

OHRNET

PARSHAT VAYERA 20 CHESHVAN 5784, 4 NOVEMBER 2023
• VOL 31 NO. 3

PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Is Life Worthless Or Priceless?

“But the son of the slave-woman (Yishmael), as well, I will make into a nation, for he is your offspring.” (21:13)

Judaism says there is a G-d who controls everything; that nothing happens without Him wanting it to happen. Whether we like it or not, the massacre of Simchat Torah was part of His plan. How we can understand that? The beginning and the end of understanding is that Divine reasons are beyond the understanding of humans. That’s the difference between faith and trust, between *emuna* and *bitachon*.

You can believe Hashem exists, but how much do you trust Him? Sure, you trust Him when you pray and you get what you want, but real trust is when things don’t go the way you want them to, and you still say, “Hashem I trust You. I don’t understand why You are doing this, but I know and believe that it is for my good and the ultimate good of the world.”

The Jewish People have been subjected to the most savage, cold-blooded and murderous assault since the Second World War. This has shaken us from our complacency. We think that anti-Semitism is under control, that we are living in golden age, the army is invincible. That Saudi Arabia will tame the Arab world. If you look at the history of Jewish People, you will see that much of our exile has been one of being victims, fear and running for our lives. Why were so many Jews jewelers? Because you pack up your wealth in a small packet and run for your life. Why are so many Jews artisans? Because your livelihood doesn’t depend on anything outside yourself, or being an entrepreneur for that matter.

In the *Shema*, the basic credo of the Jew and our declaration of faith before we leave this world, the second time we say the name of Hashem, one of our thoughts should be that I am prepared to put up with any pain or suffering, or to give my life to sanctify the Name of Hashem. That’s what we are committing to. Perhaps, the most important thing in our lives is the way we leave this life.

Q & A

Questions

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the brit mila?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels matza. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the akeidah (binding)?

Answers

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of mitzvot.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Getting Pushy

When the angels came to visit Lot in Sodom before destroying the city, they posed as human wayfarers who said to Lot that they were prepared to sleep in the street. However, Lot pressed them and insisted that they lodge at his house, so they eventually relented and accepted Lot's hospitality. The Hebrew word used to denote Lot "pushing/insisting" that the angels sleep over at his house is *potzer* (Gen. 19:3). In the continuation of that story, when the people of Sodom wanted to "know" Lot's guests, they "pushed" Lot to cede his guests (Gen. 19:9), which the Bible describes again using the same verb, *potzer*. This story serves as our entry point into exploring the etymology of *potzer*, which also leads us to exploring related Hebrew synonyms, such as *docheh*, *dochef*, *hadof*, and *dofek* – all of which connote various forms of "pushing." By delving into the rich etymology and multifaceted meanings of these words, we can gain a deeper understanding of the subtleties within the Hebrew language and various Hebrew words.

It is important to distinguish between the physical act of "pushing" and the metaphorical sense of "being pushed around" or "coerced." Some of the words we will discuss encompass both of these notions, and these usages carry intriguing implications throughout the Hebrew Bible.

All in all, cognates of *potzer* appear seven times in the Bible. Other examples include when Jacob "pushed" his brother Esau to accept his gifts (Gen. 33:11), demonstrating a form of insistence or prodding that goes beyond mere politeness, and in the tragic story of the Concubine of Givah (Judges 19:7). These words are all clearly derived from the trilateral root PEH-TZADI-REISH.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 19:3) explains *potzer* as primarily referring to "poking" or "stabbing" someone or something until they acquiesce to the desires of the one doing the pushing. This vivid imagery highlights the persistence and determination embedded in the word *potzer*. In a similar way, Shadal (to Gen. 33:11) further enriches our understanding by arguing that the three-letter root in question is actually itself an off-shoot of the biliteral root TZADI-REISH ("narrow/strait"), as "pushing" somebody to do so something essentially leaves that person in a situation with narrow choices until he relents (evidently, he saw the PEH as a sort of radical added to the core biliteral root). According to this view, "pushing" an individual into a particular course of action leaves them with limited options, akin to navigating a narrow passageway, until they give in.

