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PARSHA INSIGHTS

AN HISTORICAL BACKWATER

“And it was in the days of Amrafel, king of Shinar...” (14:1)

In the middle of this week’s Torah reading, the Torah seems to make a detour into the backwaters of Canaanite political history. For an entire chapter of 25 verses the Torah describes a war between the four kings and the five kings. Ostensibly, these events have little to do with the story of Avraham and the genesis of the Jewish People.

Or maybe there is more here than meets the eye.

The four kings and the five kings represent two inimical world-views.

The four kings represent a world-view where everything in creation is subsumed under the ‘forces of nature.’ This view holds that there is nothing else in this world except this world. Four always denotes ‘this-worldliness’. There are four points of the compass. We speak of the ‘four winds’. The world is composed of four ‘elements’: earth, wind, fire, and water. The letter *dalet* which has the numerical value of four consists of two lines at right angles to each other, suggesting the four points of the compass.

You can look at this world as being no more than what can be contained within this world — within the four directions, the four winds, and the four elements. Or you can look deeper and higher and see that this world is focused on an Existence beyond this world. This is the world-view represented by the five kings.

Five in Hebrew is represented by the letter *heh*. If you look at the letter *heh* you will see that it is composed of the letter *dalet* (the letter which stands for four and all it signifies) plus the letter *yud*. *Yud* is a unique letter. It is the only letter that doesn’t touch the line on which you write. It is no more than the smallest of dots floating above the

line. The letter *heh* is a pictogram of this world focused and revolving around that which is above this world — the *dalet* (the “four” of this world) with the *yud* at its axis.

Avraham fought on behalf of the five kings against the four kings. Avraham was the first person to look at this world and see that there was an Existence beyond that which is contained in this world. If there was a ‘manor’, there had to be a ‘Lord of the manor.’

After Avram fought the war against the four kings, G-d added a letter to his name. Not surprisingly, that letter was the letter *heh*. For Avraham represents all that the *heh* represents, that this world revolves around a Higher Existence.

It was also after the war against the four kings that G-d made a covenant with Avraham, the covenant of *Brit Mila*. *Brit Mila* represents the sublimation of the physical to the metaphysical. It signifies that the human body is only complete when we dedicate it to its Maker.

The natural cycle of this world is seven. There are seven days in the week, seven notes in the scale, and seven colors in the rainbow. *Brit Mila* is performed on the eighth day because it symbolizes the dedication of the physical to that which is above the physical.

Just a little war between four kings and five kings. Just a little backwater historical chapter in the Canaanite history books.

*Sources: An Historical Backwater
by Rabbi Eliezer Breitowitz in the name of
the Maharal of Prague as heard from Rabbi C. Z. Senter*

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Ten generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to the inescapable Truth of G-d's existence, and thus merits that G-d appear to him. At the beginning of this week's *Parsha*, G-d tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where G-d will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants and those whom they converted to faith in G-d. When they reach the land of Canaan, G-d appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants. A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty would cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to Pharaoh, but G-d afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues, and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to *Eretz Yisrael* (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in the fertile plain of the Jordan. A war breaks

out between the kings of the region, and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs from accepting any of the spoils of the battle. In a prophetic covenant, G-d reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to *Eretz Yisrael*, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian hand-maiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel Hagar returns to Avram and gives birth to Yishmael. The *Parsha* concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a covenant between G-d and his seed. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. G-d promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham's being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and all his household.

ISRAEL Forever

A DOUBLE SIGNIFICANCE

“He built there an altar to G-d and invoked G-d by Name.” (*Bereishet* 12:8) In the description found in this week's Torah portion of the entry of Avraham into *Eretz Yisrael*, we find a double significance in the action of our Patriarch.

Rashi, based on the translation of Onkelos, defines his action as prayer. He explains that Avraham prayed at the site where a great sin would someday be committed by one of his descendants in the hope that his prayer would spare the nation from catastrophe.

In his commentary, Ramban interprets Avraham's action

as preaching to people in order to attract converts to monotheism.

How great is the significance of Avraham's prayer and preaching for our own generation! The merits of our forefathers have a lasting impact and will hopefully protect our people from any danger despite our faults. Our own great merit of reaching out to Jews to bring them closer to G-d is modeled on the highly successful efforts of Avraham in outreach.

May prayer and outreach combine to secure Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PLACES

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

TWO MOUNTAINS – ONE MESSAGE

Our ancestors were commanded that after crossing the Jordan River and entering their promised land they would gather at the site of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. Six tribes ascended one mountain and six the other while in the valley between them stood the Kohanim, Levites and the Holy Ark.

