

# OHRNET

PARSHAT VAYECHI 11 TEVET 11 JANUARY 2025  
• VOL 32 NO. 9

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Keystone Kop

### *Chazak! Chazak! V'nitchazek!*

The Torah portion of Vayechi brings the Book of Bereishis to its end. Bereshis is also called the “The Book of the Patriarchs.” It was Avraham, the Hebrew, the Ivri – literally the ‘one who crossed over’ - who brought the concept of Monotheism to mankind. In his day, his belief was regarded as absurd. It was consigned to the scrap heap of history. His generation likened him to a mule, which is sterile, an animal with no future.

And yet, Avraham laid the cornerstone of Western civilization.

It says in Hallel, “The stone that the builders thought to be misshapen, became the cornerstone.” Meaning that the Jewish People (who secular luminaries like Arnold Toynbee referred to as ‘the fossils of history’) became the ‘cornerstone’ of Creation. ‘Cornerstone’ is the usual translation of the Hebrew *rosh pina*. But *rosh* means ‘head,’ something at the top, not at the bottom like a cornerstone.

And why would the builders reject a cornerstone per se? A better translation of *rosh pina* is keystone. If you look at the way a stone arch is made, you’ll notice that all the stones are regular except for the stone at the pinnacle. That stone is called the keystone.

The keystone is the last stone to be placed during the construction of an arch, effectively locking the other stones into place and allowing the arch to support weight. This is achieved through the principle of compression, with each stone in the arch pushing against its neighbors, creating a stable, self-supporting structure.

The reason that the builders rejected the keystone was because it isn’t regular. It is wedge-shaped. The nations of the world say, “These Jews don’t fit it.”

And they reject us, but it is the Jewish People who are the pinnacle, the *rosh pina* of Creation. The stone that keeps the whole edifice from falling in on itself.

---

# TALMUD TIPS

---

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Sanhedrin 16-22

### Greatness and Humility

*Rabbi Elazar said, "No one achieves greatness unless all of his sins are forgiven."*

Rabbi Zeira originally kept a low-profile in order to avoid *smicha* (rabbinical ordination). This was due to a teaching of Rabbi Elazar that “One who resides in ‘obscurity’ will live long.” However, after he heard Rabbi Elazar also teach, “A person does not rise to a position of greatness unless all of his sins are forgiven” — he then sought to be awarded the greatness of *smicha*.

Rashi explains the idea behind the first teaching of Rabbi Elazar as the same idea taught in Tractate Pesachim 87b: “Woe to rulership (*rabbanut*), for it buries its possessor.” (See the commentary of Maharitz Chiyos, who explains why these two statements of Rabbi Elazar are not contradictory, and also see “The Path of the Just,” chapter 22, regarding the trait of humility and how it relates to a position of authority.)

- *Sanhedrin 14a*

### Birth Via Torah

*Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmeni said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, "Anyone who teaches Torah to another is considered as if he gave birth to him."*

- *Sanhedrin 19b*

---

## PARSHA OVERVIEW

---

After 17 years in Egypt, Yaakov senses his days drawing to a close and summons Yosef. He has Yosef swear to bury him in the Machpela Cave, the burial place of Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka.

Yaakov falls ill and Yosef brings to him his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe. Yaakov elevates Ephraim and Menashe to the status of his own sons, thus giving Yosef a double portion that removes the status of firstborn from Reuven. As Yaakov is blind from old age, Yosef leads his sons close to their grandfather. Yaakov kisses and hugs them. He had not thought to see his son Yosef again, let alone Yosef's children. Yaakov begins to bless them, giving precedence to Ephraim, the younger, but Yosef interrupts him and indicates that Menashe is the elder. Yaakov explains that he intends to bless Ephraim with his strong hand because Yehoshua will descend from him, and Yehoshua will be both the conqueror of *Eretz Yisrael* and the teacher of Torah to the Jewish People.

Yaakov summons the rest of his sons in order to bless them as well. Yaakov's blessing reflects the unique character and ability of each tribe, directing each one in its unique mission in serving G-d. Yaakov passes from this world at age 147. A tremendous procession accompanies his funeral cortege up from Egypt to his resting place in the Cave of Machpela in Chevron.

