

O H R N E T

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

“Thus says your servant Yaakov...” (32:5)

The Jewish People has never found itself in a predicament as complex and disturbing as the one that faces it today.

On the one hand, we have never enjoyed such material comfort and security. Not even during the “Golden Age” in Spain were Jews so accepted into the life of the non-Jewish world. Who would ever have thought that a Jew, and a religious one at that, could be seriously considered for Vice-President of the United States of America, let alone its President?

Jews are more comfortable, more respected, and have a larger slice of the national “apple pie” than ever before.

And yet, on the other hand, the Jewish People are threatened by a new anti-Semitism, on the campus and off, whose depth and virulence can only be conjectured.

There is no doubt that this stems, at least in part, from living the American Dream at not-quite-first remove.

The American Dream is not our dream. It is the dream of our brother Esav. Esav sees the world as a series of spreadsheets and bottom lines, skyscrapers and condos. He sees roast beef on every table.

We see a prayer book on every table.

The hands are the hands of Esav. And nothing incites Esav more than when he sees us taking usurping his position. Esav knows who we are. He understands, subconsciously, that Yaakov’s *métier* is the voice, the world of the spirit, of Torah and prayer. When Yaakov strays into Esav’s territory and lords it up to boot, Esav reacts with implacable ferocity.

Which is not to say that we have to live in abject poverty; just we don’t have to knock out our neighbors’ eyes with our conspicuous consumption, living the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

We learn this from this week’s Torah portion:

“Thus says your servant Yaakov...”

The Midrash tells that Rebbe (Yehuda HaNasi) would sign letters to his friend the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, with the words “your servant.” Rebbe said “Am I better than Yaakov our Patriarch who referred to himself as Esav’s servant?”

The Midrash criticizes Rebbe for following Yaakov’s example, since it itself opposed Yaakov’s conduct in this regard. Nevertheless, Yaakov calling himself Esav’s servant created a relationship with Esav and his offspring that binds us to this day. This spiritual land-mapping is called “the actions of the fathers are a sign to the children.”

Jewish identification in America and Europe is at an all-time low, and going down. Support for Israel - the Judaism of previous non-religious generations - has evaporated in direct proportion to Jewish cultural identification. And intermarriage, largely unheard of a hundred years ago, has galloped past the fifty percent mark, which means that more Jews now chose non-Jewish partners over Jewish.

If there’s one glimmer of light, it seems to be the religious community (*bli ayn hara*). The religious community is burgeoning both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Its birthrate together with rampant assimilation in the non-religious sector have brought the religious community to the forefront of Jewish social life both numerically and intellectually.

However, the religious community isn’t perfect. (Is any community?) Divorce, while scarce compared to the secular community, is growing steadily. The phenomenon of “children at risk” – children who leave observant homes and frequently end up on drugs and alcohol – is now a fact of the landscape.

But, maybe most of all, we should be very careful not to show off our new-found prosperity by making extravagant weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, building huge mansions, and spending fortunes on glatt kosher dream cruises.

Are we better than our Patriarch Yaakov?

Sources:

• Based on the *Avnei Ezel*

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 of 400. Yaakov takes the strategic precautions of dividing the camps, praying for assistance, and sending tribute to mollify Esav. That night, Yaakov is left alone and wrestles with the Angel of Esav. Yaakov emerges victorious but is left with an injured sinew in his thigh (which is the reason that it is forbidden to eat the sciatic nerve of a kosher animal). The angel tells him that his name in the future will be Yisrael, signifying that he has prevailed against man (Lavan) and the supernatural (the angel). Yaakov and Esav meet and are reconciled, but Yaakov, still fearful of his brother, rejects Esav's offer that they should dwell together. Shechem, a Caananite prince, abducts and violates Dina, Yaakov's daughter. In return for Dina's hand in marriage, the prince and his father suggest that Yaakov and his fami-

ly intermarry and enjoy the fruits of Caananite prosperity. Yaakov's sons trick Shechem and his father by feigning agreement; however, they stipulate that all the males of the city must undergo *brit mila*. Shimon and Levi, two of Dina's brothers, enter the town and execute all the males who were weakened by the circumcision. This 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 Beit Lechem Road. Yaakov builds a monument to her. Yitzchak passes away at the age of 180 and is buried by his sons. The Parsha concludes by listing Esav's descendants.

