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PARSHA INSIGHTS

SOLITAIRE

“Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.” (23:9)

A man jumps off the top of the Empire State building. As he is plunging downward as 33 ft. per second squared, someone sticks his head out of the window on the 29th floor and yells to him “Are you okay?” Smiling, he shouts back “So far, so good!”

America has proved a home of unparalleled acceptance for the Jewish People. The United States has the merit of supporting enormous amounts of Torah scholarship. However, the rampant assimilation that is also a facet of American life should give us pause. We cannot afford to sit back and say “So far, so good.”

The Jewish People are, in essence, an entity that exists in solitude. They are removed from the rest of society because they are essentially different from the other nations. Like oil and water, they cannot mix. And when they seem to mix, the eventual separation is violent and tragic in direct proportion to the desire to blend into the melting-pot. The Jews of Germany proclaimed their undying loyalty to a Germany that killed and tortured them. It took the horror of the gas chambers to serve as a reminder that Berlin was not

Jerusalem.

In this week’s weekly Torah portion we find a hint to the solitary nature of the Jewish People: *“Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.”* The Hebrew word in this sentence for ‘It is’ is *hen*. *Hen* consists of two letters, *heh* and *nun*. The gematria (numerical equivalent) of *heh* is five. Five is a unique number. It dwells alone. It has no partner other than itself. In the series of numbers from one to nine, all other numbers will combine with a different number to make ten. One and nine. Two and eight. And so on. However, five combines only with itself. It dwells alone and can only combine with itself to reach ten.

The Jewish People are, in essence, an entity that exists in solitude.

Similarly, the letter *nun* is exactly halfway through the extended Hebrew alphabet of twenty-seven letters. *Nun* is letter 13. If you pair the first letter with the last, the second with the penultimate letter, and so on, each letter will have a partner. Until you come to the 13th letter. The *heh* and the *nun* are like the Jewish People. A nation that dwells alone.

• Source: Rabbi Menachem Nissel

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilam arrives, King

Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

Bnei Yisrael begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

ISRAEL Forever

A NATION THAT DWELLS ALONE

At a time when Israel finds itself in virtual isolation from the rest of the world because of the Palestinian state controversy, we can only reflect on what we will be reading in this week's Torah portion.

"A nation that dwells alone" was the way the evil prophet Bilaam described the nation he was hired to curse, "and it will not be reckoned among the nations."

The Midrash interprets this as a prophecy regarding Israel's mission to remain apart from the nations of the world in order to avoid being corrupted by their influence.

Perhaps the political isolation from which Israel is suffering should serve as a reminder that Jews must avoid assimilating into the world community and strive to preserve their sense of sacred mission forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PEOPLE

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

ROOM FOR EVERYONE

We pray daily for the return of all Jews to *Eretz Yisrael*. Is there really room in this country for so many people?

The same question was put to Rabbi Chanina by a heathen skeptic who scoffed at the claim made by the Sages that millions of Jews once lived in just a portion of the Holy Land that appeared to him too small to hold so many. *Eretz Yisrael*, explained the Sage,



is compared by the Prophet Yirmiyahu to a deer. When the skin of a deer is removed from its carcass it is impossible to once again have it envelop the deer's flesh. Similarly, when Jews live in *Eretz Yisrael* the land expands to absorb them, but when they are in exile it contracts.

The answer then is yes, there is room in *Eretz Yisrael* for every Jew.

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PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilam's donkey?
12. Bilam compared his meeting with an angel to someone else's meeting with an angel. Who was the other person and what was the comparison?
13. Bilam told Balak to build seven altars. Why specifically seven?
14. Who in Jewish history seemed fit for a curse, but got a blessing instead?
15. Why are the Jewish People compared to lions?
16. On Bilam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilam told Balak that the Jews' G-d hates what?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

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

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the Land. Bilam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.
11. 22:33 - So that people shouldn't see it and say, "Here's the donkey that silenced Bilam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilam said, "G-d told me to go but later sent an angel to stop me." The same thing happened to Avraham: G-d told Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak but later canceled the command through an angel.
13. 23:4 - Corresponding to the seven altars built by the Avot. Bilam said to G-d, "The Jewish People's ancestors built seven altars, but I alone have built altars equal to all of them."
14. 23:8 - Yaakov, when Yitzchak blessed him.
15. 23:24 - They rise each morning and "strengthen" themselves to do *mitzvot*.
16. 24:1 - He began mentioning the Jewish People's sins, hoping thus to be able to curse them.
17. 24:2 - An evil eye, pride and greed.
18. 24:2 - He saw each tribe dwelling without intermingling. He saw the tents arranged so no one could see into his neighbor's tent.
19. 24:3 - "*Shatum ha'ayin*." It means either "the poked-out eye," implying blindness in one eye; or it means the "the open eye," which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