After Yaakov's passing, the brothers are concerned that Yosef will now take revenge on them. Yosef reassures them, even promising to support them and their families. Yosef lives out the rest of his years in Egypt, seeing Efraim's great-grandchildren. Before his death, Yosef foretells to his brothers that G-d will redeem them from Egypt. He makes them swear to bring his bones out of Egypt with them at that time. Yosef passes away at the age of 110 and is embalmed. Thus ends Sefer Bereishet, the first of the five Books of the Torah. *Chazak*

**subscribe @ ohr.edu**

to receive Ohrnet directly to your email each week

---

# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

---

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## **KIDDUSH LEVANAH (PART 21)**

### **UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON**

*“My walk on the moon lasted three days. My walk with G-d will last forever.”*  
(Charles Duke – Lunar Module Pilot, Apollo 16)

### **Afterword**

#### **Jewish History Month After Month After Month**

Kiddush Levanah is one of the many testimonies that show a symbiotic relationship between the Jewish nation and the moon. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so too do we reflect the light of Hashem and His Torah. And, just as the moon waxes and wanes, so too the fortunes of the Jewish nation wax and wane. For fifteen days, the moon waxes, until it reaches its fullest size, and then for fifteen days it wanes, finally disappearing from view. And, then, the entire cycle begins anew.

In spiritual terms, Avraham Avinu represents the very nascent beginnings of the Jewish nation. In symbolic terms, Avraham Avinu represents the “birth” of the new moon. The Midrash (*Ber. Rabbah* 42) relates that Avraham was given the title “*haIvri*” because he was different from the entire world. The word “*ivri*” comes from the Hebrew word “*eiver* – the other side.” Avraham, being the very first person to come to the realization by himself that there is only One G-d, stood on the other side to everyone else when he began the process of revealing Hashem’s Majesty to the world.

As each generation became more familiar with the concept of Monotheism, Hashem’s Majesty grew in the world. This continued until fifteen generations after Avraham began reflecting Hashem’s light onto the world, when Shlomo HaMelech built the magnificent Holy Temple. He created an edifice that reflected the purity of Hashem’s light and His Torah to the entire world. It bathed the earth in the most vivid light ever experienced. For fifteen generations, beginning with Avraham Avinu, the “moon” waxed until it reached its peak with the building of the First Temple. Never since has there been such a clear manifestation of purity in the world. And then fifteen generations later, darkness descended on the world when Shlomo HaMelech’s exquisite Holy Temple was destroyed, and the Jewish People were sent into exile.

Just like the Jewish nation, the moon is in a constant state of flux, growing and shrinking, appearing and disappearing. At times, casting light into the dark and inhospitable night sky. And, at times, leaving us wrapped in seemingly never-ending darkness. And then the whole cycle begins again. As the light of the moon fades and leaves us in darkness yet again, Hashem is calling out to His beloved nation, “Don’t despair!” There have been too many moments in Jewish history when it looked so frighteningly dark, and the future looked even darker. Yet, paradoxically, it is the darkest moments of Jewish history that herald in renewal. Just as it seems as if the darkness will never dissipate, a new light reveals itself to warm us and bring us life.

And so, each month we pour out our hearts to our Father in Heaven, praying that the world merits to once again experience the true light. We ask from Hashem, that we, His Chosen nation, should not need to experience any more darkness. This is just as we request every morning in the first blessing before the Shema, “*Ohr chadash al Tzion ta’ihr v’nizkeh kulanu meheirah le’ohro* – May You shine a new light on Tzion, and may we all speedily merit its light.”

Please allow me to end this series on Kiddush Levanah with a story that encapsulates the determination of each Jew to do what Hashem wants us to do – even when it may be oh-so difficult to do so.