The Levites would first face Mount Gerizim and announce the blessing that would be bestowed upon those who refrained from committing a certain sin. All twelve



tribes would offer a chorus of “Amen”. Then the Levites would turn to Mount Eival and declare the curse that would be visited upon one who committed that sin. Once again all joined in the saying of “Amen”.

This procedure was repeated for a dozen different sins. The one message that came forth from these two mountains was that it was up to every Jew to choose between bringing a blessing or curse upon himself.

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. What benefits did G-d promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?
8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites". How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "palit" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "ma'aser" specifically to Malki-Tzedek?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did G-d indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace"?
17. How did G-d fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age"?
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when G-d appeared to him?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

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

1. 12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. 12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. 12:5 - People they converted to the worship of G-d.
4. 12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.
5. 12:8 - He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.
6. 12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.
7. 13:7 - Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.
8. 14:1 - Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.
9. 14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.
10. 14:13 - He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.
11. 14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.
12. 14:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.
13. 14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.
14. 14:23 - Hashem had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's king to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."
15. 15:13 - With the birth of Yitzchak.
16. 15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.
17. 15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.
18. 15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.
19. 16:1 - Pharaoh.
20. 17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.

- Donating to the Sanctuary in generous fashion
- Sanctifying an inherited or purchased field
- What is included in sale of a ship
- The sea stories of the Sage Rabbah
- The adventures of the Sage Rabbah bar Bar Chanah
- Sea visions of other Sages
- All about the Leviathan

- Rabbi Yochanan and his skeptical listener
- The canopies of Gan Eden and of the World to Come
- The dimensions of Yerushalayim
- How is the sale of a ship finalized
- How loan documents can be transferred
- What is included in sale of a wagon or mules
- Are its saddle or offspring included in the sale of a donkey

A STRAND OF SAND

“Do you not fear me, says G-d, will you not tremble at My presence, Who has placed the sand as the boundary of the sea as an eternal order that it cannot be passed?” (Yirmiyahu 5:22)

This passage is quoted in our *gemara* in relation to a mystical report by the Sage Rabbah about a dialogue between two giant waves.

“Tell me if there is anything, my friend, which you have not yet flooded,” said one wave to another, “so that I can go and destroy it.”

To which the other wave replied:

“Take note of the power of your Master Who has made it impossible to pass over one thin strand of sand.”

The commentaries explain that the first wave had the illusion that because it had reached great heights it had broken through the barrier of beach which had been created to contain it. The above-mentioned passage is cited as support of the second wave’s response that it has no permission to pass that boundary.

In a homiletic sense the waves of the sea symbolize the nations of the world who attempt to destroy the Jewish people. Although some of them reach great heights and imagine that they have destroyed us, history bears witness that no wave has succeeded in doing so, and we know that they never will, because Heaven has placed a strand of sand to protect us forever.

• Bava Batra 73a

What the SAGES Say

“Three are called by the Name of G-d: the righteous, Mashiach and Yerushalayim.”

• Rabbi Yochanan - Bava Batra 75b

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Who is Like Unto Your People Israel, One Nation on Earth

BY DAVID SIEGEL

This is a true story. I am the narrator. It was the custom of our Gemara shiur at Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem to take the train up north to the sleepy seaside town of Zichron Yaakov every couple of months for a long weekend retreat.

This was the old Jerusalem-Tel Aviv line, now abandoned. Twice a day, the train chugged indolently through the Judean mountains, winding its way along wadis filled with wildflowers overseen by hawks circling far above. The Jerusalem train station was an ornate arcade designed by the Turks in their waning years of empire.

The ride to Tel Aviv took about an hour and a half. By bus the ride was 45 minutes, by car, half an hour. An old joke said you could step off the first carriage, pick a bouquet of flowers, and step back on the train with time to spare. Although preposterously cheap, the timeworn train always made its leisurely run near-empty.

Almost always, that is.

The Thursday we had scheduled for our Zikaron Yaakov excursion turned out to be “Jerusalem Day,” when the country celebrates the capture and reunification of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War.

The normally tranquil and placid train was filled to overflowing with raucous Israeli teenagers enjoying the day off from high school. Each three-seater couch was occupied by one prone teenager. Cigarette haze filled the cars. Transistor radios cackled and screeched. The chatter was like an awesome aviary. Bubble gum popped and snapped.

After some informal negotiation, the guys in our shiur managed to carve out a niche in the corner of the last car. We said the brief travel-prayer, cracked open our Gemaras, and settled down to learn.