ISRAEL Forever

A CHANGE OF HEART

When will Arafat finally come to the conclusion that the Palestinians will not gain anything from terror? When will the rest of the free world rally behind the American-British initiative to put a brake on international terror by making an example of at least one member of that "axis of evil" identified by President Bush?

When will all the Jew-haters throughout the world finally learn to live in peace with the people they have threatened for thousands of years?

These questions, and many more like them which most of us ask about politics and politicians, find a theological answer in this week's Torah portion. Yaakov and his family, on their way back to *Eretz Yisrael*, are threatened by the forefather of Jew-haters, Esav and his band of 400 terrorist followers. Yaakov does everything in his power to avert this danger to himself, his family and future generations. He uses diplomacy in the form of lavish gifts and humbling himself before his brother. He prays to Heaven and even prepares himself for war.

The dramatic climax to this confrontation finds Esav

embracing and kissing the brother he had vowed to destroy. What turned the trick? It is hard to imagine that Esav was deterred by the puny resistance Yaakov was capable of offering by splitting his camp in two and concealing weapons behind the clothes of the vastly outnumbered defenders. In his commentary, Ramban assigns some of the credit to the diplomatic subservience of Yaakov but accords the lion's share to his prayer.

Just as man determines with his digging where the waters of a river will flow, says King Solomon (*Mishlei 21:1*), so is the heart of the king in the hand of G-d Who directs it to wherever He wishes. Although ordinary humans have free will to choose right or wrong, this freedom is sometimes suspended by Heaven when a ruler's decision affects the fate of his nation and other nations. Heaven's response to Yaakov's prayers came not in the form of a miraculous military triumph but rather in the change of heart of his enemy.

This should answer all the questions we ask about events in our region and throughout the world – and provide the formula for assuring Israel forever.

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THE FROG THAT WHISTLED

The second of the ten plagues that G-d inflicted on Pharaoh and the Egyptians who stubbornly refused to let their Israelite slaves go free was that of frogs invading their homes, their bedrooms and their kitchens. But when Aaron, at G-d's command, stretched out his miracle-making staff over the waters of Egypt, the Torah informs us that "the frog (singular) arose and covered the land of Egypt" (*Shmot* 8:2).

Both Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah concluded from this use of the singular form that it was really one frog which came up from the river. But while the former states that this single frog suddenly gave birth to an army of frogs numerous enough to fill Egypt, the latter contends that this frog whistled and all the frogs throughout the world heard this signal and converged upon Egypt.

The commentaries note that there are several examples of the Torah using a singular term to designate the species even when the reference is to a multiple of that species (see *Shmot* 8:13 re "louse" for lice and *Bamidbar* 21:7 re "snake" for snakes).

What compelled the aforementioned sages to interpret the word "frog" literally and provide an extra dimension of miracle to this plague?

A most interesting solution is provided by Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto (RYAP) in his commentary on *Ein Yaakov*. In regard to the first plague of Egypt's waters turning into blood, the Torah tells us (*Shmot* 7:21) that the fish in the river died as a result. If the fish died because the water was uninhabitable, he projects, we must assume that the frogs also perished since their principal habitat is the water. Therefore, it would be impossible for a host of frogs to suddenly come up out of the river. The Sages therefore concluded that it was indeed a single frog survivor who came forward, and they differ only in regard to how it multiplied so quickly into an entire army.

Maharsha notes the connection between this discussion of frog multiplication and an earlier discussion on this page regarding the third plague of lice. When Pharaoh's sorcerers, who doubted Divine intervention and had duplicated the first two plagues through their own magical manipulation of demons, realized their inability to match this plague, they admitted to their king that "this was the finger of G-d" (*Shmot* 8:15). While Rabbi Elazar explains that demons are not capable of creating something as tiny as lice, Rabbi Papa takes the position that they are not capable of creating anything, only in causing elements to gather together. Although these demons could succeed in achieving this in regard to blood and frogs they had no power to do so with lice. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah favors the approach of the frog whistling because such a gathering of frogs made the sorcerers believe they could succeed in also gathering together the frogs from all over. But if the frog reproduced in the manner suggested by Rabbi Akiva this would have been a creative feat beyond their powers and they should have then admitted it was not magic but the "finger of G-d".