The long winter nights metaphorically describe the seemingly endless exile that we are in. There are many occasions in the heart of the winter when even the moon doesn’t seem to be able to penetrate the thick darkness. To step outside on such inhospitable nights can be daunting. However, if Kiddush Levanah needs to be recited, that is what one needs to do. A Jew from Monsey found himself facing a “Kiddush Levanah conundrum.” It was the month of *Tevet*, in the heart of the winter. The entire beginning of the month had been overcast, with no signs of the moon at all. And now it was the last night that Kiddush Levanah could be recited that month. Unwilling to let Kiddush Levanah slip through his fingers, he got into his car and began driving northbound on Route 17. He pulled off at Exit 110 and looked upward, and, lo-and-behold, there was the moon, as clear as can be! He parked his car, jumped out and started reciting Kiddush Levanah. When he was in the middle, he heard the sound of an engine. A car pulled up behind his car, and another Jew emerged, Siddur in hand, and he also began reciting Kiddush Levanah. Soon, another car pulled up, then another, and then another. Within a short time, there were at least twenty(!) Jews standing underneath a star-filled sky and a translucent moon. Together, they all recited the beautiful and poignant words of Kiddush Levanah. And then they all joined hands and danced together – in the middle of nowhere – in a joyous circle.

Fulfilling the enchantingly poignant words of the blessing, “*Sasim u’smeichim la’asot retzon Konam* – joyous and glad to perform the Will of their Owner!”

---

## Q & A

---

### Questions

1. Why is kindness towards the dead called "chesed shel emet" — kindness of truth?
2. Give three reasons Yaakov didn't want to be buried in Egypt.
3. How do you treat a "fox in his time" (i.e., a commoner who rules)?
4. "When I was coming from Padan, Rachel died on me... I buried her there on the way to Efrat..." Why did Yaakov say all this to Yosef?
5. Initially, why was Yaakov unable to bless Ephraim and Menashe?
6. What does *pillalti* mean?
7. What does "Shechem" mean as used in this week's parsha? (two answers)
8. Which individual is called "the Emori"? Why? Give two reasons.
9. What did Yaakov want to tell his sons but was unable to?
10. What privileges did Reuven lose due to his rash actions?
11. What congregation from Yaakov's offspring did Yaakov not want to be associated with?
12. What did Yehuda do after he heard Yaakov rebuke Reuven, Shimon and Levi? Why?
13. What does milk do to teeth?
14. Why is Yissachar like a "strong-boned donkey"?
15. With what resource did both Yaakov and Moshe bless Asher?
16. In Yosef's blessing, Yaakov said, "They embittered him..." Who are "they"?
17. Which descendants of Binyamin "will divide the spoils in the evening"?
18. From whom did Yaakov buy his burial place?
19. What oath did Yosef make to Pharaoh?
20. Which two sons of Yaakov did not carry his coffin? Why not?

## Answers

1. 47:29 - Because the giver expects no reward from the recipient.
2. 47:29 - a) Egypt's ground was to be plagued with lice; b) At the time of the resurrection, those buried outside Israel will suffer; c) So the Egyptians wouldn't make him into an idol.
3. 47:31 - Bow to him.
4. 48:7 - Yaakov thought Yosef harbored resentment since Yaakov had not buried Yosef's mother, Rachel, in the Ma'arat HaMachpela.
5. 48:8 - The Shechina departed from him.
6. 48:11 - "I thought."
7. 48:22 - a) The actual city of Shechem; b) A portion.
8. 48:22 - Esav. a) He acted like an Emorite; b) He trapped his father with words (*imrei pi*).
  
9. 49:1 - When Mashiach will come.
- 10.49:3 - Priesthood and Kingship.
- 11.49:6 - Korach and his congregation.
- 12.49:8 - He drew back. He was afraid that Yaakov would rebuke him for the incident with Tamar.
- 13.49:12 - It makes them white.
- 14.49:14 - Just as a donkey bears a heavy burden, so the tribe of Yissachar bears the yoke of Torah.
- 15.49:20 - Oil-rich land.
- 16.49:23 - Yosef's brothers, Potifar and his wife.
- 17.49:27 - Mordechai and Esther.
- 18.50:5 - From Esav.
- 19.50:6 - Yosef swore not to reveal Pharaoh's ignorance of Hebrew.
- 20.50:13 - Levi, because he would carry the aron (holy ark). Yosef, because he was a king.

