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PARSHA INSIGHTS

BY RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR

WRITTEN IN STONE

“The angel of G-d stood in the path of the vineyards, a wall on this side and a wall on that side. The she-donkey saw the angel of G-d and pressed against the wall and it pressed Bilaam’s leg against the wall.” (22:24)

Rashi comments of the above verse: “An undefined wall is made of stones.” Of what possible interest or importance could the construction of the wall be?

When Yaakov Avinu made a pact with Lavan he made it on a mound of stones, “*This mound shall be witness ... that I may not crossover to you past this mound, nor may you crossover to me past this mound ... for evil.*” (Ber. 31:52)

Bilaam, who was a descendent of Lavan (Sandhedrin 105), overturned this covenant and “*passed over for evil*”

against the children of Yaakov.

Thus his punishment was through stones. The she-donkey pressed his leg against the wall of stones, broke his leg and left him lame, and was called by all “Bilaam the Lame.” (Sanhedrin 106)

Rashi’s seemingly redundant comment “An undefined wall is a wall of stone” hints to this hidden depth.

• Sources: *Toldot Yitzchak and Ayein Chizkuni in Iturei Torah*

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Balak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilaam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilaam and forbids him to go. But because Bilaam 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 Bilaam’s donkey’s path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilaam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilaam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilaam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilaam arrives,

King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilaam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilaam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilaam 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.

BY RABBI MOSHE NEWMAN

BAVA BATRA 164 - 170

Rav Dimi the brother of Rav Safra taught, "A person should never speak words of praise of another person, since his speech about the person's goodness will lead to speech about the person's disgrace."

What's wrong with praising someone? The Chafetz Chaim in his *sefer* called "Chafetz Chaim" (9:1) explains this as follows: Speaking excessive praise of another is forbidden because this will lead the speaker to eventually speak disparagingly of the person. For example, he will say about the person: "... except for one certain bad trait that he has", or the listeners of this excessive praise will respond: "Why do you praise him so much? But he has a certain bad trait!"

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the *gemara* is in fact only forbidding speaking excessive praise of a person to another person, since we find in the Talmud cases where Sages would praise the character traits of others — meaning that *non-excessive* praise is certainly permitted. See for example how Rabban Yochanan be Zakkai would recount the praise of each of his five top students (Avot 2:9). The Chafetz Chaim notes that this explanation of the *gemara* as forbidding only excessive praise is also found in the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam and the Rif.

• Bava Batra 164b

Rav Amram said in the name of Rav, "There are three transgressions that a person is not saved from each day: contemplating transgression, 'looking into' prayer, and a subtle form of evil speech.

The actual text of the *gemara* for these transgressions is: *hirhur aveira, iyun tefilla* and *avak lashon hara*. The Rashbam defines the second and third transgressions. He writes that an example of *avak lashon hara* (literally, the dust of evil speech) is saying to another person with a negative implication, "Where is there always a fire for cooking? In the home of so-and-so!" This implies that the person is rich and he is cooking food there all day long. *Iyun tefilla* is explained by the Rashbam as: "After a person prays, he judges in his heart that G-d should pay him reward, fulfill his needs, and answer all his prayers." Although G-d certainly hears our prayers, He is also certainly not obligated to give us everything we request. Sometimes the answer to our prayers is "No", so to speak.

This reminds me of a story I heard recently. A woman was married for ten years without having children, despite her numerous, tearful prayers. She went to Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*zatzal*). She cried out her story to him. He told her, "G-d doesn't owe you children". She began to leave in a state of overwhelming despair. Rav Shlomo Zalman called the woman back, saying, "G-d doesn't owe you children, but He can certainly give you more than He 'owes' you – if you take upon yourself more than your basic obligation. Then maybe He will do for you more than He 'owes' you." The woman took these words to heart, and started volunteering at three hospitals in her city. Within a few years, she had one child and then twins, and has continued her volunteering to this day.

• Bava Batra 164b

LOVE OF THE LAND

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

"RENEW OUR DAYS AS OF OLD"

"The mountain of Zion is desolate; foxes prowl over it." These words from the *Eicha* lamentations of the Prophet Yirmiyahu are said and sung in a sad tone during the upcoming commemoration of mourning for the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash.

