

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Nitzavim

#### Stand Up and Be Counted

*“You are standing today...” (29:9)*

As modern culture seems to increasingly anesthetize the inherent morality of humanity, a Jew needs to stand up and be counted. As society at large is held to ransom by an autocracy of pseudo-intellectuals whose views are based on little more than their own virtue-signaling and a desperate scramble not to be seen as un-enlightened, we who champion the immutable values of the Torah need to stand up and be counted.

The Chafetz Chaim once said to Rabbi Shimon Schwab, “Do you know why I am a Kohen and you are not?” Rabbi Schwab said, ‘Because your father was a Kohen and your grandfather was a Kohen.’ “Okay, so *why* was my grandfather a Kohen?’ Before waiting for Rabbi Schwab to answer, the Chafetz Chaim explained, “I am a Kohen because three and half thousand years ago, at the scene of the Golden Calf, when Moshe Rabbeinu called out, ‘Who is for Hashem? To Me!’ - my great-great-grandfather ran and heeded the call to be counted with Moshe and our holy Torah.”

Today, how do we answer the call of “Who is for Hashem? To Me!” How do we stand up and be counted? When we stand bigger and stronger than temptation. When we turn our heads away, we heed the call.

When we do this, we experience a moment that is totally between us and Hashem, a private moment that no one else will ever know about. The Midrash says on the verse in Mishlei, “My son, give Me your heart and your eyes...” – “The Holy One says, ‘If you give Me your heart and your eyes, I know that you are Mine.’”

When we guard our eyes, when we raise our eyes and minds from temptation and look to Hashem - He knows that we are His. We have answered the call of “Who is for Hashem? To Me!” We are standing up and are counted.

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## Q & A – Nitzavim

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### Questions

1. What is the connection between the verse "atem nitzavim" and the curses in the previous parsha?
2. Who were the wood-choppers and water-carriers?
3. Why can Hashem never "swap" the Jewish People for another nation?
4. One who ignores the Torah's warnings "adds drunkenness to thirst." What does this mean?
5. What two cities were destroyed along with S'dom and Amorah?
6. "The hidden things are for Hashem, our G-d, and the revealed things are for us..." What does this mean?
7. According to Rashi, how will the day of the ingathering of the exiles be "great and difficult"?
8. Where is the Torah not to be found? Where is it to be found?
9. When and where did the Jewish People become culpable for each other's sins?
10. How do the earth and sky remind us to keep the mitzvahs?

### Answers

1. 29:12 - The Jewish People asked, "Who can survive such curses?" Moshe responded, "You've done a lot to anger Hashem, and yet 'atem nitzavim'— you are still standing before Him."
2. 29:10 - Canaanites who joined the Jewish People under false pretenses.
3. 29:12 - Because Hashem swore to their ancestors that He would never do so.
4. 29:18 - He causes Hashem to reckon his unintentional sins alongside his intentional ones, punishing him for all.
5. 29:22 - Admah and Tsevoyim.
6. 29:28 - There is collective culpability only for "open" sins, but not for "hidden" ones.
7. 30: 3 - It will be as if Hashem needs to take each individual by the hand and lead him out of exile.
8. 30:12-15 - The Torah is not found in Heaven, nor is it across the ocean. Rather, it is "very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart."
9. 30:28 - When they crossed the Jordan and accepted the oath on Mount Eval and Mount Grizim.
10. 30:19 - The earth and heavenly bodies, although receiving neither reward nor punishment, always obey Hashem's will. How much more so should we, who stand to receive reward or punishment, obey Hashem.

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## Q & A – Vayelech

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### Questions

1. Moshe said, "I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in..." How do we know this does not refer to physical inability?
2. Which of Moshe's statements to Yehoshua was later contradicted by Hashem's command?
3. Why does the Torah refer to Succot of the eighth year as though it occurred during the shemita year?
4. Why does the Torah command that babies be brought to the Torah reading?
5. What does it mean that Hashem "hides His face?"
6. What function does the song Ha'azinu serve?
7. Which verse promises that the Torah will never be totally forgotten?
8. What is the difference of opinion regarding the placing of the Torah scroll which Moshe gave the levi'im?
9. On the day of Moshe's death, why didn't Moshe gather the people by blowing trumpets as he normally would have?
10. Moshe said, "For I know that after my death you will act corruptly," but, in fact, this didn't occur until after Yehoshua's death. What does this teach us?