---

# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

---

## Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

### Good and Pleasant

When Jacob sensed his earthly demise nearing, he called in his twelve sons and offered his parting blessings to those future progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. When it came time to bless his son Issachar, Jacob compared Issachar to a strong donkey, saying “and he saw rest for it is good [*tov*], and the land for it is good [*na'eimah*], and he inclined his shoulder for burdening” (Gen. 49:14). When it came to blessing his son Naphtali, Jacob compared Naphtali to a swift gazelle, “who gives good sayings [*imrei shafer*]” (Gen. 49:21). In this essay, we will examine the words *na'im/noam* (of which *na'eimah* is an inflection) and *shapir/shefer* (of which *shafer* is an inflection) to better understand how these two ostensibly synonyms convey slightly different ideas. For example, a single verse uses both of these terms in tandem, when King David notes his satisfaction with his lot: “Portions have fallen to me in the good [*ba'neimim*] / even my inheritance has been good [*shafrah*] upon me” (Ps. 16:6).

The trilateral root SHIN-PEH-REISH in Biblical Hebrew conveys notions of “beauty,” “improvement,” and overall “goodness.” For example, a verb form of this root appears in the phrase, “By His breath the heavens were made good [*shafrah*] (Job 26:13).” Here, a cognate of *shapir* suggests an act of beautification or enhancement, describing how Hashem’s creative power perfects the heavens, making them splendid and orderly. In Biblical Aramaic, the word *shfar* appears three times (Dan. 3:32, 4:24, 6:2) in the context of a king’s approval, with something being “good” or “appropriate” in his eyes. The Aramaic term *shapir* in Babylonian Talmud discourse primarily functions as an adverb meaning “well” or “appropriately.” For example, it is used in discussions to affirm the correctness or logical validity of an argument (*ati shapir* or *shapir ka'amar*), indicating that something has been done properly or fittingly. This usage aligns with the root's association with “goodness” and “improvement,” suggesting that the matter in question meets a certain ideal standard.

As Rabbi Eliyahu Bachur documents in his work *Meturgaman*, the Targumim often use the word *shapir* or variants thereof in translating two sets of relevant Biblical Hebrew terms. The first set consists of Biblical Hebrew terms that denote “approval,” which literally translate into something being good (*tov*) in the approver’s eyes. In such cases, the Hebrew *tov* is rendered by Targum as *shapir* (see Lev. 10:20, Num. 24:1, although in some versions of the Targum, the Aramaic word used is actually *takin*). Similarly, in the context of “physical beauty,” Targum tends to translate the Biblical Hebrew words *tov* (e.g., Gen. 6:2, I Sam. 8:16, 9:2, I Kgs. 20:3) and *yafeh* (e.g., Gen. 12:11, 29:17, 41:2) into Aramaic as *shapir*.

Interestingly, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro (1935–2017) claims that the Hebrew/Aramaic word *shapir* (“good”, “bettering”, “nice”) uses the rare *shiphah* inflection. He explains that this word



shares its root with the words *tiferet/pe'er* (“glory” or “beauty”), which are traced to the root PEH-(ALEPH)-REISH. He argues that the SHIN at the beginning of *shapir* serves as a grammatical function denoting an action that leads to the creation of *pe'er*. As an aside, a popular folk etymology connects the ancient Jewish surname Shapiro/Shapira to the Hebrew word *shapir*, although historians presume that it is more plausibly derived from the name of the German town Speyer.

In his work *Yeriot Shlomo*, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim explains that the trilateral root NUN-AYIN-MEM from whence *noam* derives is itself actually a derivative of the biliteral root AYIN-MEM, plus the extra initial NUN. That two-letter root is also the etymon of the word *im* (“with”), leading Rabbi Pappenheim to explaining that one tends to bond with that which he considers “good” or “pleasant/enjoyable.” In this way, the pleasantness of *naim/noam* focuses on this rapturous property of pleasant things to which one wishes to connect. In his work *Cheshek Shlomo*, Rabbi Pappenheim offers a similar approach, further reducing the biliteral root AYIN-MEM to the monoliteral root AYIN, whose core meaning refers to “movement.” The way Rabbi Shamshon Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 5:30) explains it, *noam* relates to “movement” (NUN-AYIN) because something “pleasant” has the power to arouse/encourage/inspire a person and cause him to move towards achieving a specific goal.

From an onomastic perspective, various personal names are derived from the word *noam*, including the Biblical Hebrew names Naomi (wife of Elimelech in the Book of Ruth), Naamah (the daughter of Lemech in Gen. 4:22, and also the wife of King Solomon in I Kgs. 14:21, 14:31, and II Chron. 12:13), and Naaman (Aramean general in II Kgs. 5:2-27), as well as the Arabic name Naim and the Modern Hebrew name Noam.