• *Sanhedrin* 67b

LEARNING FOR LEARNING'S SAKE

This *perek* of *Mesechta Sanhedrin* deals with a Torah chapter of an unusual nature. So unusual, in fact, that two leading Sages declared that its laws were never applied and never would be.

This is the chapter of the rebellious son (*Devarim* 21:18-21) who is to be executed as a preemptive action because his behavior of hedonism and dishonesty is certain to lead him to eventually murder in order to satisfy his desire. Rabbi Yehuda's reason for this never happening is his interpretation of the Torah's requirement that both of the rebel's parents, who must be the ones who take the initiative of bringing him before the court for initial disciplining, must be similar in voice, appearance and height. Such a similarity is virtually impossible. (In his footnote on our *gemara* the BACH points out that for a man and woman to have similar voices would necessitate excessive femininity on the part of the man or excessive masculinity on the part of the woman which would eliminate the possibility of their having children.)

Rabbi Shimon rejects the possibility of this taking place because it is unimaginable that any parents would actually initiate a process leading to the execution of their son merely because he stole money from them and indulged in some meat and wine.

Both of them, however, concur that despite the fact that the laws of the rebellious son would never be applied they appear in the Torah in order that we "analyze and gain our reward". The same perspective is presented by other Sages in regard to the law concerning a city in which the majority of the populace has been subverted to idolatry (*Devarim* 13:13-19) and the law of a house on whose walls a leprosy-like blotch appears (*Vayikra* 14:33-53). Twice again we are informed that although these laws never were and never will be applied they were recorded in the Torah for us to analyze and be rewarded.

Two different explanations are offered by the commentaries for the value of such study and analysis which will not lead to actual practice. One is that every law in the Torah is an expression of G-d and that the study of it enables one to, as it were, attach himself to Divine intelligence even if he never reaches practical application of that law. This is why the angels thought the Torah should be given to them rather than to mortals (*Mesechta Shabbat* 88b). Although they were incapable of practical fulfillment, as Moshe pointed out to them in his winning argument, they believed that their exalted spiritual nature endowed them with a superior capacity to grasp its spiritual-intellectual dimension.

Another approach is that there are important lessons to learn from each of these laws despite the fact that the Torah made it technically impossible for them to be practiced. The importance of disciplining a child at an early age is learned from the chapter of the rebellious son. From the chapter of the subverted city we learn the necessity of rigorous action to eliminate a spiritual cancer in a nation. From the chapter of an afflicted home we learn the evil of miserliness which is the cause of such an affliction.

• *Sanhedrin* 71a

PARSHA Q&A ?

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. The Torah states “The sons of Yaakov were twelve.” Why?
17. How old was Yaakov when Yosef was sold?
18. Esav changed his wife’s name to Yehudit. Why?
19. Which 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?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week’s Questions!

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 would have to kill.
3. 32:9 - He sent gifts, he prayed, and he prepared for war.
4. 32:23 - Yaakov hid her 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 pity 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 sometimes does.
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 - His two twin sisters.
15. 35:18 - *Ben-Yemin* means “Son of the South.” He was the only son 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.”

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PEOPLE

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

YONAH – THE PROPHET OF NO ESCAPE

When the Prophet Yonah was told by G-d that he had been chosen to deliver a message of repentance to the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire he attempted to evade this mission. He was afraid, say our Sages, that the positive response of the sinful Assyrians to his call for a return to G-d might serve as an indictment of the Jewish People who showed less interest in heeding the calls of their prophets.

What did Yonah do? As we are reminded each year at Mincha on Yom Kippur when the Book of Yonah is read as the Haftarah, he hired a ship at the port of Jaffa to take him to the foreign port of Tarshish.



His logic was that since G-d bestows prophecy only on people in *Eretz Yisrael* he would be exempt from a prophetic mission if he were outside of the Holy Land.