### Answers

1. 31:2. Because verse 34:7 says "His (Moshe's) eye never dimmed, and his (youthful) moisture never departed."
2. 31:7 - Moshe told Yehoshua to share his leadership with the Elders. Hashem later commanded Yehoshua to rule alone.
3. 31:10 - Because the laws of the seventh year still apply to the harvest.
4. 31:12 - To give reward to those who bring them.
5. 31:17 - He ignores their distress.
6. 31:21 - It warns what will befall the Jewish People if they abandon Torah.
7. 31:21 - "For (the Torah) will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring."
8. 31:26 - Whether it was placed outside but adjacent to the Ark, or inside next to the Tablets.
9. 31:28 - Blowing the trumpets expressed Moshe's dominion, and "there is no dominion on the day of death." (Kohelet 8)
10. 31:29 - That a person's student is as dear to him as himself. As long as Yehoshua was alive it was as though Moshe himself was alive.

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# Q & A – Ha'azinu

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## Questions

1. Why were heaven and earth specifically chosen as witnesses?
2. How is the Torah like rain?
3. How is G-d "faithful without injustice"?
4. Why is G-d called "tzaddik"?
5. How many major floods did G-d bring upon the world?
6. What group of people does the Torah call "fathers"? Cite an example.
7. Why did G-d separate the world's nations into exactly 70?
8. Why is the merit of the Jewish People's ancestry called a "rope"?
9. How is G-d's behavior toward the Jewish People like an eagle's behavior toward its offspring?
10. Regarding the Jewish People's punishment, G-d says, "I will spend my arrows on them." What is the positive aspect of this phrase?
11. How does the idea of "chillul Hashem" prevent the nations from destroying the Jewish People?
12. What will happen to the nations that conquer the Jewish People?
13. When G-d overturns a nation that persecutes the Jewish People, His attribute of Mercy is "replaced" by which attribute?
14. When G-d punishes the heathen nations, for whose sins does He exact punishment?
15. How will G-d's punishment change the way the nations view the Jewish People?
16. On what day was Ha'azinu taught to the Jewish People?
17. Verse 32:44 calls Yehoshua "Hoshea." Why?
18. In verse 32:47, what does "it is not empty from you" mean?
19. Why did G-d tell Moshe that he would die a similar death to that of Aharon?
20. If Moshe had spoken to the rock rather than striking it, what would the Jewish People have learned?

## Answers

1. 32:1 - They endure forever.
2. : 32:2 - The Torah gives life and promotes growth like rain.
3. 32:4 - He is "faithful" by rewarding the righteous, and "without injustice" by rewarding even the wicked for any good deeds.
4. 32:4 - All will agree that His judgments are righteous.
5. 32:7 - Two. One in the time of Adam's grandson Enosh and one in the time of Noach.
6. 32:7 - The Prophets. Elisha called the Prophet Eliyahu "My Father." (Melachim II 2:12).
7. 32:8 - To correspond to the 70 Bnei Yisrael who entered Egypt.
8. 32:9 - Their merit is "woven from" the merits of the Avot.
9. 32:12 - He mercifully wakes them gently, hovering over them, and carrying them on His "wings".
10. 32:23 - "The arrows will be spent" implies that the afflictions will cease but the Jewish People will not.
11. 32:27 - The nations would attribute their success to their might and the might of their gods. G-d would not let His name be desecrated like this.
12. 32:35 - They will eventually be punished.
13. 32:41 - His attribute of Justice.
14. 32:42 - For their sins and the sins of their ancestors.
15. 32:43 - They will view the Jewish People as praiseworthy for cleaving to G-d.
16. 32:44 - The Shabbat upon which Moshe died.
17. 32:44 - To indicate that although he was the Jewish People's leader, he still maintained a humble bearing.
18. 32:47 - That you will receive reward for studying Torah and that there is nothing meaningless in the Torah.
19. 32:50 - Because Moshe wanted this.
20. 32:51 - The Jewish People would have reasoned as follows: If a rock, which receives neither reward nor punishment, obeys G-d's commands, all the more so should they.

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# Q & A – Rosh Hashanah

## Questions

1. Why do we blow the shofar during the month of Elul?
2. Where in the written Torah text does it tell us explicitly that the first day of Tisrei is Rosh Hashanah?
3. We eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize a sweet year. Why do we choose apples above other sweet fruits?
4. What two blessings do we say before sounding the shofar?
5. Which Book of Tanach does the beginning of the Tashlich prayer come from?
6. What three barren women were "remembered" by Hashem on Rosh Hashanah?
7. A person's yearly allowance is fixed on Rosh Hashanah, except for three types of expenses. What are they?
8. We refer to the binding of Isaac in our prayers when we say: "Answer us as You answered Abraham our father on Mount Moriah..." What was Abraham's prayer on Mount Moriah?
9. Why, even in Israel, are there two days of Rosh Hashanah, whereas other festivals in Israel are celebrated for only one day?
10. What halacha applies to the shehechyanu blessing on the second night of Rosh Hashanah which does not apply on the second night of any other holiday?