Going back to Jacob’s blessings for Issachar and Naphtali, rabbinic exegesis explicates both of these blessings as references to Torah study. In other words, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* §98:12) explains that when Jacob blessed Issachar that he should view “rest” and “the land” as good (*tov* and *na'eimah*), this means that Issachar should recognize the Torah as good. The Zohar (*Vayechi* 242b) further explains that “rest” refers to the Written Torah, while “the land” refers to the Oral Torah. Likewise, when Jacob blesses Naphtali to be the one who “gives good sayings [*imrei shafer*],” the Midrash (*Midrash Shochev Tov* to Ps. 81:4) understands that this refers to spreading the Torah (in a way that is reminiscent of the English word *gospel*, which is derived from the Old English *god spell*, meaning “good message”). In fact, the Talmud (*Sotah* 13a) connects the word *shafer* with *sefer*, meaning “book” (via the interchangeability of SHIN/SIN and SAMECH), with *Midrash Aggadah* (to Gen. 49:21) adding that this means that Jacob blessed the tribe of Naphtali in that their Torah students should be especially clever.

When all said and done, it turns out that Jacob gave essentially the same blessing to both Issachar and Naphtali — that they should excel in their Torah studies. The only difference between the blessings is the verbiage used, as when giving Issachar this blessing Jacob used a cognate of *noam* and when giving Naphtali this blessing, Jacob used a cognate of the word *shapir*.

In practice, tradition teaches us that it is the Tribe of Issachar who is more associated with mastery of Torah than the Tribe of Naphtali. For example, the Bible relates that the Jewish People would consult with the Children of Issachar, who were known to have a particularly deep understanding of Torah (I Chron. 12:33). Targum pseudo-Jonathan (to Gen. 46:13) relates that the descendants of Issachar were wisemen and masters of calculations. The Talmud (*Yoma* 26a) even relates that the Torah Scholars who served as Halachic rulers generally came from the Tribe of Levi or the Tribe of Issachar.

To me, it seems that the key to understanding the difference between the fate of Naphtali and the fate of Issachar lies in the different terms Jacob used when blessing them — *noam* versus *shapir*. With that long introduction, we can now broach the question of how these two synonyms differ from one another. The question is compounded when one consults with Ibn Janach's and Radak's respective *Sefer HaShorashim*, as both of those works define both *shapir* and *noam* as *yofi*. Using the same word to define both of those terms strengthens our question as to what the difference between them ought to be. [Menachen Ibn Saruk in *Machberet Menachem* defines *shapir* as *noam*, but defines *noam* as *hadar* (“beauty”).]

Rabbi Avraham Bedersi, in his work *Chotam Tochnit* (the first known book that attempts to differentiate between synonyms in the Hebrew language), has an entry in which he treats the words *shapir* and *noam* as synonyms. He attempts at differentiating between these two terminologies by defining each of those two words with different term: he defines *noam* as *yofi* (“beauty”) and he defines *shefer* as *tov* (“good/positive”). But what exactly is he trying to say?

In reflecting on *Chotam Tochnit* — and I freely admit that I am probably reading too much into his words — it struck me that he seems to differentiate between *noam* and *shapir* in quite a profound way. While both words refer to a positive quality (“good”), I think he is trying to explain *noam* as reflecting *subjective* positivity — it speaks to “beauty” that resonates on a deeply personal and emotional level. As the cliché states, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” This concept is codified in rabbinic discourse, as the rule of the Beautiful Captive (*Eshet Yefat Toar*) applies so long as the woman taken is “beautiful” in their eyes of her Jewish captives, even if she is not objectively beautiful in the eyes of others (see *Kiddushin* 22a, *Sifrei Ki Teitzei* §211, and Ibn Ezra to Deut. 21:11). When Jacob described Issachar as recognizing the Torah as *noam*, this refers to their personal subjective in the recognition of the Torah's positive attributes (like “beauty”). By contrast, in connecting the term *shapir* with *tov*, Rabbi Bedersi seems to associate *shapir* with objective positivity — a value that is universally recognized as having a “good” disposition, regardless of one's own personal perceptions.