What is a more powerful reminder of that great tragedy than seeing an Arab mosque on Temple Mount!

Halacha forbids Jews in their present ritually impure state from ascending Temple Mount, because they may unknowingly be treading on the site of the Beit Hamikdash,



which is out of bounds for anyone who has come into contact with the dead. The closest we can get to this holy site is the Western Wall, which is why the "Kotel" is such a magnet for worshippers and visitors.

The closing words of *Eicha* are "Return us to You, O G-d, and we shall return; renew our days as of old."

When all of our people accept the outstretched hand of G-d and return to Him we will merit the return of the Beit Hamikdash to the Mountain of Zion in a renewed Israel forever.

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 Bilaam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilaam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilaam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilaam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilaam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilaam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilaam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilaam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilaam die?
11. Why did the *malach* kill Bilaam's donkey?
12. Bilaam 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. Bilaam 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 Bilaam's third attempt to curse the Jews, he changed his strategy. What was different?
17. What were Bilaam's three main characteristics?
18. What did Bilaam see that made him decide not to curse the Jews?
19. What phrase in Bilaam's self-description can be translated in two opposite ways, both of which come out meaning the same thing?
20. Bilaam 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 Bilaam'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. Bilaam 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 Bilaam 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 Bilaam." G-d is concerned with human dignity.
12. 22:34 - Avraham. Bilaam 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 - They correspond to the seven altars built by the Avot. Bilaam 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 open eye," which means vision but implies blindness in the other eye.
20. 24:14 - Promiscuity.

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Love of the Land, written by Rav Mendel Weinbach, zt"l • General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman • Design: Rabbi Eliezer Shapiro

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NATURAL FORCES AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

This *parsha* features the strange episode of the confrontation between the non-Jewish prophet Bilaam and the *malach* or messenger of G-d, which features a verbal exchange between Bilaam and his donkey. Abarbanel points out the obvious difficulties with this narrative. A speaking donkey is clearly a miracle and G-d only performs miracles out of absolute necessity. If G-d's intention was to prevent Bilaam from cursing the Jewish nation, He could have simply appeared to him in a dream or vision without invoking such a bizarre scenario with a talking animal that is capable of seeing a messenger of G-d who remains invisible to the prophet Bilaam.

Bilaam believed that G-d related to the Jewish People in two different ways. He realized that G-d had a special relationship with the nation, a Divine Providence and intervention which prevailed over the natural forces and influences of the physical universe. He believed, however, that they were also subject to these natural forces as well, and would manifest themselves through destructions and exiles that the nation would suffer. This is what he intended to convey to Balak. G-d, on the other hand, wanted to prevent Bilaam from saying anything other than the exact words that G-d wanted him to say. Giving the donkey the power of speech was a dramatic way of demonstrating to Bilaam that G-d alone grants the power of speech.

Abarbanel goes on to elucidate the nature of the relationship between natural forces and Divine Providence. Bilaam began his "career" as an astrologer and sorcerer, with knowledge of how events on earth were influenced by the stars. Once he became a prophet he understood that there was a concept of Divine Providence whereby G-d acted directly and not through the influence of the stellar configurations. However, Bilaam was uncertain whether Divine Providence could prevail over the natural order or, vice-versa, if the natural order always remained in place. He understood the latter possibility from that fact that G-d had told him, "Do not curse this nation, for it is blessed." He took this to mean that by cursing them and bringing down the natural order to their detriment, he could overcome their special blessing from G-d. In his mind, G-d was instructing him not to curse them in order to prevent this from happening.