## Answers

1. After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe went up to Mount Sinai to receive the second set of Tablets on Rosh Chodesh Elul. On that day, the Jewish People sounded the shofar to remind themselves to stray no more after idol worship. Also, the sound of the shofar strikes awe into our hearts and inspires us to return to the ways of Torah. (*Mishna Berura and Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 581*)
2. Nowhere. The Torah calls it "a day of shofar blowing." (This is one of many examples showing how our observance depends on the continuous oral tradition dating back to Mount Sinai). (*Bamidbar 29:1*)
3. Isaac blessed Jacob with the words: "The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed..." (*Bereishis 27:27*). The Talmud identifies this "field" as an apple orchard. (*Ta'anis 29b, Biyur Hagra*)
4. "Blessed are You... who has commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar," and the shehechyanu blessing. (*Orach Chaim 581:2*)
5. The Book of Micha (7:18-20).
6. Sara, Rachel and Chana. On Rosh Hashanah it was decreed that these barren women would bear children. (*Tractate Rosh Hashanah 10b*)
7. Expenses for Shabbos, Yom Tov, and the cost of one's children's Torah education. (*Ba'er Hetaiv Orach Chaim 242:1*)
8. He prayed that Mount Moriah should remain a place of prayer for all future generations (*Onkelos 22:14*). Also, he prayed that his sacrifice of the ram should be considered as though he had actually sacrificed Isaac. (*Rashi 22:13*)
9. Before our current exile, we did not have a fixed calendar as we do today. Rather, the Supreme Torah court in Jerusalem determined our calendar on a month to month basis. They did this on the first day of every month, based on witnesses testifying that they had seen the new moon. Therefore, the people outside Israel had insufficient time to find out the exact date in time for the festivals. The "two-day festival" arose to correct this situation. In Israel, however, the people lived close enough to Jerusalem to find out the exact date of all the festivals except Rosh Hashanah. Since Rosh Hashanah occurs on the first day of the month, even those living in Jerusalem sometimes needed to observe it for two days, if the witnesses failed to arrive.
10. On the second night of Rosh Hashanah it is customary to wear a new garment or to have a new fruit on the table when saying the shehechyanu blessing. Thus, the shehechyanu blessing applies not only to the holiday, but to the new garment or new fruit as well. (This is done in order to accommodate the minority of halachic authorities who rule that no shehechyanu blessing be said on the second night of Rosh Hashanah.) (*Taz 600:2*)

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# Q & A – Yom Kippur

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## Questions

1. Passover commemorates the going out of Egypt. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah. What historical event can Yom Kippur be said to commemorate?
2. For what kinds of sins does Yom Kippur not atone?
3. What should someone do if the person he wronged does not forgive him the first time?
4. Why is the vidui confession included during the mincha prayer the afternoon before Yom Kippur?
5. On Yom Kippur we refrain from: Working, eating, drinking, washing, anointing, family relations and wearing leather shoes. Which three of these prohibitions are more severe than the others?
6. In what two ways does the prohibition against eating food on Yom Kippur differ from the prohibition against eating pork the entire year?
7. Who wrote the prayer "Unesaneh Tokef" said during the chazan's repetition of musaf?
8. Why do we read the book of Yona on Yom Kippur?
9. In what two ways does havdalah after Yom Kippur differ from havdalah after Shabbos?
10. Ideally, what mitzvah should one begin immediately after Yom Kippur?

## Answers

1. Moshe came down from Mount Sinai on the tenth of Tishrei with the second set of Tablets, signifying forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf. Yom Kippur can be said to commemorate this event, the first national day of forgiveness for the Jewish People.
2. Sins committed against other people, including hurting someone's feelings. Yom Kippur does not atone for these sins until the perpetrator gains forgiveness from the victim himself. (*Orach Chaim 606:1*)
3. He should try at least two more times to gain forgiveness. (*Orach Chaim 606:1*)
4. Lest one choke while eating the pre-Yom Kippur meal and die without atonement, or lest one become intoxicated and unable to concentrate on the prayers at night. (*Mishna Berura 607:1*)
5. Eating, drinking, working. (*Mishna Kritut 1:1*)
6.
  1. Although any amount is forbidden, eating on Yom Kippur is not punishable by a Sanhedrin until one has eaten food equal in volume to the size of a date. Eating pork, on the other hand, is punishable for eating even an olive-sized piece, which is smaller than a date. (*Mishna Berura 612:1*)
  2. Eating on Yom Kippur incurs the punishment of karet - spiritual excision, whereas eating pork does not.
7. "Unesaneh Tokef" was written by Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany about 1000 years ago.
8. The repentance of the people of Ninveh serves as an inspiration to us to repent, and shows us that repentance can overturn a Divine decree. (*Shelah Hakadosh*)
9. After Yom Kippur, the blessing over spices is omitted from havdalah. Also, the source of the flame used for havdalah after Yom Kippur must be a fire kindled before Yom Kippur. (*Orach Chaim 624:3,4*)
10. Building the succa. (*Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5*)