When it comes to the story of Lot, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) in *HaKtav VeHabbalah* (to Gen. 19:9) actually interprets the term *potzer* in this context in the physical sense. In other words, he reads the verse as saying that the people of Sodom physically "pushed" Lot away from the door, preventing him from protecting his angelic guests. This physical interpretation adds a layer of tension and urgency to the story, emphasizing the Sodomites' hostile intent, and offers a compelling contrast to the more figurative usages of the word.

Let's shift our focus to the word *docheh*, whose root DALET-CHET-HEY (*dachah*) carries the connotation of being "pushed." An almost identical root is DALET-VAV-CHET, which also refers to being "pushed." As the Psalmist famously says about himself, "I was surely pushed (*dacho dechitani*) into falling / And Hashem helped me" (Psalms 118:13). This theme reappears in other psalms, where the Psalmist expresses gratitude for God's intervention in preventing his downfall, particularly for "extracting my soul from death, my foot, from being

pushed (*dechi*)” (Ps. 116:8, see also Ps. 56:14). Altogether, inflections of DALET-CHET-HEY appear eleven times in the Bible (as Even-Shoshan lists them), primarily in the book of Psalms, with a few instances elsewhere (Prov. 14:32, 26:28, Jer. 23:12).

The term *docheh* is also present in rabbinic literature. For example, in Talmudic jurisprudence, a positive commandment "supersedes" (*docheh*, literally "pushes away") a negative commandment. In a more colloquial sense, within Yeshivish parlance, when someone dismisses a particular argument or line of thinking, they may be said to be *docheh* that particular argument or line of thinking, reinforcing the idea of “pushing” aside one viewpoint in favor of another.

*To read the rest of this story, please visit us online at: http://ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word/

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by Hashem. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. Hashem reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. Hashem agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham "bargains" Hashem down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon.

Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After Hashem appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar's son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but Hashem tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel, and Hashem promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation.

Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that Hashem is with him. In a tenth and final test of Avraham, Hashem instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, Hashem sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, Hashem promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The Torah portion concludes with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Bava Kama 2-8

Introduction to Bava Kama

We now begin learning Masechet Bava Kama, the first Tractate of *Seder Nezikin* (“The Order, i.e., category, of Damages), which is the third of the six orders of the Mishna and the Oral Law (*Shas*). I’d like to share an oft-discussed question regarding the subject of damages.

In the Torah, we are taught that a person who causes damages (a “*maxik*”) is obligated to pay for the damages he causes. However, there does not appear to be a specific verse in the Torah that states that there is a *prohibition* against causing damage. The question, therefore, is whether it is in fact prohibited. One may perhaps aver that it must be based on logical thinking. But is causing damage actually prohibited, and, if so, is it a Torah transgression or a Rabbinical one?

First of all, we find a source teaching that it is certainly prohibited to damage another’s property. We learn in Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat 378), “Just as it is forbidden to steal from someone else, likewise it is forbidden to damage his property.” But what is the original source and the nature of this prohibition?

One answer to this question is that the prohibition against damaging has a Torah source, and can be learned from the commandment to return another person’s lost object. The obligation to return a lost object includes a *positive* command to return the property to the owner, and also a *negative* command *not to ignore* a potential loss to the owner, but rather to make an effort to save the property. For example, our Sages teach, based on a verse, that if one sees water about to flood another’s field, he is obligated – by the mitzvah of returning lost property – to help save the field from flooding, and prevent a financial loss to the owner. (Bava Metzia 31)

Based on this teaching, we can say that if one has a mitzvah to prevent damage to another’s property, despite him not being the reason for the damage, all the more so he has a mitzvah that he must not cause any damage. (See Kehillas Yaakov, Bava Kama 1 and the opinions cited there as to whether the prohibition is of Torah or rabbinical nature.)

Don’t Roll Over

“A person is always responsible for his actions (i.e., damages caused), whether he’s awake or asleep.”

