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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead

“And he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and you have prevailed.’” (Bereishet 32:29)

“*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*”, the National Theatre in London, 1967: I’d never seen anything as witty, brilliant and funny in my life.

The playwright, Tom Stoppard, has died at age 88. Czech-born Stoppard was often hailed as the greatest British playwright of his generation, garlanded with honors. His brain-teasing plays ranged across Shakespeare, science, philosophy and the historic tragedies of the 20th century. Five of his works won Tony Awards for best play.

Stoppard was born Tomáš Stráussler in 1937 to a Jewish family in Zlín, then Czechoslovakia. His stage breakthrough, “*Rosencrantz...*” reimagined Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” from the viewpoint of two hapless minor characters. It was a mix of tragedy and absurdist humor.

Some critics found Stoppard’s plays more clever than emotionally engaging. But many of his plays contained a “sense of underlying grief.” His biographer Hermione Lee said, “*People in his plays... history comes at them... They turn up, they don’t know why they’re there, they don’t know whether they can get home again. They’re often in exile, they can barely remember their own name. They may have been wrongfully incarcerated. They may have some terrible moral dilemma that they don’t know how to solve. They may have lost someone. And over and over again I think you get that sense of loss and longing in these very funny, witty plays.*”

I was thinking, how very Jewish!

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead turns this world into a corridor of entrances and exits — characters stepping into scenes without knowing from where they came or to where they go. We appear suddenly, we depart abruptly, and in between we stumble through meaning, laughter, fear, absurdity. But a Jew understands what the play suggests beneath the humor: what looks like disappearance is transition. What feels like exile is corridor. **This world is the backstage, not the stage.**

Yaakov crosses the river at Yabok and wrestles with the angel of Eisav till dawn. Yaakov is struck by the angel, yet the angel is forced to crown Yaakov with a new name. The exit from “Yaakov” becomes the entrance into “Yisrael”. The wound becomes covenant. The night becomes the morning.

So, too, our lives. We think we are leaving. In truth, we are entering. Stoppard, son of a people who have crossed more rivers than any nation in history, unwittingly gave expression to that quiet truth: behind endings stand beginnings. Behind loss — birth. Behind this world — the next. Never remotely religious, Stoppard’s unwitting world view was summed up in his immortal line which could have been, *l’havdil*, a quote from our Sages:

"Every exit is an entrance somewhere else."

May we walk like Yaakov with the courage to cross, with the faith to see doorways where others see walls, and with the knowledge that every exit is only the first step into forever.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Returning home, Yaakov sends angelic messengers to appease his brother Esav. The messengers return, telling Yaakov that Esav is approaching with an army 400 strong. Yaakov takes the strategic precautions of dividing the camps, praying for assistance, and sending tribute to mollify Esav. Yaakov is left alone that night, wrestles - and defeats - the Angel of Esav, yet emerges with an injured sinew in his thigh, which is why the Torah prohibits eating the sciatic nerve of a kosher animal. The angel tells Yaakov that his future name will be Yisrael, signifying that he has prevailed against man (Lavan) and the supernatural (the angel). Yaakov and Esav meet and are reconciled; but still fearful of his brother, Yaakov rejects Esav’s offer to travel together.

Shechem, a Canaanite prince, abducts and violates Yaakov’s daughter Dina. In return for Dina’s hand in marriage, the prince and his father suggest that Yaakov and his family intermarry and enjoy the fruits of Canaanite prosperity. Yaakov’s sons feign agreement, yet they stipulate that all the males of the city must undergo *brit milah*. Two of Dina’s brothers, Shimon and Levi, enter the town and handily execute all the males, who were weakened by the circumcision. Their action is justified by the city’s tacit complicity in the abduction of their sister. G-d commands Yaakov to go to Beit-El and build an altar. His mother Rivka’s nurse, Devorah, dies and is buried below Beit-El. G-d appears again to Yaakov, blesses him and changes his name to Yisrael. While traveling, Rachel goes into labor and gives birth to Binyamin, the twelfth of the Tribes of Israel. She dies in childbirth and is buried on the road to Beit Lechem. Yaakov builds a monument to her. Yitzchak passes away at age 180 and is buried by his sons. The *parsha* concludes by listing Esav’s descendants.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Mevarchim HaChodesh
Blessing the New Month (Part 5)

*“The greatest darkness comes just before dawn –
but most people give up one minute before the light.”*
Ba'al Shem Tov

Mevarchim HaChodesh continues with an announcement about when the new month will begin. The day, hour and “chalakim” (fractions of an hour) of the “molad” – the moment that marks the beginning of the new month – are announced.

The Exodus from Egypt took place in the year 2448 from Creation, corresponding to the year 1312 BCE. Immediately before the Jewish People left, Hashem commanded us the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh (see *Shemot 12:1-2*). *Kiddush HaChodesh*, the sanctification of the new month, is actually the very first mitzvah given to the Jewish Nation by Hashem.

Kiddush HaChodesh symbolizes our partnership with Hashem in creating the yearly cycles: The Torah mandates the date of Yom Tov, for example, but only through our active participation in declaring each new month can every Yom Tov be celebrated in its correct time.

Truly amazing, however, is the extraordinary accuracy of the calculations that create each new month of our calendar. From the very beginning, our Sages understood that the length of a lunar month was exactly 29 days, 12 hours, and 793 “*chalakim*”. What are “*chalakim*”?

According to Jewish Tradition, hours are divided, not into sixty-minute units, but rather into 1080 “*chalakim*”. Each individual “*chelek*” is thus slightly more than three seconds.

Amazing indeed! What this means is that over three thousand three hundred years ago, we knew that each month was exactly 29 days 12 hours, 44 minutes and a little more than 3 seconds! Such precision is breathtaking, but when one factors in the realization that counting seconds became a practical reality only in the sixteenth century with the invention of mechanical clocks, it is positively astonishing. The established and absolute definition of a second was only conclusively finalized by the International System of Units in 1967, yet such exactitude has been ingrained within our calculations for thousands of years.

What makes this accuracy even more remarkable is that, at around the same time that the International System of Units was quantifying a second, NASA - using precision satellite measurements - were in the process of determining the precise length of a lunar month. NASA's final figure was 29.530588 days. Which is almost exactly the same figure as our Sages reached thousands of years earlier of 29.53059 days!

Pondering this pinpoint accuracy of the Jewish calendar, it actually becomes quite a mystery why we have a reputation for somewhat unreliable time keeping. This tendency is referred to, tongue-in-cheek, as “Jewish Standard Time”, with its own entry in Wiktionary! *“A notional system of time or time zone...which the Jewish people sometimes jocularly ascribe to themselves, to account for their supposed tendency to be leisurely, not rigorous about scheduling, and often tardy. (en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Jewish_Standard_time)”*

Of course, we have learnt to use “Jewish Standard Time” to our benefit over the generations.

There is a famous joke told about three friends, one French, one Italian and one Jewish, who have been found guilty and sentenced to death for anti-government agitation in Soviet Russia. On their last day they are offered a last meal, immediately after which they will be executed. Pierre, the Frenchman, asks for a fresh baguette and camembert cheese washed down with a glass of champagne. Luigi, the Italian, requests a margherita pizza and a glass of chianti. Moshe, the Jew, asks for a plate of strawberries.

“Strawberries?” his jailors ask him incredulously.

“Yes,” replies Moshe, “strawberries.”

“But they are out of season.”

“No problem,” replies Moshe, “I’ll wait...”

To be continued...

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Contributing authors, editors and production team: Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz - Rav of Kehillos Ohr Somayach, 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. Rachel Sagiv, Rabbi Reuven Subar.

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TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

WASHING HANDS

When *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) enacted the mitzvah to wash hands, a Heavenly voice proclaimed, "My son [Shlomo] is wise, and My heart is glad" (see *Shabbos* 14b). Let us explore some of the wisdom behind this mitzvah.

Shlomo Hamelech obligated washing hands before partaking in sacrificial meats, which must be eaten in a state of bodily purity and sanctity. The basis for this mitzvah is that hands are always “busy” and one may have inadvertently touched something impure. The Sages expanded this mitzvah to include an obligation for *kohanim* to wash before eating *terumah* foods, which must likewise be eaten in purity and sanctity. They enacted this for bread only, because most *terumah* is eaten in the form of bread. The Sages later expanded the obligation to include all bread eaten by any Jew, whether kohen or *Israelite*, as a safeguard for *terumah* (*Rambam* and *Raavad*, *Shaar Avos HaTumah* 8:8; *Mishnah Berurah* 158:1).

We also wash hands for cleanliness and sanctity (*ibid.*). These are related concepts because being holy includes being clean and sanitary (*Yere'im* §434). The Sages derive this from the verse “*Sanctify yourselves and be holy*” (*Vayikra* 11:44). “*Sanctify yourselves*” means to wash hands before eating as a preparation to eat in sanctity; “*be holy*” means to wash hands again after eating (*Berachos* 53b). When a person sanctifies himself by washing his hands, his eating is compared to an angel eating (*Zohar Chadash*, *Rus* 46a). The Sages required this only for bread because bread is the mainstay of a proper meal and therefore warrants a special enactment of cleanliness and sanctity (*Shaar HaTzion* §3). It has been noted that washing before eating also prevents the spread of disease and is said to be one reason why the Jewish people were less affected by the Black Plague.

Before *Birkat HaMazon*, even if one’s hands appear clean, they must still be washed until the second knuckle to remove unseen salt that could potentially harm the eyes, as well as for Kabbalistic reasons. There is an opposing view that one need not wash his hands before *Birkas HaMazon* on account of salt. One following this view must nevertheless wash his fingers if they are not clean and the uncleanness bothers him (see *Mishnah Berurah* 181:1 and 10).

* * *

Let us explore this mitzvah on a deeper level. A Jew rises in the morning with a pure soul and straightaway engages in the purifying activity of prayer. As the day progresses, however, one’s involvement with this world gradually blackens the purity of his soul. Even traveling to work exposes a person to sights and sounds that may run counter to the foundations of the Torah. The three daily prayers help reconnect us with Hashem and purify our souls (see *Kuzari* 3:5).

Based on this, we suggest as follows: Just as there is a concern that one's "busy hands" may have become contaminated through contact with something impure prior to a meal, there is also a concern that one's involvement in matters of this world may have diminished his purity. Now, eating is a physical act and can therefore be detrimental to the soul. For example, if one eats for pleasure, the way animals eat, it may influence him a bit to think like an animal. But if a person intends to refresh himself and maintain his health so that he can serve Hashem, his eating becomes the sacrificial service, and his food is like an offering (*Ruach HaChaim* 3:3). If serving Hashem is not a person's sole intention, it should at least be a primary intention.

It is therefore improper to sit down and eat immediately after being involved with earthly matters that have a negative influence on the mind. The solution is to sanctify oneself before eating by washing hands. Not only does this remove impurity contracted by contact with something impure, but it also reminds a person to eat in sanctity, or at least like a *mentch*.

We enhance each meal with words of Torah, which indicate that the meal is being eaten for Hashem's sake. The table is then called "*a table in Hashem's presence*" (*Avos* 3:3 with *Areshes Sefasai*). The fact that Hashem is present makes the need for prior sanctification even greater.

Regardless of the purity of a person's intentions, a physical act like eating will invariably draw him toward physicality to some extent. Following the same approach, we suggest that washing our fingers after eating not only cleanses them of food but also sanctifies a person on the inside and prepares him to recite *Birkas HaMazon* with a pure heart. Thus, with water and a little thought, we turn the physical activity of eating into a means of becoming holy and serving Hashem.

Q & A

Questions:

1. What sort of messengers did Yaakov send to Esav?
2. Why was Yaakov both "afraid" and "distressed?"
3. In what three ways did Yaakov prepare for his encounter with Esav?
4. Where did Dina hide and why?
5. After helping his family across the river, Yaakov remained alone on the other side. Why?
6. What was the angel forced to do before Yaakov agreed to release him?
7. What was it that healed Yaakov's leg?
8. Why did Esav embrace Yaakov?
9. Why did Yosef stand between Esav and Rachel?
10. Give an exact translation of the word *nisa* in verse 33:12.
11. What happened to the 400 men who accompanied Esav?
12. Why does the Torah refer to Dina as the daughter of Leah and not as the daughter of Yaakov?
13. Whom should Shimon and Levi have consulted concerning their plan to kill the people of Shechem?
14. Who was born along with Binyamin?
15. What does the name Binyamin mean? Why did Yaakov call him that?
16. Why does the Torah state "*The sons of Yaakov were twelve*"?
17. How old was Yaakov when Yosef was sold?
18. Esav changed his wife's name to Yehudit. Why?
19. What three categories of people have their sins pardoned?
20. What is the connection between the Egyptian oppression of the Jewish People and Esav's decision to leave the land of Canaan?

Answers:

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

1. 32:4 - Angels.
2. 32:8 - He was *afraid* he would be killed. He was *distressed* that he might need to kill.
3. 32:9 - He sent gifts, he prayed, and he prepared for war.
4. 32:23 - Yaakov hid Dina in a chest so that Esav wouldn't see her and want to marry her.
5. 32:25 - He went back to get some small containers he had forgotten.
6. 32:27 - Admit that the blessings given by Yitzchak rightfully belong to Yaakov.
7. 32:32 - The shining of the sun.
8. 33:4 - His mercy was aroused when he saw Yaakov bowing to him so many times.
9. 33:7 - To stop Esav from gazing at her.
10. 33:12 - It means "travel". (It does not mean "*we will travel*." This is because the letter 'nun' is part of the word and does not mean 'we' as it does in other contexts.)
11. 33:16 - They slipped away one by one.
12. 34:1 - Because she was outgoing like her mother, Leah.
13. 34:25 - Their father, Yaakov.
14. 35:17 - Two sisters (i.e., Rachel had triplets)
15. 35:18 - *Ben-Yemin* means "Son of the South." Binyamin was the only son of Yaakov born in the Land of Israel, which is south of *Aram Naharaim*.
16. 35:22 - To stress that all of them, including Reuven, were righteous.
17. 35:29 - One hundred and eight.
18. 36:2 - To fool Yitzchak into thinking that she had abandoned idolatry.
19. 36:3 - One who converts to Judaism, one who is elevated to a position of leadership, and one who marries.
20. 36:6 - Esav knew that the privilege of living in the Land of Israel was accompanied by the prophecy that the Jews would be "*foreigners in a land not their own*." Therefore Esav said, "I'm leaving. I don't want the Land if it means I have to pay the bill of subjugation in Egypt."