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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## Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

### An Article About Nothing (Part 1 of 2)

The *Aleinu L'Shabeach* prayer, which is recited multiple times daily and in the *Amidah* on Rosh Hashana, declares the universal dominion of Hashem's sovereignty and His special relationship with the Jewish People. That prayer contrasts the Jews who worship the "King – King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He" as opposed to other nations who serve *hevel* and *rik*. Those two terms denote the impotence and powerlessness of the imagined deities worshipped by the others, and essentially amounts to the idea that those nations worship "nothing." Later in that prayer, another word for "nothing" appears: "Our King is True, nothing (*efes*) exists besides Him." In part one of this essay we explore these three Hebrew words for "nothing" (*hevel*, *rik*, and *efes*), while in part two we will deal with the terms *tohu* and *bohu* used to describe the state of "nothingness" before the six days of Creation, and other words for "nothing," such as *blimah*, *meumah* and *klum*.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Provençal scholar Rabbi Avraham Bedersi uses a very peculiar methodology in his work *Chotam Tochnit* to differentiate between Hebrew synonyms: When dealing with a pair of similar-meaning words, he focuses on the order in which those words appear in the Bible whenever they occur near each other, and uses the words' order to help clarify the difference between them. He postulates that when multiple terms for the same idea appear in tandem, the Bible uses those words in ascending order – from the least intense to the most intense.

The one time that the words *hevel* and *rik* appear in the Bible side by side (Isa. 30:7, cf. Isa. 49:4), they appear precisely in that order, first *hevel* and then *rik* (just like in the *Aleinu* prayer). Following his methodology, Rabbi Bedersi explains that *hevel* denotes a less intense form of "nothingness" than *rik*. The way he puts it, *hevel* refers to something that does exist (*yesh*), but has no purpose (*to'elet*), while *rik* refers to something that does not even exist!

Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Luzzatto (1800–1865), also known as Shadal, offers a comprehensive study that looks at the differences between these apparent synonyms. He explains that *hevel* refers specifically to something that on the surface appears to be advantageous or otherwise valuable, but will ultimately be shown to be worthless. An example of this is beauty, for on the surface aesthetic qualities do have some import, yet the Bible teaches that beauty is actually *hevel* (Prov. 31:30) as such qualities are ultimately meaningless.

In line with this, Rabbi Luzzatto explains the meaning of the name *Hevel* that Adam gave his son Abel (Gen. 4:2), arguing that at first, *prima facia*, Adam thought that Abel had the protentional to be one of the righteous progenitors of mankind; but in the end, Abel was killed before he was even able to produce any offspring, proving his futility. In expanding on this last explanation, Shadal surmises that Abel only received the name *Hevel* after he died, in retrospective consideration of his unfruitful life, not before the fact. This is why the Bible does not explicitly report that Eve named her son Abel, like it does regarding his brothers Cain (Gen. 4:1) and Seth (Gen. 4:25).

Shadal continues to explain that the word *rik* refers specifically to the notion of one toiling and working hard to achieve something that instead yields "nothing." This usage appears in multiple instances in the Bible, like when the Torah presents a curse to those who fail to keep the Torah "and you will sow your seed for naught [*la'rik*], as your enemies will eat it" (Lev. 26:16). In many instances, the word *rik* appears alongside the word *yegiah* ("toiling"), like in: Isa. 49:4, 65:23, and Iyov 39:16. Indeed, in the daily *U'Va L'Tzion* prayer, we request



of Hashem that He open our heart to His Torah, and that He put love and fear of Him in our hearts, “so that we do not toil for *rik*.”

The Malbim (1809–1879) takes the exact opposite approach. He explains that *hevel* refers to that which is total "nothingness" and has no absolute value, while *rik* refers to something that has some value on the surface, but only when one digs deeper does one realize its folly.

\*For the rest of this article and the next installment in this series, visit us online at:  
[http://ohr.edu/this\\_week/whats\\_in\\_a\\_word/](http://ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word/)

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# ROSH HASHANAH / YOM KIPPUR

## SPECIAL FEATURE

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### Taking Responsibility for Our Lives

by Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz

People sometimes view Yom Kippur as a day of somber doom and gloom, full of long unintelligible praying, physical deprivations, and fears and anxieties about the future. Yet our Sages view Yom Kippur in quite a different light.