In order to remove this mistaken notion from his mind, G-d used the situation with the *malach* and the talking

donkey as a metaphorical lesson. The moving donkey represents the motion of the heavenly bodies. Bilaam, the rider of the donkey, represents the separate force that sets them in motion. The *malach* represents G-d's Divine Providence, as it says in Psalms "He will command his angels for you, to protect you in all your ways." When the donkey sees the *malach* he turns away immediately to demonstrate that the natural order must give way to G-d's Divine Providence. Bilaam's attempt to force the donkey back onto its proper path demonstrates that the movements of the heavenly bodies and their influences below are the result of the constant direction of the forces that set them in their proper path. Sometimes there is a collision between the natural order and Divine Providence, such that each one prevents the other from expressing itself fully. In such a case Divine Providence will always emerge victorious. This is illustrated by the passage of the donkey through a narrow lane between two fences. Bilaam, who represents the director of these heavenly movements, scrapes his foot against the fence when the donkey moves aside for the *malach*. Not only must the natural order yield to Divine Providence when they clash, but its influence will be "injured" — i.e. reduced — just as Bilaam's foot was injured, while the *malach* remains unscathed.

Additionally, there are situations where there is no room at all for both. Only one can be expressed. This is illustrated by the next incident in the narrative where the passage is so narrow that the donkey cannot move aside at all. This was Bilaam's ultimate dilemma. What happens when they are in absolute and total opposition? In this case the natural order gives way totally to the Divine Providence, as illustrated by the final act of the donkey — crouching down before the *malach*. It is at this point that G-d opens Bilaam's eyes to enable him to see the *malach* and to understand the answer to his question. There are times when the Divine Providence supersedes the natural order, but there is never a time that the natural order can supersede Divine Providence. It is at this point that Bilaam is forced to admit that he has sinned by trying to curse the Jewish nation.

LAWS OF THE “SHEMA” – PART 2

The time to recite the morning Shema extends until the third hour, which is one-fourth of the day. (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 58:1)

Although the above law is clear, straightforward and without *machloket* (dispute), its application is not so simple. There is a well-known dispute among the Rabbis about when a day starts and ends. One opinion maintains that a day begins at dawn and ends when three stars appear (Terumat HaDeshen, Magen Avraham and others). The second opinion maintains that the day begins at sunrise and ends at sunset (Lavush, Gra, Shulchan Aruch HaRav and others).

The general rule when dealing with a Biblical command is to follow the stricter opinion. In this case that would mean that one should calculate the hours from dawn to the appearance of three stars, since this time will pass first, and only if this time has already passed may one rely on the second opinion and say the *Shema* before the end of the third hour by calculating the hours from sunrise to sunset (Kaf HaChaim). The Mishnah Berurah writes that in an ideal case there is no practical difference between the two opinions since the law is that one must not delay saying the *Shema* once its time has arrived.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein writes that the custom in most places in his country (“Europe”) followed the opinion of the Gra, and that it is considered the main opinion. Only individ-

uals who were strict in this matter followed the Magen Avraham. However, today most communities follow the Magen Avraham in accordance with the majority opinion of the later Rabbis, and this is the custom in Eretz Yisrael (Piskei Teshuvot).

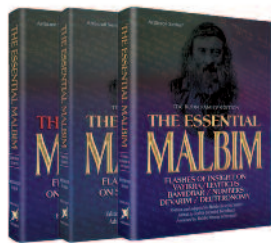
How to Calculate an Hour

According to halacha the length of a day, as mentioned above, is either from sunrise to sunset or from dawn to the appearance of three stars. In the summer the days are longer while in the winter they are shorter. Therefore, the exact time of day changes, based on the time of the year. To properly calculate the exact time of day until when one may recite the *Shema* prayer, one must take the total amount of time (i.e. the total minutes) from sunrise to sunset, or from dawn to the appearance of three stars, and divide it into twelve equal parts. This will give you the length of one “halachic hour”. You will notice that in the summer, when the days are long, a halachic hour can be as long as seventy minutes, and in winter as short as fifty minutes. You can then calculate when the 3rd hour ends to know the latest time to say the *Shema*. Nowadays we have tools such as myzmanim.com to make this task much simpler.

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RABBI SAMET VISITS GIBRALTAR

Recently, Rabbi Yehuda Samet, *shlita*, our beloved *mashgiach*, returned from a trip to the fabled Rock of Gibraltar, also known as “The Guardian of the Entrance to the Mediterranean Sea”. He visited there with his wife at the invitation of the Jewish community.