- *Shechitah* with something connected to the earth
- What sort of meat was consumed before entering Eretz Yisrael
- Which instrument is invalid for *shechitah*
- The flaws which can disqualify a knife for *shechitah*
- The incomplete *shechitah* and the misplaced cut
- Things that can disqualify *shechitah*
- Is *shechitah* of fowl of Torah origin
- The fatal fall of the Kohen Eli and its relationship to the laws of *treifah*
- The *oleh* and *chatat* sacrifices of fowl
- Which fowl qualify for sacrifice

THE FATAL FALL

An interesting incident in Jewish history is mentioned in our *gemara* in the course of a discussion on what sort of physical disability causes an animal to become a *treifah*, a creature with a short lease on life and therefore forbidden.

Rabbi Yehuda quotes the Sage Shmuel as ruling that if the nape of an animal is broken it becomes a *treifah* only if most of the flesh around it is also severed. This ruling is challenged by citing a passage (*Shmuel* I, 4:18) describing the death of the Kohen Gadol Eli. As he sat upon a seat awaiting news from the battlefield where his two sons were among the soldiers fighting the Pelishtim, a refugee from the battle delivered the terrible news that his two sons were among the thirty thousand soldiers of Israel who had fallen in the

conflict. But it was only when this 98-year-old leader heard that the Ark of G-d had been captured that he was seized by a trembling that caused him to fall backwards from his seat and break his nape.

This is noted by our commentaries as an expression of Eli's righteousness, that he was more shocked by the loss of the Ark than the loss of his sons. But it does raise a problem in regard to the ruling of the Sage Shmuel, since it appears that death was caused by the breaking of the nape without the severance of most of the flesh around it.

The resolution offered by the *gemara* is based on the mention in the above-mentioned passage that "he was an old man and heavy", factors which caused his death despite the fact that in ordinary cases such damage would not create a condition of *treifah*.

• *Chullin* 21a

What the SAGES Say

"Each river and its flow" (An expression explaining why there are different customs in different communities.)

• *Rabbi Yosef - Chullin* 18b

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GENIZA

From: Alice

Dear Rabbi,

It is not clear to me why old prayer books and other such works cannot be thrown away once they're no longer fit for use. I can understand why as long as they're being used they should be treated with respect given their purpose, but once that's no longer the case what's the problem with throwing them away?

Dear Alice,

What makes prayer books and other such books of Torah learning sacred is not just their purpose, namely for prayer or for learning, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it is their content.

Prayer books have not only many, many verses from the Tanach that are interwoven throughout the prayers, as well as entire sections which are passages from the Torah itself like the "Shema". They also have many of the various names of G-d Himself. This makes the prayer book sacred even after it's no longer used.

The same thing applies for books on Torah subjects. Usually they have verses, often they have G-d's names. And even if they don't have either, the ideas expressed therein are ideas of holiness and it is not appropriate to throw away such ideas even after the book is no longer usable.

Also, in both cases, while the text may not be usable in its entirety, it still has sections with verses, G-d's names or

Torah ideas that are intact, and those sections maintain their sanctity such that they may not be thrown away.

So what is done with such out-of-use texts? Known by some as "Sheimas", which is an Ashkenazi pronunciation of the Hebrew word "Shemot" meaning "Names", they are put in what's called in Hebrew "geniza" which means "in hiding". This may be in a closet, a special storage room, or even buried underground.

In times of old, they were often stored in special vaults in the synagogue, thanks to which many old and sacred works have been recovered, which has been of great religious and academic importance. A notable example of this is the famous Cairo Geniza. In modern times, most "sheimas" or "geniza" are buried, either in special sites, or even interred in graves with families' permission. This later option spares valuable resources for the living while creating a mitzvah which envelopes the deceased in a type of spiritual shroud.

I once heard of a person visiting a foreign country who had a bill of the local currency fly out of her hand because of the wind. In chasing after the note she stepped on the bill to keep it from getting away. This was observed by a policeman who summarily issued her a fine for placing her shoe on the visage of the country's king that is on the currency.

If nations take so seriously the picture of mundane kings on money, all the more so we must take seriously the Names and Knowledge of the King of Kings in our holy books.

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“HEY TAXI!”