The Mishna in Masechet Ta'anit (26b) tells us that Yom Kippur was one of the two most joyous days of the Jewish year (the other being the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av, as explained there). Yom Kippur is a day of forgiveness, reconciliation and opportunity for a new beginning, unencumbered by the crushing deadweight of past failure. Yom Kippur is a wondrous gift of love from the Creator, the gift of a second chance. As such, despite the lengthy prayers and the physical discomfort of no food or drink, and our backs, knees and feet being sore from long hours of standing, one should cherish every moment “like the sweetness of honey” (an expression I heard from my revered *Mashgiach*, Rav Dovid Kronglass, *zatzal*). For an all too brief 25-hour period we are with Hashem, in Whose presence there is “strength and joy” (Chronicles I 16:27).

If a blind person were given one day in which to see, what would he do? How he would rush to savor the memory of color, of pattern, to notice the green of the grass, the colors of flowers, the smiles of his children. How he would hold on to everything he could see so he could imprint it on his mind and soul and consciousness, even as the physical image fades away. This last hour of Yom Kippur, as we say the *Ne'ilah* prayer, is very much the same. We spend most of our lives only half-seeing. If not blind, then we are at least color-blind, missing so much of the essence. On Yom Kippur, when we really focus, we can begin to see. On this day the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) is particularly close and the gates of Heaven are open to our prayers. But toward the end of the day that time is ending, and we will go back to our regular life, our life of half-seeing. The prayer of *Ne'ilah* is shorter than the rest of the Yom Kippur prayers. There are no long “*al chets*”. We are pressed for time and we are pushing to get those last few requests in. We are trying and striving to hold on to the special moments when Hashem is closer to us than at any other time of the year, to remember them so we can continue to keep some of the holiness within us.

And *teshuva* can be earned in a moment if we do it right. The *gemara* in Avoda Zara (17a) relates the story of Elazar ben Dordaya, who was a notoriously degenerate person. He was so degenerate that he traveled the world looking for prostitutes. Finally, he heard of one he hadn't been with, far away. He made the trip, but she was so disgusted that he had spent so much effort to find her that she refused to be with him. This woke him up. In an instant he realized what he had become. In despair, he turned to the mountains and hills and asked them to pray for him. They answered him that they couldn't — they had to pray for themselves. Next, he turned to the heaven and earth and asked them the same. Again, he got the same answer. Next, he turned to the sun and moon, and again was turned down. Finally, he turned to the stars, and they, too, refused him. At last he cried out that the only one who could save him was himself. All of it was on his shoulders. With this realization he cried such a pitiful cry to Hashem that his soul left his body. At that instant a voice from Heaven sounded, “Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya has earned a share in the World-to-Come.” He had been given rabbinic ordination posthumously. When the rabbis of the Talmud told this story they would cry with the realization that in an

instant someone could ascend so high-to and acquire his share in the World-to-Come in one minute – and yet so many of us waste so much time. And so many years.

The great Reisher Rav, *zatzal* (Rabbi Aaron Levine, who died in the Holocaust) explains this story further. What is the meaning of Elazer ben Dordaya's dialogue with the elements? What earned him his passage into the next world? He explains that the hills and mountains are often a reference to parents. When Elazar realized what he had become, his first impulse was to look for someone to blame. He called to his parents, as if to say, "It's not my fault. You raised me poorly and that's why I became what I became." But in his heart of hearts, he knew the truth. Hearing the echo of his parents' response in his own heightened consciousness, he understood that whatever his parents may have to answer for is between them and Hashem, but that he and all of us remain free actors responsible for the life we choose. Next, in his restless, frenetic efforts to find a scapegoat and an excuse, he turned to the heaven and earth, which are symbols of the environment. Perhaps his environment could be blamed – his friends, his society, the predominant culture to which he was exposed. He got the same answer. Next he turned to the sun and moon, which control the crops, and are symbols of economic circumstance. A person might be led to sin because of poverty, or conversely the pressures of success might be a crushing insurmountable burden. Again he received the same answer. Finally, he turned to the stars, his DNA, as it were, his predetermined characteristics. All these things he looked to blame, and each one refused. Finally, he realized it all lay in his own power. Though parents and environment and economics and inborn traits all weigh on a person, ultimately we have free choice. We are not a product of rigid determinism. This is what Elazer ben Dordaya realized, and in realizing it, he took responsibility for himself. This is what earned him his life in the World-to-Come. He approached Hashem with honesty, simplicity and directness. We certainly cannot fool Hashem, but we must be careful not to fool ourselves either!