Gibraltar is a tiny British Overseas Territory located on the tip of the Iberian Peninsula. It was conquered by England from Spain in 1704 in the War of the Spanish Succession. Its inhabitants are full British citizens. The population is about 30,000 and its Jewish population is about 800. In spite of their small number, the Jews are very prominent in Gibraltar. The largest law firm in the colony is Hassan’s, which was founded by Sir Joshua Hassan. Sir Joshua was a Moroccan Jew who later became the first Mayor and later the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, serving in that latter capacity for 20 years, between the 1960’s and the 1980’s.

The Jewish community is noteworthy for the fact that it is a traditional *kehillah* (Jewish community) with a *rav* who oversees all the Jewish institutions. Perhaps most striking is the fact that the entire Jewish population is Orthodox. There are four

shuls, a Jewish grammar school, boys’ and girls’ high schools, a *kollel* — and much daily learning taking place in the general community

There are other Ohr Somayach connections. The *rav* of the community, *Rav Chassid*, was a *chavruta* of our own Rabbi Shlomo Wiener, the head of the Center Program. And the Principal of the Boy’s Jewish High School, Rabbi Chanoch Bonchek, is the son of Rabbi Dr.

Avigdor Bonchek, one of the first Rabbis of Ohr Somayach.

Both Rabbi Samet and his wife delivered many lectures to the community over the course of a week, including a lecture to about 20 *ba’alei batim* at a “lunch-and-learn” session that was held at one of the shuls on a work day. Rabbi Samet also had the opportunity to meet with a number of Ohr Somayach alumni there. Danny Rudich, originally from Italy, learned in Ohr Somayach and married a young lady from Gibraltar. He’s a CPA and works for an International Law firm there. Rabbi Samet is happy to report that Danny dav-

ens *vatikin*, and has a full learning schedule. He also met with the brothers Sidney and Levi Gross and a few other alumni.



Rabbi Samet in Gibraltar with singer Benny Friedman and Daniel Rudich, an alumnus of Ohr Somayach now living in Gibraltar

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LEARNING FROM EVERYONE

We often find that the Torah's description of even simple actions of our great Forefathers impart to us a treasure trove of correct behavior, worldview, and even Jewish law (halacha). Sometimes, though, it is the exact opposite: a halacha is gleaned from the acts of those far from being paragons of virtue. In our Torah portions for each week we learn fascinating halachic insights from people whom we would not consider role models by any stretch of the imagination.

Quite interestingly there are certain *halachot* that are gleaned from none other than the vile and villainous genocidal madman and overall arch-enemy of the Jews featured in *Parshat Balak*: the evil Bilaam.

One remarkable observance that we learn from Bilaam is that an "*adam chashuv*" — an important individual — should not travel without having two assistants. See Rashi (*Bamidbar 22: 22 s.v. u'shnei*), quoting the Midrash Tanchuma (*Parshat Balak 8*). This is quite fascinating, as one would certainly think that such a wicked person would not fit the Torah's description of an important individual. Yet, even so, we see that the Torah was concerned with his honor.

An additional example of a halacha gleaned from the disgraceful actions of Bilaam, and seemingly more apropos, is the prohibition of "*tzaar ba'alei chaim*", causing living creatures unnecessary pain. Although the *gemara* (*Bava Metzia 32a-b*) debates whether this proscription is Biblical or Rabbinic in nature, according to most authorities "*tzaar ba'alei chaim* is indeed a Torah prohibition. According to the Midrash Hagadol (*Parshat Balak 22, 32*), Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim vol. 3, end Ch. 17*), and Sefer Chassidim (666) this halacha is gleaned from Bilaam's actions of hitting his donkey. In fact, they maintain that since Bilaam remarked that if he would have been holding a sword in his hand he would have killed his donkey on the spot, he therefore was eventually slain specifically by the sword!