We learn in this Mishna that one needs to make a maximal effort not to cause damage with his body, not only when he is awake and is in control, but also when he is asleep and acting without any ill intent. From the straightforward reading of the Mishna, it seems that a person must pay for such damage under any circumstances.

Tosefot, however, citing the Jerusalem Talmud, states that a person is responsible for damage he causes to the property of another in his sleep only if the property was near him when he went to sleep. However, if another person placed property near the sleeper after he was already asleep, the sleeper who causes damage while asleep is not responsible. The reason, writes Tosefot, is that in the latter case, the one who put the property there is considered as having caused the damage.

▪ *Bava Kama 3b, 4a*

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

HAVDALAH (PART 8) – FAREWELL, MY BELOVED

“Hashem, my God will illuminate my darkness”

(King David, Tehillim 18:29)

Havdalah concludes with the final blessing: “Blessed are you, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who separates between holy and secular, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of labor. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who separates between holy and secular.”

The final blessing of Havdalah lists a series of opposites. Holy and secular; light and darkness; the Jewish nation and the other nations of the world; the seventh day and the six days of the week. These opposites teach us a fundamental lesson. It is not possible to appreciate something fully without also having experienced its opposite. Without living the six days of the week, we would not be able to recognize and treasure the splendor that is Shabbat. The opposite is also true. If Shabbat were not an integral part of our week, it would not be possible to value the true significance of the weekdays.

The prophet Michah says (7:8), “Though I sit in darkness, Hashem is my light.” Our familiarity with darkness gives us the ability to compare it to light, and allows us to perceive just how wondrous the light truly is. If we would be bathed in light for twenty-four hours a day, it would mean very little to us because we would not know anything else.

So, too, is true with Shabbat. At this time in history, we need the six days of the week to appreciate just how effectively Shabbat uplifts and enriches our lives. Our Shabbat experience is enhanced when we compare the innate holiness of Shabbat with the seeming lack of purity of the weekdays and how hard we have to work to imbue them with spiritual meaning.

We are all waiting for the Mashiach to reveal his identity, may it be very, very soon. And when that happens, we will begin a new era, one that our Sages describe as “*Yom Shekulo Shabbat*, a time of eternal Shabbat.” At that point, we will not need the six days of the week, as we do now, to help us appreciate the holiness of Shabbat. Being connected to Hashem will be an integral part of our identity, such that we will be able to live in an elevated state, similar to that of Shabbat, throughout the entire week. But, until then, we need the weekdays to heighten and deepen our appreciation of Shabbat. And, as we bid farewell to Shabbat, it is beholden upon us

to recognize that the beauty and the sanctity of Shabbat enhances our week. As we move back into the mundane, we must take with us the knowledge that the weekdays complement Shabbat. And Shabbat complements the weekdays. They belong to each other.

Havdalah ends with the words, “Blessed are You, Hashem, Who separates between holy and secular.” The blessing is not referring to a separation where there is no connection. It is not suggesting that the two themes are independent of each other and have nothing in common. Rather, Havdalah is teaching us that even though there is a clear distinction between the holy and the secular, they share a sense of reciprocity. We need to be able to identify which is which, so that we can work throughout the week to discover the holiness within the mundane.

In doing so, we are preparing ourselves for next Shabbat.

To be continued...

To be continued...

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS

Reasons behind the Mitzvos

By Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

TEFILLIN

421. Tefillin of the arm; 422. Tefillin of the head (*Shemos* 13:1-16; *Devarim* 6:4-9; 11:13-21)

“And it shall be for you a sign on your arm and a reminder between your eyes, so that Hashem’s Torah will be in your mouth, for Hashem took you out of Egypt with a strong hand.” (*Shemos* 13:9)

One should intend with the placement of [the tefillin] that the Holy One, blessed is He, commanded us to place these four passages [that are enclosed within each of the tefillin boxes], which discuss Hashem’s unity and the Exodus from Egypt, on the arm against the heart [which is on the left side of the chest], and on the head against the brain. Thereby, we will remember the miracles and wonders that He performed for us, which demonstrate His unity, and that He has the power and dominion over the Heavens and the earth to manipulate them according to His will. One should subjugate to the Holy One, blessed is He, his soul, which in the brain, and also the heart, which is the seat of the desires and thoughts, and thereby he will remember His Creator, [to fulfill His desire,] and minimize the fulfillment of his own desires (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 25:5*).