The Maggid of Kelem used to tell a story, a famous parable, in which for one half hour the inhabitants of the city's graveyard were brought back to life for the purpose of fixing what they had not done right in life. He described the frenzy of the dead, rushing from their graves to learn a page of *gemara*, or to give charity, or to try to make something right with their loved ones. And all the time they had their eyes on the clock. Twenty-five minutes left, then only fifteen, finally five, and then the clock strikes, and with a wail the dead are again gone. The Maggid of Kelem would finish by asking his audience, "And my friends, what's so bad if we have more than a half hour? And my friends, who says we *have* a half hour?"

Life is precious. Opportunities are legion. Let us use the gifts that Hashem in His infinite kindness has given us and may we and all of Israel merit a good and sweet year of health, holiness and growth.

The Ohr Somayach family wishes our students,  
alumni, friends and all of Klal Yisrael a  
meaningful and fruitful New Year holiday season.

May you and your families be written and sealed in  
the Book of Life, enjoy a festive Succot, and be  
blessed from Above with much good health, happiness  
and success in the coming year – and for many  
more years to come.

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Kiddushin 16 - 36

### Not an Earring

*The ear of a person that heard My voice at Mount Sinai declare that ‘the Jewish People are My servants’ (Vayikra 25:55) – and not the servants of servants – and went and sold himself as a slave to another – deserves to be pierced.”*

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai explained that we can learn this “gem of a teaching” (“*k’min chomer*” – see Rashi) when we learn the verse: “But if the Hebrew indentured servant says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go free...’ his master shall bore his *ear* with an awl, and he shall serve him forever.” (Ex. 21:5-6)

In addition to this explanation for piercing his ear, Tosefot offers cites a Midrash that hints to the reason for using an awl – called “*martzea*” in the verse. The *gematria* of the word *martzea* is 400. Since the Jewish People were slaves in Egypt for 400 years and were redeemed by Hashem, this Jewish person who went and “acquired” a master for himself deserves to be pierced with a “*martzea* of 400”.

▪ *Kiddushin 22b*

### Miracles, Prayers and Righteousness

*On the following day, Rav Acha said to them, “If not for a miracle, you have caused me to be in danger.”*

What happened on the previous day that led Rav Acha to say this, and why did the people put him in a potentially dangerous situation? The *gemara* relates that there was a “*mazik*” – a type of damaging demon – that resided in the Yeshiva headed by the Sage Abayei. When Abayei heard that Rav Acha was coming to town he told the people not to put him up for the night, so that Rav Acha would be forced to stay in the Yeshiva, “and perhaps a miracle will occur”, and the danger would cease. In fact, Rav Acha stayed in the Yeshiva, and when he saw the *mazik* he prayed for help from Hashem. Each time Rav Acha bowed while saying “*modim*” – “thank you” – to Hashem, one of the seven “skulls” (Rashi) fell from the damaging force.

But how could Abayei rely on a miracle to save Rav Acha, in order to bring safety to his Yeshiva? From the words of Abayei, “*perhaps* a miracle will occur”, it sounds like Abayei was not *certain* of Rav Acha’s safety. Perhaps a miracle would occur but perhaps it would not!

The Maharsha explains that indeed Abayei was 100 percent certain that the prayer of the pious scholar would destroy the predator. And this would *not* be considered a miracle, since it was purely “natural,” according to Abayei, that Hashem would answer Rav Acha’s prayer and save him. Abayei was in doubt, however, that perhaps Hashem would perform a miracle to vanquish the damager *before* Rav Acha began to pray. And if a miracle in fact would occur for Rav Acha, this would *detract* from his merits in his “Heavenly accounting,” something that Rav Acha would not be happy about. Yet, since there was a *mazik* in the Yeshiva, Abayei felt

that the *certainty* that Rav Acha's presence there would kill it justified causing Rav Acha to be there. This step of ensuring safety in the Yeshiva was warranted *despite* Abayei's *doubt* of whether the danger would be removed naturally by prayer (with no reduced merits), or "supernaturally" through a miracle (resulting in reduced merits).

Either way, Rav Acha would be safe according to Abayei's view, and the Yeshiva would be made safe again – perhaps with a miracle, but perhaps without.

Rav Acha, on the other hand, did not view the matter in the same manner as Abayei did. In fact, his prayer was enough, *without* a miracle, to naturally remove the demon, one head a time. However, Rav Acha was extremely humble and modest, and did *not* feel that his prayer could kill the damager in a natural manner. Rather, he felt that Hashem answering his prayer to destroy the damager would be considered a great miracle, and his own "merits" would be reduced. Therefore, he was "upset" when he spoke to the people of the town the next day and said to them, "If not for the miracle, you would have caused me to be in great danger." Meaning, since Rav Acha did not consider his prayer powerful enough that Hashem should "naturally" answer him and save him, he had certainly suffered a loss by being "cornered" into staying in the place of the damager. He felt that only a miracle could save him. And since he was put into a situation that even if a miracle occurred and he was saved, which is how he viewed what had happened, he today had fewer merits than he had yesterday according to his humble view of himself.