Another interesting example of a potential halacha we

derive from Bilaam is the "*zman tefilla*" (what constitutes the time for prayer). The *gemara* (*Berachot 7a*) explains that Bilaam knew the exact millisecond when G-d got angry, and knew how to properly curse during that time. Tosafot (*ad loc. s.v. she'ilmalei and Avodah Zarah 4b s.v. rega*) asks what type of curse it was possible for him to utter in such a limited time frame (a fraction of a second) and gives two answers: 1) the word "*kaleim*", "destroy them"; 2) once Bilaam started his curse in that exact time frame, he "locked it in" and could continue as long as it takes, since it is all considered in that exact time.

The Aruch Hashulchan (*Orach Chaim 110:5*), the Butchacher Rav (*Orach Chaim 104*), and the Yid HaKadosh of Peshischa (*cited by the Kozoglover Gaon in his Shu"t Eretz Tzvi, end 121 s.v. v'amnam*) take the second approach a step further, and apply this idea to prayer in its correct time. As long as one starts his prayer before the end of the allotted time for prayer, they maintain that it is considered that he 'made the time' even if the majority of his prayer actually took place after the time period's end.

Although not everyone agrees with this (indeed, many *poskim*, including the Mishna Berura, are strict and rule that one must *finish* his prayer *before* the end of the allotted time), nevertheless, *this* logic (based on Bilaam) is presented by the Machatzit HaShekel, quoting the Beit Yaakov (*Shu"t 127*) in the name of the Arizal regarding prayer of the congregation. If such design worked for one as despicable and reprehensible as Bilaam to enable him to curse us, how much more so should it work for us regarding public prayer, which is an "*eit ratzon*" (a time when prayers are *especially* accepted)!

It is fascinating that all of these *halachot* are based on the actions of one loathsome individual with the absolute worst intentions. As it is stated in Pirkei Avot (4:1) "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone" — sometimes even from one as wicked as Bilaam.

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UNITED WE FAST

The prophet Zechariah (Zech. 9:19) foretells of a time when the four fast days will be turned into holidays, days of joy and happiness. The four fast days which he lists are defined by the month in which they are held: the “Fast of the Fourth” (i.e. the 17th of Tammuz), the “Fast of the Fifth” (i.e. 9th of Av), the “Fast of Seventh” (i.e. the Fast of Gedaliah on the 3rd of Tishrei), and the “Fast of the Tenth” (i.e. the 10th of Tevet). All of these fast days mark different stages in the destruction of the First Holy Temple and the Jewish People being exiled to Babylon: In Tevet, the Babylonians began their siege around the city of Jerusalem. In Tammuz, they breached the city’s walls. In Av, they destroyed the Holy Temple and exiled many Jews to Babylonia. And finally, in Tishrei, Gedaliah, son of Achikam, who was the Jewish governor over the remaining Jews in the Holy Land, was assassinated. A special fast day known as *Tzom Gedaliah* was declared in his memory. Other fast days of the Jewish calendar include *Ta’anit Esther* (which is observed the day before Purim) and *Ta’anit Bechorot* (which many firstborns observe on the day before Pesach). In this special installment, we will visit the concept of fasting from a linguistic perspective, shedding light on the differences between the seemingly synonymous words *tzom* and *ta’anit*.

The word *ta’anit* (fast day) is rooted in the Hebrew word *inui* (affliction). Verb forms of the word *inui* are used to describe the afflictions which we are required to undergo on Yom Kippur (Lev. 16:19-21, 23:27-32, and Num. 29:7). Included in such afflictions are refraining from eating and drinking. Thus, technically, the word *ta’anit* does not primarily mean “fast”, but rather denotes any type of suffering, including fasting. This word is the common word for fast days in the Mishnah and the Talmud.

The word *tzom* (fast) or variations thereof appear close to fifty times in the Bible, and usually refer to abstinence from eating. It is probably related to the Hebrew word *tzama* (thirsty), as one who engages in a hunger-rite generally ends up thirsty. Nonetheless, Radak (in *Sefer HaShorashim* and in his commentary to I Kgs. 21:9) writes in the name of his father that the word *tzom* literally means “gathering”. To prove this assertion, he cites the Mishnah (*Chullin* 4:7) that mentions the *tzomet hagidim* of an animal’s leg, which is the place where the different sinews converge. That gathering of sinews is known as a *tzomet*, lending credence to the assertion that a *tzom* is also a gathering. (This usage is reflected in Modern Hebrew in which the word *tzomet* refers to the intersection of streets, e.g. *Tzomet Bar Ilan* in Jerusalem is the Bar Ilan Junction).