This distinction carries a powerful lesson about how we relate to Torah and its teachings. Both Naftali and Issachar were blessed with success in Torah, yet Issachar's success in Torah Study was decidedly greater. Why? Because Issachar experienced Torah as *subjectively* good — they felt its beauty and pleasantness on a personal level. For them, Torah was not merely an abstract ideal of universal goodness, something that might be “objectively” valuable, but still distant or external to them personally. Instead, the Issacharites internalized the Torah's teachings and allowed them to resonate with their innermost being, creating a personal connection. This dynamic invites us to reflect on the *growth mindset* — a concept foundational

to self-help literature — which emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation over extrinsic validation. To truly succeed, one must not only recognize the inherent goodness of a goal or value (the objective positivity, *shapir*), but must also experience it as personally meaningful and fulfilling (subjective positivity, *noam*).

In personal correspondence, Rabbi Shaul Goldman takes another approach to understand the distinction that *Chotam Tochnit* is getting at. Rabbi Goldman wrote that even if both terms are meant as subjective, they refer to different qualities. The way he reads Rabbi Bedersi's explanation, *noam* relates to attraction and desire — something that draws us in, that we find desirable or attractive, like “beauty.” This term applies whether or not said attraction is based on objective qualities (like how “beauty” might stem from objective facts or values, like features such as symmetry, color, or form) or entirely subjective metrics. *Shapir*, on the other hand, refers simply to overall positivity. It speaks more broadly to something being “good” or “fitting,” without necessarily carrying any sense of personal appeal or elegance.

As Rabbi Goldman explains, this becomes clear when applied to intellectual or rhetorical ideas. A strong logical argument may not always be elegant or beautiful, and an elegant or well-crafted analytical insight is not always inherently good or practical. Even when something is subjectively “good,” this does not mean that it is necessarily attractive and desirable. Something can be considered “good” —like a piece of “good advice” —even if it does not resonate with us emotionally or its implications are hard to accept.

All the different ways of explaining the phrase *imrei shefer* in the Targumim and Midrashim echo this basic understanding. Those various sources associate that phrase with “good tidings,” “thanksgiving and blessings to Hashem,” “agricultural fecundity,” “song,” “verbal cleverness” and even the *shofar* (“ram’s horn”). Together, these vastly different explanations suggest that Naftali embodies a quick mind with sharp communication skills — someone instinctively persuasive, articulate, and effective even with a hostile interlocutor.

In contrast, Issachar is portrayed as a grounded and diligent scholar, devoting himself to Torah study with consistent effort and deep focus. The metaphor of the donkey invokes the image of a surefooted, solid beast of burden, which precisely underscores Issachar's studious role: steadfast, strong, and determined. He represents the scholar who toils in deep learning, the sage who has mastered Torah knowledge, and the Halachic decisor, whose advice and insight guide others. When the Jewish People needed advice as a collective, it was the Issacharite scholar who was consulted.

While Naphtali represents the Torah rhetorician (the *darshan*, *maggid shiur*, the pulpit lecturer, or otherwise articulate cosmopolitan advocates on the speaking circuit), Issachar is the cloistered, serious scholar who finds value in labor and contentment with simplicity, embracing the peace of being satisfied with one's lot.

Rabbi Goldman takes this a step further in arguing that the origins of these two tribes further reflect their differences. Issachar was born from a deliberate and practical exchange between Leah and Rachel — a “transaction” whereby Leah traded her son's mandrakes for an extra night with Jacob (Gen. 30:14–18) — and thus represents earned reward through effort.

Naphtali, on the other hand, is the product of Rachel's prayers and struggles, as well as her passivity and quiet selflessness in offering her handmaiden Bilhah to Jacob (Gen. 30:3–9). In doing so, she was simply following the precedent of Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham as a second wife and was following what may be termed a "cultural inertia."

This distinction, whose tribe is characterized by toil, diligence, and constancy, reflects a life of purposeful action and earned achievement. His relationship with the Torah is expressed with the term *noam* ("goodness/pleasantness") that emerges through effort, the serene satisfaction of hard-won success. Naphtali, byed light on the broader contrast between Issachar and Naphtali. Issachar, contrast, represents *imrei shefer* — words of beauty and inspiration that arise not from toil, but from a place of struggle, yearning, and Divine grace. His existence is rooted in Rachel's prayerful submission and her acceptance of circumstances beyond her control. Naftali's name speaks to swiftness and lightness, a reflection of his spiritual essence: the beauty of connection to Hashem achieved not through laborious effort, but through the vulnerability of faith, trust, surrender, and the ability to quickly adapt to one's circumstances.

