was in a hurry to go *daven mincha* (pray the afternoon service) before it was too late to do so.

This truly is *Eretz Hakodesh* — the Holy Land. A very special place.

• Submitted by an *Ohrnet* reader, Jerusalem

## PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous "Ohrnet" features

### Re: "Marranos" (Ohrnet Vayechi):

Recently, a reader commented: "Many of Columbus' crew were Jewish "Marranos."

The above usage of the word "Marrano" is incorrect. On Tisha B'Av 1492, the expulsion order of the Jews went into effect in Spain. Any Jews who chose to leave had to leave behind all of their property and estates. Of the approximately one million Jews living in Spain at the time, half left and left everything behind. Everything left behind was forfeit to the Spanish crown. The following day Columbus' ship sailed out of Spain for the "New world," financed by the property stolen from the Jews. (It is probably true that there were several Jews aboard fleeing Spain.) The remaining 500,000 Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism, most of whom secretly practiced Judaism. Those Jews who were not sincere in their baptisms were referred to by the Christians as "Marranos."

• Havah <havah@netvision.net.il>

### Re: Words from the Heart (Ohrnet Vayechi):

In response to Dr. Carol Conaway's question regarding the source for the phrase "Words from the heart enter the heart" often attributed to "The Sages," you will find it is indeed a statement of "Chazal" (the Sages) cited in Sefer Hayashar by Rabeinu Tam, Sha'ar 13, and in Shelah Hakadosh, Sha'ar Ha'oyosios.

• Gershon Sabol <gsabol5244@aol.com>

Perhaps an alternate source for the phrase "words from the heart enter the heart" could be the Talmud Masechta Sota 9b: "The words of truth are recognizable (*Nikarim Divrei Emes*)." The truth which emanates from the heart will be recognized as truth and enter the next heart.

• Rabbi Eisenman <rye613@aol.com>

### Re: Ohr Somayach Internet Publications:

The Ohrnet is just fantastic! I virtually wait for it to arrive in my e-mail box each week!

• J. W. from Des Moines, Iowa  
<jw613@aol.com>

### Re: Hip Hip Hurrahs (Ohrnet Shemot):

I liked the historically-based "Hip! Hip!" article, and read Psalms 137 anew. I know so little. Great!

• Yuri A. Klimenko, Ukraine <tdtana@zfs.lg.ua>

### Where is Yossi?

Ohrnet received the following regarding the (hopefully temporary) discontinuation of our "Yossi and Co." parsha cartoon series for youth:

Dear Yossi,

Are you all right? Please come back, I miss you extremely.  
Your friend, Mendy

• Mendy Singer, England  
<bsinger@bury2.demon.co.uk>

## YIDDLE RIDDLE

**Last week we asked:** In Hebrew, if you subtract 30 from 30 you get 60. How is this?

**Answer:** The numerical value of the letter *lamed* is 30 (each Hebrew letter has a numerical value). The Hebrew word for "thirty" is "*shloshim*," spelled "*shin lamed shin yud mem*."

So, if you take the letter *lamed* (which equals 30) out of the word "*shloshim*" (which means thirty) you get the letters "*shin shin yud mem*," which spells "*shishim*," 60!

## RECOMMENDED READING LIST

### RAMBAN

10:14 Locusts and Crocodiles  
10:23 A Different Darkness  
12:2 Jewish Months  
12:3 Symbolism of the *Korban Pesach*  
12:31,51 Timetable of the Exodus

13:5 Five and Two – Seven Canaanite Nations

### SEFER HACHINUCH

7, 16 Eating Like Kings  
18 Recognizing Hashem's Gifts  
21 The Significance of the Exodus