Rabbi Akiva Shlomo Deutsch-Dayan of Geneva proposes differentiating between the two seemingly synonymous words by suggesting that the word *tzom* is Biblical Hebrew, while the word *ta’anit* is Rabbinic Hebrew. However, he rejects this distinction due to the fact that the word *ta’anit* also appears in the Bible in the Book of Ezra (9:5). Although he admits that Ezra does sometimes use expressions that are closer to Rabbinic

Hebrew than Biblical Hebrew, he nonetheless rejects this explanation. Instead, Rabbi Akiva Shlomo Deutsch-Dayan of Geneva proffers the argument that the terms *tzom* and *ta’anit* reflect two different degrees of obligations for fasting. He argues that *tzom* refers to a fast day which is required by the letter of the law, while the word *ta’anit* refers to a fast that is declared on an *ad hoc* basis, or may be simply an accepted norm, but is not truly required. Thus, for example, the Fast of the Seventh is known as *Tzom Gedaliah* because Jeremiah prescribed that fast by prophetic fiat. On the other hand, the Fast of Esther is known as *Ta’anit Esther* because it was instituted in post-Talmudic times, and in the words of Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1520-1572), “This fast is not obligatory, and therefore one can be lenient when needed” (*Orach Chaim*, 886:2). Nonetheless, the fast days declared during the story of Purim are described in the Book of Esther as *tzomot* because at that time those fasts were obligatory.

Rabbi Avraham Etiel Gurwitz (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Ner Moshe in Jerusalem) takes a different approach. Basing himself of Maimonides’ usage of the two words in question, he explains that the terms *tzom* and *ta’anit* imply two different modes of fasting. The word *tzom* simply represents the pledge to refrain from eating and drinking. This is the term Maimonides uses in *Hilchot Nedarim* (“Laws of Vows”) when referring to personal fasts. On the other hand, the word *ta’anit* refers to the acceptance of a certain day as halachically special, and whose specialness precludes eating and drinking. Therefore, Maimonides uses the word *ta’anit* when detailing the laws of the special days of fasting in *Hilchot Ta’aniyot* (“Laws of Fast Days”).

In a passage customarily read as the Haftarah on Yom Kippur morning, the prophet Isaiah mocks sinful Jews for their insincere fasting. People would fast and outwardly feign repentance, but would nonetheless continue to sin. When tragedy would continue to befall them despite their “repentance”, they would rhetorically ask G-d: Why did we fast (*tzamnu*) and You did not see? We afflicted (*ininu*) our souls and You do not know.” Isaiah supplies the answer by asserting the inconvenient truth: Behold, on the day of your fast, you find desires and from all your bothers (i.e., your debtors) you approach (to demand payment)”. With this, Isaiah criticizes the hypocrisy of the fasts of sinners. Instead, Isaiah explains that G-d desires fasts which “break open the shackles of wickedness, untie the bonds of injustice, send free the oppressed, and cut off all iniquities” (Isa. 58:3-6).

Rabbi Yechiel Heilpern (1660-1742) cites an illuminating explication of this passage in the name of Rabbi Moshe Di’Segovia Benveniste (c. 1540). When the Jews asked “Why did we fast and You did not see?” they used the word *tzom* which implies gathering or joining (commensurate with Radak’s explanation above). In this, they insinuated that they do not deserve whatever calamities G-d had wrought upon them because they were all united as one. Indeed, the Talmud (*Keritot*

continued on page nine

TAMMUZ, AV AND THE ZODIAC – PART 2

From: Rodney

*Dear Rabbi,
Since the months with holidays are considered “good months”, are the months of Tammuz and Av considered “bad months” since they have days that commemorate the destruction of the Temple?*

Dear Rodney,

In the previous installment we explored the permutations of G-d’s name for these specific months, and how they affect their nature and the events that occur within them. In this part we’ll explore how the zodiac signs are related to and influence the quality of these months.