▪ *Kiddushin 29b*

## An Elder or a Scholar

Rabbi Yosi Hagalili said, "The word 'zaken' (in the verse) refers to one who has acquired Torah wisdom."

The Torah states in Vayikra 19:32, "You shall rise before an elderly person and you shall respect the 'zaken,' and you shall fear your Hashem. I am the L-rd." We see in this verse that there is a mitzvah, a positive command, to show honor by standing up for a *zaken*. Whom does the Torah refer to with the word *zaken*?

According to the explanation of the *gemara*, Rabbi Yosi Hagalili states that the Torah mitzvah to rise before a "zaken" applies not only to rising for an elderly Torah scholar, but even for a young Torah scholar. This is because even a young Torah scholar is called a *zaken* (although it is usually translated to mean "elderly"), since *zaken* in the verse refers to "one who has acquired Torah wisdom," regardless of his age. Rashi explains that Rabbi Yosi's Hagalili understands the word "zaken" in the verse as an acronym for three Hebrew words: "*Zeh kana chochma*," meaning "this person acquired (Torah) wisdom." The halacha is according to the ruling of Rabbi Yosi Hagalili and is cited in Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 240:1.

A famous question is asked on this explanation. True, I can "see" the words "zeh" and "kana" in the word "zaken", but where is the hint to the key word for "chochma", Torah wisdom, in the word "zaken"?

What is the one and only true possession that a person *acquires*? The wisdom of the Torah. A person who "acquires Torah" turns it into part of his being and owns it for eternity. All other possessions can come and go, and are not truly part of a person's essence. Therefore, although the word "zaken" appears to contain only the words for "this person acquired", it *obviously* means that he has acquired Torah wisdom. "*Chochma*," Torah wisdom, is *understood* to be that which he acquired, since Torah is the only acquisition that is a true and lasting acquisition. (Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, *zatzal* – "the Steipler Rav")

▪ *Kiddushin 32b*

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## Havdalah Introduction (Part 6): Farewell, My Beloved

“Hashem, my G-d, will illuminate my darkness”  
(*King David, Tehillim 18:29*)

Havdalah continues with the blessing over spices:

“Blessed are you, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates species of fragrance – *Borei Minei Besamim.*”

In general, the Halacha for making blessings over different fragrances can be complex. The various possibilities revolve around how each spice grows and its what Halachic designation. However, for Havdalah, the Ashkenazic custom is to recite the blessing “Boreh Minei Besamim” regardless of the kind of spices are being used. Nevertheless, due to the Halachic issues the Mishna Berura (297) rules that one should try to use a spice with the natural blessing of “Boreh Minei Besamim.” According to Sephardic custom, one should make the appropriate blessing for whatever spice is used (Kaf HaChaim 297).

What is the purpose of the spices at Havdalah? Our Sages teach (Ta’anit 27b) that on Shabbat we are granted an extra Neshamah – a Neshamah Yeteira. “Reish Lakish said: An additional Neshamah is placed in a person on Erev Shabbat, and at the conclusion of Shabbat it is taken away. As it states, ‘Shavat Veyinafash – He rested and was refreshed’ (Shemot 13:17). Once he has rested [i.e., once Shabbat has ended], woe, the [additional] Neshama is gone!” Rashi explains that the function of the Neshamah Yeteira is to enhance our ability to enjoy the delights of Shabbat.

In the Chassidic texts, the Neshamah Yeteira is described as being a portal for entry into the more esoteric dimensions of the Torah. Our regular Neshamah is the key to understanding the revealed dimensions of the Torah. Shabbat, with its heightened level of holiness, allows us to enhance the spiritual side of ourselves. We are then given the Neshamah Yeteira to help us achieve new levels of connection to Hashem.

But, as Shabbat draws to a close, our extra Neshama returns to the Spiritual Realms and we are left bereft. The Avudraham explains that the spices that we smell at Havdalah comfort us for our loss of the Neshamah Yeteira.

The Bach (Orach Chaim 297) offers an additional reason for smelling the spices. Our Sages teach that as Shabbat commences, the fires of Gehinom are extinguished. Throughout the week, the Neshamahs in Gehinom suffer terribly. However, as the tranquility of Shabbat descends into the world, even the Neshamahs in Gehinom experience peace and serenity. But, as Shabbat departs, the fires of Gehinom are reignited. Sometimes, with the conclusion of Shabbat, our Neshamahs feel a certain weakness as they become aware of the terrible spiritual stench that the suffering in Gehinom produces. The sweet-smelling aroma of the spices give our Neshamahs the capability to approach the new week with renewed spiritual anticipation.