THE MITZVAH

It is a mitzvah to place on the arm and on the head, throughout the day, tefillin boxes that contain the four passages of the Torah in which the mitzvah of tefillin is mentioned. These discuss fundamental ideas pertaining to our relationship with Hashem, and their common theme is our subjugation to Him, the One and Only God Who took us out of Egypt, which we demonstrate and remember by wearing tefillin.

The first passage, “*Kadesh Li*,” speaks of the mitzvah of remembering the Exodus, the symbol of our relationship with Hashem, for it was then that He revealed Himself and became our G-d. **The second passage**, “*V’haya ki y’viacha*,” continues the theme of the first passage, and adds that Hashem smote the firstborn Egyptians, which

confirmed our status as His chosen people. **The third passage**, “*Shema*,” proclaims that Hashem our God is one, and that we are therefore obligated to love Him with all of one’s soul, heart, and resources. **The fourth passage**, “*V’haya im shmo’a*,” discusses the idea of reward and punishment, for serving Hashem or for straying from His will. When a person wears the tefillin, he should meditate upon these ideas so that he will live according to them. Whoever sees the tefillin recalls the Exodus and talk about it. There is a special obligation to wear them during the recital of the *Shema* and the *Shemoneh Esrei* each weekday morning, in order to fortify these two expressions of subjugation to Hashem.

Some relate the word “tefillin” to the word “pellilah,” a testimonial, for it demonstrates that Hashem’s name is called upon the Jewish People. Others understand that it is related to a homonymous word that means “thought,” which indicates that a person must constantly meditate upon the ideas represented by the tefillin. A third opinion associates it with the word “*tafel*,” meaning “attached,” for the tefillin are attached to the head and arm. Yet another opinion suggests that it comes from the word “*tefillah*,” prayer, since tefillin are worn primarily at that time.

SIGNS OF SUBJUGATION

Man is earthly, and therefore naturally inclined to lowliness and sin. The tefillin serve to remind us of our lofty relationship with Hashem and our obligations towards him. Hashem gave them to us to wear in the same way a human master gives his slave with a badge or a uniform to wear.

The tefillin are worn against the heart and eyes, the main catalysts of sin in the human body, as the Sages state, “The eye sees, then the heart covets, and then the body commits the sin.” The arm-tefillin are worn on the left arm because it is closest to the heart. In addition, the right arm, which is the primary arm, needs to be unburdened and fully available for its regular functions. The straps of the arm-tefillin are tied along the arm and the hand, indicating that our actions are bound to the symbolism of the tefillin that is upon our hearts. It would appear that the straps of the head-tefillin that extend down along the body similarly indicate that the symbolism of the tefillin sanctifies our bodies.

The passages are placed in a single compartment in the arm-tefillin, but in four separate compartments in the head-tefillin. This is because the arm-tefillin corresponds to the sense of feel, symbolized primarily by the arm and hand, whereas the head-tefillin corresponds to the four senses of the head: sight, hearing, smell, and taste. In addition, the single compartment of the arm-tefillin indicates the simple faith of the heart, while the compartmented head-tefillin indicates the complex intellectualization of the mind. Thus, the arm-tefillin are placed first, to symbolize that we are to fulfill Hashem’s commandments in deed even before we comprehend them fully.

Hashem gave us other symbols of slavery as well: Shabbos and Yom Tov. They are in fact greater than that of tefillin, for they are Hashem’s own symbols. As such, it is unnecessary, and even disrespectful, to place tefillin on Shabbos and Yom Tov. The *Zohar* compares one who places tefillin on these days to a slave who removes the more important badge of slavery that his master personally adorned upon him, and wears his own badge instead.