Sefer Yetzira, an ancient kabalistic text which pre-dates the Talmud (see Sanhedrin 65b), and contains teachings which are attributed to Abraham, makes the following associations (ch. 5): The month of Tammuz is governed by the sign of Cancer (Crab) and corresponds to the Hebrew letter ‘chet’ (ח), the sense of sight and the Tribe of Reuven. The month of Av is governed by the sign of Aries (Lion), and corresponds to the Hebrew letter ‘tet’ (ט), the sense of hearing and the Tribe of Shimon.

For now, we’ll elaborate on the teachings of Sefer Yetzira regarding the zodiac signs and leave the discussion of the Hebrew letters, human faculties and Tribes for the next and last part of this discussion.

Tammuz is governed by Cancer, the Crab. Just as the crab claw bites, leaving a painful wound, so too the historical events of Tammuz made a painful incision into the Jewish People and put them in the clasp of destruction.

Thus our Sages taught (Ta’anit 26b) that five great catastrophes occurred in Jewish history on the 17th of Tammuz: 1. Moses broke the tablets at Mount Sinai in response to the

sin of the Golden Calf; 2. The daily offerings in the First Temple were suspended during the siege of Jerusalem; 3. Jerusalem’s walls were breached, prior to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE; 4. The Roman general Apostamos burned a Torah scroll; 5. An idolatrous image was placed in the Sanctuary of the Holy Temple as an act of blasphemy and desecration.

Av is governed by Aries, the Lion. Just as a lion conquers, overwhelms its prey and devours, so too the events of Av brought about the conquest of the Jewish People and the destruction of the Holy Temple.

Thus, our Sages taught (ibid.) that five great catastrophes occurred in Jewish history on the 9th of Av: 1. As a result of the spies’ evil report, G-d forbids the Jews of the Wilderness from entering Land of Israel; 2. The First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, led by Nebuchadnezzar. 100,000 Jews were slaughtered and millions more exiled; and also the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, led by Titus. Some two million Jews died, and another one million were exiled. 3. The Bar Kochba revolt was crushed by Roman Emperor Hadrian; 4. Beitar, the city of the Jews’ last stand against the Romans, was captured and liquidated. Over 100,000 Jews were slaughtered; 5. The Temple area and its surroundings were plowed under by the Roman general Turnus Rufus. Jerusalem was rebuilt as a pagan city renamed Aelia Capitolina, and access to it was forbidden to Jews.

In the coming, concluding discussion, we will explore the remaining teachings of Sefer Yetzira regarding which of the Hebrew letters, the human senses and the Hebrew Tribes are related to and influence the quality of these months.

• Sources: *Bnei Yisaschar, on Tammuz and Av, section 1, by Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira (c. 1783-1841) of Dinov, Galicia, Poland*

What’s in a Word *continued from page eight*

6a) exclaims “Any fast day which does not include everyone — even the sinners of Israel — is not considered a fast day”. National unity is a necessity for effective fasting, and the Jews in Isaiah’s time claimed that they met that requirement. However, Isaiah responds that this picture is a façade, because in reality the sinful Jews only feigned unity with one another, but their hearts were not with each other. They pretended to love each other so that others would do favors for them, but they did not really love each other.

When the Jews claimed, “We afflicted our souls and You do not know” they essentially meant to argue that they gave up their bodily pleasures by fasting in order to better facilitate their

spiritual connection to G-d. Indeed, the purpose of fasting is to dull one’s physical senses in order to sharpen and attune one’s spiritual consciousness. The Jews of Isaiah’s time pretended that this was their intent in fasting, but Isaiah reveals otherwise. He charges that in reality they declared fast days with ulterior motives: they needed spare time from their regular schedules in order to harass those who owe them money and pester them for payment. In other words, they did not declare fast days for altruistic, noble purposes, but for their own convenience.

*Author’s note:
Le’Zechut Refuah Shleimah for Bracha bat Chaya Rachel*

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