חזק חזק ונתחזק - סיימנו ספר בראשית

---

## TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

---

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

*"Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance." (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)*

### **INHERITANCE OF THE FIRSTBORN** **Mitzvah #400 (Devarim 21:15-17)**

According to the Torah's inheritance laws, a firstborn son receives a double portion. This means that if there are three sons, the inheritance is divided into four portions, and the older son receives two. The Torah prohibits the father from transferring the firstborn's right to another son.

*Abarbanel* states two reasons for these laws. The first reason is that all firsts are beloved by Hashem. This is also the reason for the mitzvah of *bikurim* (first fruits). To elaborate, all firsts allude to Hashem, Who is the quintessential first. Hashem therefore sanctified firstborns, and one of the elements of this sanctity is his right to a double inheritance (see also *Baal HaTurim* and *Hagahos HaGra* to *Orach Chaim* 480:1).

A second reason is that a person loves his children because they will continue after him, and he especially loves his firstborn son, whose birth initiated that continuation. It is therefore fitting for him to be distinguished from the brothers with a double portion (see also *Taamei HaMitzvos* by Rav Menachem HaBavli §1).

*Ateres Moshe* (*Ki Savo* §13) writes that the double portion comes from the brothers' portions. They have to give the firstborn an extra portion because of their obligation to honor their oldest brother.

Alternatively, we may suggest that the double portion of the firstborn son stems from the fact that while a father may have many sons who continue after him, his position can only be filled by one person, and the oldest son is most eligible for this. For example, kingship passes from father to firstborn son. Even when the father does not have a position that may be filled by the firstborn son, the firstborn son generally fills the role of family leader in his father's absence. He therefore deserves a portion like all the brothers, plus an additional portion as the continuation of the father (see also *Otzar Ephraim* to *Bamidbar* 1:5). By giving him fully double of that received by any of the other brothers, the father distinguishes him clearly as the family leader after his passing. The role of the firstborn as the father's successor is essential to the family's continued stability (*Rav Hirsch*). We may further suggest that the Torah forbids transferring this right to another son out of the concern that this transfer will not be accepted by the firstborn, and this would spark a feud after the father's passing.

In *Parashas Vayechi*, Yaakov transferred the firstborn portion from Reuven to Yosef. Several commentators (*Daas Zekeinim*, *Rosh*, and *Sforno*) explain that this was an exception to the rule because Reuven sinned in the incident of Bilhah and became unworthy of the firstborn right (see *Bava Basra* 133b). Yaakov transferred it to Yosef, who provided for him in Egypt.

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](mailto: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.

©1992-2025 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.

---

# INSIGHTS INTO HALACHA

---

## 5785 – The Rarest Year of Them All Part V

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

As detailed in previous installments in our series, our current year, 5785, is not only a rare one, but calendarically speaking, actually the hands-down **rarest** of them all. 5785 is classified as a *HaSh" A* year in our calendars. This abbreviation is referring to Rosh Hashana falling out on Thursday (*hei*), both months of Cheshvan and Kislev being *shalem* (*shin* - 30 day months instead of possibly 29; these are the only months that can switch off in our set calendar), and Pesach falling out on Sunday (*aleph*).

A *HaSh" A* year is the rarest of years, and out of the 14 possibilities in *Tur's* 247-year calendar cycle, this year type occurs on average only once in about 30.19 years (approximately 3.3 percent of the time). Indeed, at times there are 71 years (!) in between *HaSh" A* years. The last time this year type occurred was 31 years ago in 5754 / 1994. The next time will be 20 years hence in 5805 / 2044. The next several times after that are slated to be 27 years further, in 5832 / 2071 and then a 51 year gap in 5883 / 2122.

The reasons and rules governing the whys and whens this transpires are too complicated for this discussion; suffice to say that when the *Mishnah Berurah* discusses these issues he writes “*ain kan makom l'ha'arich*,” that this is not the place to expound in detail, which is certainly good enough for this author.