CROWNED WITH THE SHECHINAH

There is a more subliminal level of meaning in the subjugation symbolized by the tefillin. A slave to a human master is lowered by his subjugation, while a slave to Hashem is elevated. Our badge of slavery, the tefillin, alludes to the Divine Presence that rests upon every Jew.

Thus, there is a *shin* etched on each side of the head-tefillin, a letter that represents Hashem’s name. In addition, it combines with the letter *dalet* of the knot of the head tefillin and the letter *yud* of the knot of the arm-tefillin to form the Divine name *Sha-dai*. In the same way black does not change color when other colors are added to

it, so too, Hashem, Who is represented by the tefillin, is eternally one. The color black also symbolizes the depth and concealment of their meaning. The four-sided cubic shape of the tefillin boxes alludes to four-letter name of Hashem. The *shin* on the right side has three heads, corresponding to the three Patriarchs, on the *shin* on the left side has four heads, corresponding to the four Matriarchs, in whose merit the Divine Presence rests upon the Jewish people. The boxes are sewn with twelve stitches, four on each side, alluding to the twelve tribes of Israel, who encamped on the four sides of *Mishkan*. In addition, the *gematria* value of two *shin*'s and three and four is 613; thus, the tefillin allude to our obligation to observe 613 mitzvos.

The straps of the head-tefillin extend downward, alluding to that which Hashem's Presence fills the world and controls it. The strap on the right side extends at least until the navel, symbolizing that Hashem's dominion on high extends down to earth, and especially to the center of the world, Eretz Yisrael.

The tefillin thus serve to elevate us and to distinguish us from amongst the nations that do not share our bond with the Creator. With regard to the head-tefillin, which is displayed for all to see, the verse states: "Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of Hashem is proclaimed upon you, and they will revere you."

*Sources: *Rashi* and *Chizkuni* to *Shemos* 13:9; *Tosafos* to *Menachos* 34b; *Shoshanim LeDavid*; *Aruch (tafel)*; *Mayim Chaim*, by *Rabbi Yosef Masas* (*Orach Chaim* §38); see also *Pri Megadim* (*Orach Chaim* §25, *Eishel Avraham* §8); *Maharal*, *Gevuros Hashem* (Ch. 39); *Chinuch*; *Zohar* cited in *Beis Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* §31); *Rav Shimshon R. Hirsch* (*Devarim* 6:8); *Menachos* 37b; *Chizkuni* (13:16); *Tzror HaMor* to *Shemos* 13:5; *Maadanei Melech* to *Devarim* 6:8; *Kuzari* (3:11); *Alshich* (11:18); *Chidushei Aggados L'Rashba* (*Berachos* 6a); *Eliyah Rabbah* (*Orach Chaim* §25); *Rabbeinu Bachya* (*Shemos* 13); *Ateres Zekeinim* §11; *Tzioni* to *Shemos* 12:12; *Eliyah Rabbah* (see also *Beis Yosef* §32); *Raavan* in his commentary to the prayer "Shochen ad"; *Kad HaKemach*; *Matteh Moshe* (*Tefillin* §16); *Beis Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* §31).

Ohrnet Magazine is a weekly Torah magazine published by Ohr Somayach Institutions,
POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel · Tel +972-2-581-0315 · Email. info@ohr.edu

Contributing authors, editors and production team: Rabbi Nota Schiller – Rosh HaYeshiva,
Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz - Rav of Kehillos Ohr Somayach, Avi Kaufman, Rabbi Reuven Chaim
Klein, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, Rabbi Yaakov Meyers, Mrs. Rosalie Moriah, Rabbi Moshe
Newman, Rabbi Shlomo Simon, Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair, Rabbi Yehuda Spitz,
Mrs. Helena Stern.

©1992-2023 Ohr Somayach Institutions – All rights reserved – This publication contains words
of Torah. Please treat it with due respect. Editor's disclaimer – Ohrnet Magazine is not intended
to be a source for halachic rulings. In any real and specific case one should consult a qualified
halachic authority for ruling.