His attempt to escape his Divine mission was, however, an exercise in futility. A Heaven-sent storm threatened to wreck his ship and, aware that he was the cause of the trouble, Yonah asked to be cast overboard. Swallowed by a giant fish and eventually regurgitated the prophet returned to his land and embarked on his mission. This dramatic chapter in the history of Jews and the world is read on the holiest day of the year to remind all of us that there is no escape from G-d.

PUBLIC LIBRARY BIBLE

From: Daniel

*Dear Rabbi,
Is a Jew allowed to donate a holy book (Artscroll
Tanach) to a public library? Thanks.*

Dear Daniel,

I spoke with Rav Moshe Sternbuch, *shlita*, and he said that as long as the public library will keep the book in an honorable way there is no problem with donating holy books.

An anecdote. I personally was involved in the transfer of holy books here in Jerusalem, but with a twist. A library affiliated with another religion had received boxes of Jewish prayer books. American Jewish armed-services personnel had been on a layover in Jerusalem and bought the books. After using them for Shabbat services the soldiers left the books behind in the hotel. From there the books were sent to the nearby non-Jewish library. The librarian knows me and asked if I'd like the holy books for Ohr Somayach, since their library had no customers for such books. I took them.

KISSING THE TORAH

*Dear Rabbi,
Here's my question: One thing has always bothered me in services. It's the touching of the Torah with the prayer-book and kissing the prayer-book afterwards. This strikes me as a form of idolatry. It appears to be worshipping the Torah as an idol and we're instructed by the Torah not to do that. How is this act not idolatry? Thanks for your many emails, and I look forward*

to your response.

Dear E. P.,

A kiss is a way of expressing love and affection, not only a means of worship. When a father kisses his child it does not mean he worships him (as an idol, at least!). We love the Torah, as it is our way of maintaining closeness to G-d. Therefore we express our love in the earthly manner we are used to, such as kissing, in order to encourage our feeling of love towards G-d and the Torah.

KADDISH FOR SON

From: J-anon@webtv.net

*Dear Rabbi,
A various reference book I have found says that a son must say kaddish for his parents for 11 months. Nowhere is it mandated that a father is to say kaddish for his son. My son recently passed away and I am observing kaddish each morning at services. Is this required by Jewish law? I will continue to say it regardless of your answer.
Thank you.*

Dear J-Anon,

Firstly, please accept my condolences on the passing of your son. May G-d console you and your entire family among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

The minimum time to recite kaddish for a child is thirty days but it is completely permissible to continue to recite kaddish for the full eleven months as one does for a parent.

If I can be of any more assistance please do not hesitate to write again.

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by RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

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New Feature!

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

A FRIEND IN HIGH PLACES

“**T**his is the word of G-d and we must respect it.” Thus spoke an evangelical preacher as he showed his family a pair of tefillin that he had brought home.

The preacher’s family lived at one time in an apartment over a store owned by a Jew who befriended them. When the family moved they took along the mezuzah that had been on their door to their new home.

The preacher’s wife grew up in a Jewish area of Chicago where she graciously consented to serve as a “Shabbos goya” whenever needed.

All of this would not appear to be of special significance except for the fact that these were the parents of a very important friend of Jews in one of the highest offices in the USA – Attorney-General John Ashcroft.

Writing about this friend of Jewry in the “Baltimore

Jewish Times”, M. Hirsh Goldberg points out that Ashcroft has, throughout his political career, surrounded himself with Jews, especially those proud of their Jewishness. When, as governor of Missouri, he began his successful campaign of the U.S. Senate, one of his aides was Jeff Ballabon, an alumnus of Baltimore’s Ner Israel Rabbinical College and Yale Law School. As senator he had three observant Jews on this staff, and at his confirmation hearings for attorney-general an aide by the name of Simcha Lyons, a kippa-wearing observant Jew, sat near him.

Since the FBI is under the jurisdiction of the attorney-general, Ashcroft mentioned at these hearings that it was a career FBI person, whom he referred to as “Uncle Phil”, who had been an important influence in his life. Uncle Phil, concludes Goldberg, is not a blood relative but rather a Jewish neighbor.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

...a dozen outreach centers, *yeshivot* and *kollelim* have been established by Ohr Somayach on five continents and they serve some 15,000 people of all ages?

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