What is it about the fragrance of the spices that alleviates the Neshamah’s pain? The Bnei Yissachar offers a thought-provoking insight. When the Torah describes how Adam and Chavah erred by eating from the Tree of

Knowledge, the narrative describes how four of their five senses were instrumental in their actions. The Torah states (Ber. 3) that Chavah saw the fruit, she took the fruit, they ate the fruit, and they heard Hashem calling to them. The only sense not party to the sin was the sense of smell. Therefore, the sense of smell is the considered the most refined of all five senses since it is untainted from sin. And it is through the sense of smell that the Neshamah receives the most pleasure.

*For practical information about which blessing is recited over which spice, please consult with your local Orthodox Rabbi.*

*To be continued...*

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## PARSHA OVERVIEWS

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### **Nitzavim**

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because despite having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality.

Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel that will result from failure to heed Hashem's mitzvahs. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all – that the Jewish People have forsaken the One Who protects them, in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. And, however assimilated they will have become among the nations, Hashem will eventually bring them back to the Land of Israel. Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility, but rather that its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. This Torah portion concludes with a dramatic choice between life and death, with Moshe exhorting the people to choose life.

### **Vayelech**

On this, the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent throughout the camp, bidding farewell to his beloved people, encouraging them to keep the faith. Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, Hashem is with them and will vanquish their enemies. Then he summons Yehoshua, and, in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as the leader of the Jewish People. In this manner, he strengthens Yehoshua's status as the new leader. Moshe teaches them the mitzvah of *Hakhel*: That every seven years on the first day of the intermediate days of Succot, the entire nation, including small children, will gather together at the Temple to hear the king read from the Book of *Devarim*. The sections that he reads deal with faithfulness to Hashem, the covenant, and reward and punishment.

Hashem tells Moshe that Moshe's end is near, and that he should therefore summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the Mishkan, where Hashem will teach Yehoshua. Hashem then tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land, the people will be unfaithful to Him, and begin to worship other gods. Hashem will then completely hide His face, so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, and that they will be hunted by all. Hashem instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song – *Ha'azinu* – which will serve as a witness against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to the Jewish People.



Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah and instructs the *Levi'im* to place it to the side of the *Aron* (Holy Ark), so that no one will ever write a new Torah scroll that is different from the original – for there will always be a reference copy.

## Ha'azinu

Most of the portion of Ha'azinu is a song, written in the Torah in two parallel columns. Moshe summons heaven and earth to stand as eternal witness to what will happen if the Jewish People sin. He reminds the people to examine world history and note how the Jewish People are rescued from obliteration in each generation – that Hashem "pulls the strings" of world events so that the *Bnei Yisrael* can fulfill their destiny as Hashem's messengers. Hashem's kindness is such that Israel should be eternally grateful, not just for sustaining them in the wilderness, but for bringing them to a land of amazing abundance, and for defeating their enemies. But, this physical bounty leads the people to become self-satisfied and over-indulged. Physical pleasures corrupt their morals. They worship empty idols and indulge in depravity. Hashem will then let nations with no moral worth subjugate Israel and scatter them across the world. However, the purpose of these nations is to act as a rod to chastise the Jewish People. When these nations think that it is through their own power that they have dominated Israel, Hashem will remind them that they are no more than a tool to do His will. The purpose of the Jewish People is to make mankind aware of the Creator. Neither exile nor suffering can sever the bond between Hashem and His people, and in the final redemption this closeness will be restored. Hashem will then turn His anger against the enemies of Israel. Hashem then gives His last commandment to Moshe: That he ascend Mount Nevo and be gathered there to his People.

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# PEREK SHIRA

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

## THE SONG OF THE MOUSE

The Mouse says: “*And You are righteous regarding all that has befallen me, for You have acted justly and I have been wicked.*” (See *Nechemiah* 9:33.)

The mouse breeds prolifically in every environment and is the most notorious of household pests. The Sages term it as “wicked” because, although it has basic animal intelligence, it will nibble on and destroy clothing without benefit to itself. If it sees abundant food, it calls its fellow mice to join in its plunder. When it is eventually caught, it sings of Hashem’s justice in removing the wicked from society.

The mouse’s song finds expression in every Jew, especially before and during the Days of Judgment. If a Jew stumbles on a sin, he readily admits guilt and resolves to prevent a reoccurrence. If a calamity befalls him, he declares it to be a gift of atonement and moves on. A Jew turns sinfulness into righteousness, and punishment into praise. Even his very admission of guilt is a Heavenly song!

- Sources: *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Bava Metzia 3:5), cited in *Sifsei Chaim*

In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib