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PARSHA INSIGHT

BY RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR

My Cup Runneth Over

“...and all the families of the Earth will bless themselves by you” (12:3)

As we get older we fall into two categories: Those who exercise and those who are waiting for their doctors to tell them to exercise.

I try to swim a few times a week. Outside the changing room of the pool there is a basin. Once in a while someone puts there a grubby looking white plastic *natlan* — a cup for *netilat yadayim*. It vanishes after about two days. Six weeks or so go by. Someone puts another cup there, but this time it's secured to the faucet with a serious plastic-covered metal cable. It vanishes after about two days. A few months ago someone went out and bought this beautiful *eau-de-nil*-colored metal washing cup with chrome handles. It must have set them back a hundred shekels or so.

I thought to myself, “This one isn't going to last two days — it's going to last two minutes.”

I was wrong. It was there the next time and the time after that. Two months later it's still there.

I thought to myself, “What's the mindset here? Why will someone take something cheap but leave something expensive?”

In Parshat Ekev, Rashi explains the unusual use of the word *ekev* to mean “if”. *Ekev* can also mean a heel. Says Rashi, a person must be as careful with the *mitzvot* that are typically down-trodden with the heel as he is with more serious sins.

I can rationalize taking a *cheepo* plastic cup, worth a couple of shekels at most, when I need it more than “them” — but to take an expensive item? What, me? I'm no thief!

That's how I understood the psychology.

My good friend and colleague, Rabbi Yitzchak Dallah, had a different, and, I think rather beautiful, explanation.

He told me a story that a wall in a certain town square was constantly being defaced with graffiti. The local authority had large signs put up on the wall saying, “NO GRAFFITTI!” The result was that the signs were defaced with graffiti. Someone had a bright idea: He got an artist to paint a beautiful mural on the wall. The result? No more graffiti.

When you show me how beautiful the world is, it elevates me into being a higher person. So why would I want to spoil it?

Avraham elevated the entire world. Before Avraham came along, the entire world was busy serving itself. Avraham raised the eyes of the world to gaze Heavenward; to ultimate beauty.

A famous Midrash tells how Avraham's father owned an idol emporium. One day Avraham took a hammer and smashed all the statues except for the largest one. He then took the hammer and placed it in the hands of that idol. When his father returned to the store he was furious at the destruction. “Who did this!?” he demanded. “The largest idol,” said Avraham. “Look! The hammer is in his hands.” “What nonsense!” said his father. “An idol can't do that.” Avraham replied, “So why do you worship them then?”

An idol is a way of getting out of the world what you want. You want rain? A quick offering to the “rain god”.

Continued on page eleven

TALMUD TIPS

ADVICE FOR LIFE

Based on the Talmudic Sages found in the seven pages of the Talmud studied each week in the Daf Yomi cycle

BY RABBI MOSHE NEWMAN

Sanhedrin 93-99

The Ba'al Teshuva's Place

Rabbi Abahu said, "In a place where *ba'alei teshuva* stand, not even one who was always completely righteous can stand."

Rabbi Abahu bases this well-known teaching on a verse in the writings of the Prophet Yeshayahu (57:19), as is explained on our *daf*. Our *gemara* points out that Rabbi Chiya bar Rabbi in the name of Rabbi Yochanan disagrees with Rabbi Abahu and puts the completely righteous one who never transgressed first (as one might very well think should be the case based on logic). Nevertheless, the Rambam rules according to the view of Rabbi Abahu in his work called the *Mishneh Torah*, in the Laws of Repentance, chapter 7 halacha 4:

"Our Sages stated, 'In the place where *ba'alei teshuva* stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand.' The level of *ba'alei teshuva* transcends the level of those who never sinned at all, since they overcome their inclination to transgress more so than a righteous person who never sinned."

Rashi in our *sugya* explains that the power of the returning Jew is so great that no one is worthy of standing (in a spiritual sense) "in front of him" or along with him in his unique spiritual place.

Another explanation for the higher level of the *ba'al teshuva* is given by Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler. He enlightens us on the apparent paradox of why one who returns after transgressing occupies a greater place of honor than one who was righteous his entire life. The purpose of the Creation — and especially Mankind — is to express the glory of the Creator. The righteous do this by always fulfilling the will of the Creator by themselves, so to speak. On the other hand, one who sins and then repents and returns to the way of G-d reveals another dimension of Divine glory. He shows that with the acceptance of merciful assistance from G-d to help begin his return, he is able to make a great effort to successfully conquer his previously unbeatable inclination to transgress.

Another way to help understand this teaching of Rabbi Abahu is the following: One who eats on the day preceding Yom Kippur is attributed as if he fasted for two days. Why? After a person eats on one day, it is often even harder for him to refrain from this activity of eating on the next day. He is accustomed to eating. In a similar fashion, since a *ba'al teshuva* has eaten from "forbidden fruits" by transgressing, it makes refraining from sin that much harder. Therefore, when he repents, does *teshuva* and returns to the way of G-d, he stands in a place where a person who never transgressed cannot reach. (Torah Temimah)

A personal observation, if you don't mind. As one who has taught and interacted with *ba'alei teshuva* over the years at Ohr Somayach, there are numerous times when I have heard the same reaction from students who have returned after going to eat Shabbat meals with host families who have been life-long observant:

"What a surprise! I am a *ba'al teshuva* (or in the process of becoming one) and look up to someone who is an FFB (*frum-* from-birth) as my spiritual superior. However, my hosts told me that they love to invite *ba'alei teshuva* into their homes since it greatly inspires them to improve their spiritual growth when they see how a Jew has changed to become observant, often with some degree of self-sacrifice. *They* look up to *me* for inspiration!"

I have no doubt, however, that in truth they all look up to *each other*. They all help one another in every way possible in their ongoing journeys of having closer connections with the Almighty, through constant growth in passion for the observance of *mitzvot* and the study of the Torah.

• Sanhedrin 99a

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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 - G-d 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.

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LOVE of the LAND

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

The First Aliya

Although historians refer to the arrival of Jews in Eretz Israel a century ago as the “First *Aliya*” the truly original *aliya* took place almost four millennia ago. This was when the Patriarch Avraham was commanded by G-d: “Go out from your country, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the Land that I will show you.” (*Bereishet* 12:1)

As we hear these words read in the synagogue this Shabbat we should take note of the fact that Avraham



was not told the location of this “Promised Land”, and yet he headed in the direction of the Land of Canaan which was to eventually become Eretz Israel.

In his commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) suggests that Avraham instinctively knew that the Land of Canaan was the G-dly place which would be given to him for his and his descendants’ spiritual perfection.

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 could 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.

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BY RABBI YIRMIYAHU ULLMAN

Sandek

From: Marshall

*Dear Rabbi,
I found your recent article on the Brit Milah ceremony very informative and interesting. There you mention the role of the "sandek". Could you please elaborate on the meaning of that word, the source for the honor, who the honor is given to, and what is its significance?*

Dear Marshall,

As you recall, *sandek* is the traditional term referring to the person who holds the baby in his lap during the circumcision, and usually assists the *mohel* by holding the child's legs.

According to one commentator (Otzar Dinim u'Minhagim, p. 222) the term *sandek* is related to a Greek word which implies "representative", suggesting that the *sandek* is an agent of the father. Thus, in the German-Jewish tradition, this person was called the *gefater*, the "godfather". It has also been suggested that the term *sandek* is derived from the Greek word *sunteknos* ('syn' — plus; 'tekno' — child), which would mean "companion of the child".

Rabbi Moses Isserles (Rema) records this practice of the *sandek* holding the baby on his thighs (Y.D. 265:11). The Biur HaGra (Y.D. 265:44) cites the Midrash Shochar Tov which bases this on the verse, "All my bones shall say: 'G-d who is like you?' (Ps. 35:10)". This Midrash states that every body part is used in the service of G-d, and that our thighs do so when supporting the baby during the *brit*.

The *sandek* must be a Jewish male, and every effort should be made to honor a pious person with this mitzvah. Mystical sources teach that the good qualities possessed by the *sandek* are passed to the baby (Maharil, Hilchot Milah). For this reason the honor should be given to someone whose thoughts are pure and who is worthy to sit next to Elijah the prophet (Migdal Oz, ch. 9). Many observe the custom that the two grandfathers, particularly when they are observant and G-d-fearing, are given the honor of *sandek* for the first two children. Usually the paternal grandfather is honored first, then the maternal grandfather.

The circumcision is compared to a sacrifice in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Accordingly, the *sandek* is compared to the sacrificial altar. Alternatively, the cir-

cumcision is compared to the *ketoret*, the daily incense brought before G-d in the Temple. As such, the *sandek* is compared to the pure-golden altar upon which the incense was offered.

Since the priest who would bring the incense on the altar was blessed with riches, in order that every priest be given a chance to receive this special blessing no priest performed this ritual more than once (Yoma 26a). In a similar vein, and also because being *sandek* is considered a blessing for long life, one does not serve as *sandek* for the same family for two of their children. This is in order that the merit of being *sandek* can be shared by many individuals (Rema 265:11, Maharil).

However, the Vilna Gaon (Y.D. 265:45) questions this custom. First, based on this reasoning, one should not serve as *sandek* more than once in general, not just regarding one family. Second, the Gra writes that even if the *sandek* is compared to one who offers incense, it does not necessarily follow that one who serves as *sandek* will become wealthy such that he should be limited to being *sandek* only once.

Nevertheless, the Aruch HaShulchan (Y.D. 265:34) concludes that we should abide by the custom recorded by the Rema. Still, citing the custom that the Rav of the city serves as the *sandek* for all the boys of the town, he justifies the practice by comparing the rabbi of the community to the Kohen Gadol (High Priest), who was entitled to offer sacrifices or incense at any time (Yoma 14a).

On the morning of the *brit* the *sandek* refrains from eating a regular meal. He immerses in the *mikveh* (ritual purity bath), dresses in his finest clothing, and dons his *tallit* prayer shawl during the ceremony. It is customary for the *sandek* to give a gift to the child or to the mother of the child, as token of appreciation for being given the honor. Similarly, there is a custom for the *sandek* to sponsor the celebratory meal in honor of the *brit* (Orchot Chayim, Hilchot Milah).

Since the *brit* is considered as a sacrifice and as an incense offering, the day of the *brit* for both the father and the *sandek* is considered a Yom Tov holiday. Thus, the community in which they pray is exempt from the *tachanun* penitential prayers until the *brit* is performed. After the *brit* the community would recite *tachanun*, but the father and *sandek* are personally exempt for the remainder of the day.

Letter & Spirit

Insights based on the writings of Rav S. R. Hirsch

BY RABBI YOSEF HERSHMAN

Introduction

Beginning this week we will present the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on the *parashah* and festivals.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch was a rabbi and educator who lived and taught in nineteenth century Germany. Through his leadership and writings he arrested almost half a century of unbroken ascendancy of Reform Judaism in Germany. Rav Hirsch offered a vision of traditional Judaism of unsurpassed beauty and power. His philosophy of *Torah Im Derech Eretz* is a statement that the Torah provides guidance to every aspect of life. Rav Hirsch was perhaps the first, and certainly the most persuasive rabbinic leader to teach how a Jew should navigate the challenges of the modern world.

In addition to being a captivating orator he was an eloquent and prolific writer. His commentaries to the Chumash, Tehillim, the Siddur and parts of Tanach, in addition to the Nineteen Letters, Horeb, and nine volumes of The Collected Writings, have a power of immediacy that has not diminished with the passage of time. Indeed, many of his works are translated every several decades into Hebrew and English, so as to enable the modern reader to understand his ideas in an up-to-date vernacular. Jews who engage the modern world in general, and those who are part of the *teshuva* movement in particular, continue to drink thirstily from the well-springs of Rav Hirsch's writings, which reflect in so vibrant a manner the eternal Divine response and guidance to navigating the vicissitudes of modern life.