Suddenly we looked up to see a disheveled teenage kid standing over us. “Do you guys learn in Yeshivah?” he inquired. “Yes,” we nodded. “Do you put on Tefillin?” he continued. “Yes, we put on Tefillin,” we replied. Do you have Tefillin here with you?” he pressed on. Wondering where this was leading, we said yes, we did — we put them on once a day and needed them for tomorrow. “I’d like to put on Tefillin. Would you lend me a pair?” he concluded.

This unusual request provoked a heated argument among us. Their high degree of sanctity requires Tefillin to be treated with extreme respect. They cannot be worn when one’s body is soiled or even while thinking unclean thoughts. Most

of the shiur thought that lending Tefillin to this secular high school kid risked debasing them and making a laughing-stock of this precious Mitzvah.

Rachamim, an Iranian immigrant who lived in New York and joined the Yeshiva for the summers, thought differently. “I’ll lend you my Tefillin,” he told the kid, “on condition that you respect their sanctity and follow all the Halachic guidelines.” The kid agreed. The Halachic guidelines meant he had to wash his hands in running water, wear a kippa, say the *beracha*, lay both the head and hand Tefillin properly, and recite *divrei keddusha* while wearing them. The kid disappeared, and returned in a flash holding his hands aloft, dripping with water. (The facilities in the train did not include hand towels!) Rachamim lent him a kippa, showed him how to put on the Tefillin, and taught him the *beracha*.

From the moment the kid returned with his dripping hands in the air, the party-atmosphere in the train transmuted into total silence. Dozens of pairs of teenage eyes followed his every move. The word went out and the entire trainload of kids migrated to our car. All you could hear over the clickety-click of the rails was our kid’s soft sobs as he recited the Shema.

Then an even more remarkable thing happened. All of the boys in the train formed a line behind our kid. Each asked to put on Tefillin! Rachamim had his hands full. For the next two hours the cacophony of music, chatter and bubblegum ceased. One after another the boys washed their hands, put on the kippa, said the *beracha*, put on the Tefillin, and recited the Shema.

Afterwards the kids asked us to explain the meaning of the Mitzvah of Tefillin. I volunteered and gave them a brief lesson. I explained that Tefillin contain the four sacred parchments from the Torah in which the Mitzvah of Tefillin is mentioned. We wear them on our weaker arm to show that His is the power. They are jewelry given to us by HaKadosh Baruch Hu to show His love for us.

Rav Nachman bar Yitshak said to Rav Hiya bar Avin, “What is written in the Tefillin of the Master of the World?” He replied (Shmuel I, 7:23) “And who is like unto your People Israel, one nation on earth.” (Berachot 6a).

David Siegel is an alumnus of Ohr Somayach Yeshiva in Jerusalem, 1985. He is currently attached to a Kollel in Jerusalem’s Old City. He has edited and published from manuscripts original works by Rabbi Elazar ben Yehuda of Worms, known as the “Rokeah” after his Halachic classic of that title.

MOVING THE MOURNER

Question: When I pay a condolence call to a secular co-worker who suffered a tragic bereavement, I see it as an opportunity to inspire him to become more observant. I am concerned, however, that my effort may be misinterpreted as blaming his tragedy on his sinful behavior. What is the right thing to do?

Answer: Your intention is admirable but caution is indeed required. Under no circumstances can you link the suffering of the mourner to his own guilt. This is termed “hurting with

words” by the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 58b), for it is like rubbing salt on a wound.

What you should try to do is point out that the mourner can do a big favor for the soul of the deceased by seeing that *kaddish* is recited for him and by giving charity in his memory. By thus inspiring him to take these first small steps on behalf of his loved one you may succeed in seeing him continue to grow in his observance, especially if you continue to encourage him in the future.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY _____

FIVE-MINUTE INVESTMENT

Walking along a street in Tel Aviv an observant Jew decided to try his luck at bringing a secular resident of the bustling metropolis closer to his Jewish roots. He courteously stopped a passerby and offered to study some Torah with him for five minutes.

To his pleasant surprise the fellow responded that he was interested in the offer and even invited him into his nearby home. Together they learned some *Chumash*, and when the five minutes were up our hero got up to leave.

“Wait”, said his host. “If we already studied together I would like you to give your blessing to me and my wife who

have been married many years and have not yet been blessed with children.”

“Who am I to give you a blessing which will bring you the fulfillment of your wish!” was the humble response. “But what I can do is give you a suggestion that will help. Invite some of your neighbors and friends to participate in a weekly Torah shiur in your home and I will supply the teachers. In the merit of such an initiative you will be blessed.”

The offer was accepted, the shiur became a regular event for many years and the hosting couple was soon blessed with their first child.

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