Obviously, such a rare calendar year will contain many rare occurrences. This series article sets out to detail many of them. Perhaps as we get nearer to the actual events, we will discuss them in greater detail. Let's continue on our journey through our unique year.

### **Fasting on Friday?**

A fascinating characteristic of 5785 is that the *Taanis Tzibbur* of *Asarah B'Teves* will fall out on a Friday – for the second year in a row. The status of a communal Friday fast is actually exclusive to *Asarah B'Teves* – as it is the only one that we do actually observe as a communal fast on a Friday. Proof to this, perhaps is from the words of Yechezkel HaNavi referring to *Asarah B'Teves* that the siege of Yerushalayim leading up to the destruction of the first Beis HaMikdash transpired “*B'Etzem HaYom HaZeh*” (*Yechezkel* Ch. 24:2), implying that the fast must always be observed on that exact day, no matter the conflicting occurrence. This would explain why it is fully observed on Friday, with no dispensation given. [Although technically speaking, if other fasts (with the possible exception of *Taanis Esther*) would fall out on Friday, an impossibility in our calendar, we would also have to fast.]

This is fairly interesting as there is a whole debate in the *Gemara* (*Eiruvin* 41a) about how to conduct fasts on a Friday, when we must also take *kavod Shabbos* into account, implying that it is a common occurrence. However, as mentioned according to our calendar, a communal Friday fast is only applicable with *Asarah B'Teves*, and it does happen quasi-frequently.

The last few times *Asarah B'Teves* fell out on a Friday were in 1996, 2001, 2010, 2013, 2020; and last year, 2023 (5784). This means that with *Asarah B'Teves* falling out on Friday again, this year has a rare back-to-back Friday Fast of *Asarah B'Teves*. According to calendar expert R' Yosef Yehuda Weber, author of '*Understanding the Jewish Calendar*,' this 'two year in a row' Friday Fast occurs on average only once every 51.75 years. The last time this occurred was 51 years ago (5733 and 5734 / 1972 and 1973), and the next time we will have such an occurrence will be in another 47 years (5831 and 5832 / December 2070 and January 2072).

In another interesting calendrical twist, but not the Jewish calendar, due to the differences between the Jewish lunar-based year and the Gregorian solar-based year, there will actually be two fasts of *Asarah B'Teves* occurring in 2025. The first will be on January 10<sup>th</sup> and the second (*Asarah B'Teves* 5786) will be Dec. 30<sup>th</sup>. Not so odd, but often, if the following year is a leap year, then sometimes *Asarah B'Teves* does not occur at all in a solar year.

The next few times that *Asarah B'Teves* is slated to fall out on Friday are in another nine years, in 2034 (5795) and several years later, in 2037 (5798).

### ***Halachos of a Friday Fast***

The *halachos* of a Friday fast generally parallel those of a regular fast day. In fact, even though there is some debate in the *Rishonim* as to the *Gemara's* intent that "*Halacha – Mesaneh U'Mashlim*, a Friday fast should be completed" whether or not one may be *mekabel Shabbos* early and thereby end the fast before nightfall, nonetheless, the *halacha* follows the *Shulchan Aruch* and *Rema* (O.C. 249:4) that since *Asarah B'Teves* is a public fast (*Taanis Tzibbur*) and not a *Taanis Yachid* (personal fast), one must fast the whole day and complete it at nightfall (*Tzeis HaKochavim*) before making *Kiddush*.

There are many *Poskim* who maintain that it is preferable to *daven Maariv* earlier than usual on such a Friday night, to enable making *Kiddush*, and breaking the fast exactly at *Tzeis HaKochavim*. Although *Asarah B'Teves* occurring on a Friday is not so rare, nonetheless, for it to occur in our rare year, and especially as a back-to-back Erev Shabbos *Asarah B'Teves*, is in this author's opinion, simply extraordinary.

Our fascinating journey detailing the many remarkable facets of our rare year will IY"Y be continued...

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch famously wrote that "the Jew's catechism is his calendar." It is this author's wish that by showcasing the uniqueness of our calendar year and its rare *minhagim*, this series will help raise appreciation of them and our fascinating calendrical customs.

*This author wishes to thank R' Yosef Yehuda Weber, author of 'Understanding the Jewish Calendar,' for being a fount of calendrical knowledge and for his assistance with this series.*