Question: I often have to hail a taxicab on a busy city street, and once, while in a big rush, did so by signaling with an upraised hand to a driver headed in the opposite direction. He nodded his head in acknowledgment of my signal and began to circle around to pick me up. Another cabbie who observed this scene and was hungry for business pulled up to offer his services. Accepting his offer would perhaps have saved me a minute of waiting for the first cab and I was in a hurry. What's the right thing to do?

Answer: A cabbie once told me that taxi drivers have a special name for one of their own who tries to steal another driver's business but it is hardly worth repeating in such a dignified publication.

In regard to the legal and moral obligations when one enters into a transaction with another and then wishes to back out there are distinctions made in halacha. A formal *kinyan* grants the other party the right of legal enforcement, while only paying money in certain cases or merely giving a word in most cases raises only the moral question of

faithfulness.

When you hail a taxi it is a virtual promise to that cabbie that you are hiring his services and there is a moral obligation to remain faithful to that promise. Similar situations arise when people making a wedding make promises to a photographer or a band and then wish to back out, and we can probably list dozens of other examples.

In our morning prayers we say that a man should be “G-d-fearing in public and in private and speak truth in his heart”. The paragon of this last attribute, says the Talmud, was the Sage Rabbi Safra. He was once in the midst of reciting the *Shema* when a customer came to make a purchase. Since he could not interrupt his recital to acknowledge the buyer's first bid it was interpreted as a rejection of that bid, and a higher offer was made. When Rabbi Safra concluded his prayers he insisted that the buyer pay only the lower bid because in his heart he had acquiesced to it.

If one must be true to his thoughts, how much more so must he be true to his signal and word.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

THE COAT MERRY-GO-ROUND

One of the beautiful features of religious communal life in Israel is the service provided by the used clothes centers popularly known as *gemachim* (*GEMilAt CHassadim*). These centers receive used clothes from local contributors and foreign charitable organizations and distribute them to needy families, or offer them for sale at token prices and then apply the income to other charitable projects.

In their haste to clear their homes of long-unused clothes families sometimes mistakenly place an item that is currently in use into the packages they bring to centers. A woman recently called the Kiryat Mattersdorf, Jerusalem branch of

the “Beged Yad Leyad” network of used clothes centers to report that she had mistakenly included her young daughter's coat in the package she had brought there. She could not afford to buy a new coat and when informed by the center's director that it was virtually impossible to locate her daughter's coat in the mountains of clothes to be sorted, the distraught lady put in a request to buy a used girl's coat if one turned up in the sorting process. It wasn't long before such a coat became available and reached its happy customer. Then came another call from this lady to the director, laughingly informing her that the coat she received was exactly the one she had mistakenly given away!

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By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach



Boycottage Cheese REBELLION

A Perspective of Purchaser Power

In the tense atmosphere of a nation surrounded by enemies who wish to destroy it, Israel almost welcomes issues that provide an almost comic relief from worrying about where the next security or diplomatic crisis will come from.

Perhaps this explains why the local media gave so much coverage to a consumer boycott against the country's three major dairies when it was discovered that cottage cheese was so much more expensive in Israel than in other countries. While the government debated restoring price control on dairy products or promoting competition by importing such products from Europe, the supermarkets offered bargains on their cottage cheese rather than have it spoil on their shelves.

What began as a boycott on cottage cheese has developed into a public awareness of being ripped off by a combination of manufacturer monopolies and government taxation. The reason it took so long for the public to wake up is that people were too busy enjoying the quantity and quality of the foods available in Israel to bother examining the price they paid.

Israel did not, however, invent the wheel. Boycotts have been around for a long time, many of them successful. The most famous ones in the past century were the boycott of public transportation in Alabama which brought the civil rights movement to its finest

hour, the boycott of Coca Cola when it tried to change the taste of its classical drink, and the international boycott of the South African government which brought an end to apartheid.

There is no need to trace boycotts only to such recent history. In our halachic sources we find that boycotts on the purchase of fish for Shabbat meals were mandated if the sellers raised the price too high. (See *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 242:1*, the commentary of *Be'er Heitev*)

Boycotts such as the above-mentioned were usually based on moral grounds. The boycott which the Arab states have consistently imposed on the Jewish state is, however, an unjustified expression of ethnic discrimination and, thank Heaven, has not achieved its purpose.

May we conclude by suggesting that the international community declare a boycott on all the countries and groups practicing and promoting terror. Perhaps such an initiative will yield more practical progress towards peace than all the negotiations which have proven to be exercises in futility.