Bereishet

By Design

We meet the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer hatov* at a young age. Our parents, pre-school teacher or first grade rebbe teach us to identify these two “voices” vying for control over our speech and action. It is Jiminy Cricket on our right shoulder, sounding the voice of conscience, and a pitchfork-bearing counter-character on the left, urging us to follow his evil designs.

As adolescents we learn that there are no characters — just two internal voices that comprise our own character. The *yetzer hara* is defined as a “drive” or “impulse” as though there were a force in us that urges

and impels us to do evil. While not as commandeering as the shoulder-devil's spell, this internal devil still has us bound in his grip, ready to comply with his whim.

Nothing could be further from these views than the very word *yetzer*, explains Rav Hirsch. Its root does not denote “forcing,” but “shaping.” Other conjugates of this root include *tzurah* (shape), *litzor* (to create), and *yotzer* (one who fashions). The form *yetzer* is a passive form — it is not a *yotzer*, one who shapes, but rather a *yetzer*, that which has been shaped. At the end of this week's *parashah*, G-d saw that the evil of man was great on the earth, and that all of his “*yetzer machshevet libo*” was nothing but evil. (*Ber. 6:5*) The *yetzer machshevet lev* in our verse is not what shapes our thoughts and action, but rather the *yetzer* is the shape — the formation or design — that is the *product* of our own thoughts.

To think, *lachshov*, is related to the term the Torah uses to describe the craft of the weaver — *maaseh choshuv*. The intellect is the loom that weaves together the threads of our knowledge and experience, good or evil. These raw materials are formed, like clay in a potter's hand, into *tzurot*, shapes. We may choose which colors to use, and what type of thread, in what proportion. The product is our own *yetzer* — a creation of our own design. And yet, once formed, we are drawn by this design — if it is good, we aspire toward good; if not, then the opposite is true.

For example, imagine one experiences a steady flow of *tzedakah* collectors, at his door or in his mailbox. One reaction might be, “these individuals are not doing enough to help themselves.” Another reaction might be one of compassion for those in a dire financial condition. These are the threads, and the question is how they will be woven into the fabric of this person's being. When he picks up the first thread, in the extreme, he does not give any charity. When that same thread is used over and over again, his fabric is hardened to the plight of others. He has designed a *yetzer hara*. Even more “worthy” causes get swept into the design of this *yetzer*. The compassion thread will create a pattern of giving. When used over and over again, more opportunities for giving will be discovered and capitalized on. He has designed a *yetzer hatov*. When both threads are used, the result might be a focused giving to educate and help fellow Jews out of poverty. The same experience can lead to dramatically different sustained inclinations.

Continued on page seven

Before the flood, G-d saw that the evil of man was so great that it rendered mankind irredeemable. This was because “every design of the thoughts of his heart was *nothing but evil every day*.” If *yetzer* meant the so-called “evil impulse,” then it would not be proper to refer to “every” evil impulse (there is only one). Nor would it be proper to refer to it as “only” evil. Rather, *yetzer* refers to the multiple designs and ideas that are formed in and by man’s heart. Here, man had already brought great evil upon the earth; and the future was foreboding, because every design of the thoughts of his heart — his inclinations and aspirations — was nothing but evil, at all times. But there was one man, Noach, who weaved his threads together to form a different design — a pattern of good, a pattern of G-d. May we learn from his example.

• *Commentary to Bereishet 6:5*

Noach

The Tower of Broadband

The global community is more accessible now than it has ever been — at least since the generation of the Tower of Bavel. Mankind has harnessed the power of the world community — the cyber community — to achieve many goals. Modern telecommunications has muted language and cultural divides, allowing collaboration and creating irreversible economic, social and political interdependence. But, armed with the might of this community, are we making the same mistakes that they did? Are our goals any more worthy than theirs?

The generation of the Tower of Bavel was the first to recognize the great power of community, understanding that if all forces join together, man can overcome and master nature. They set out to build a tower reaching the heavens. Their aim: *naaseh lanu shem* (“to make for ourselves a name”) — the might, renown and glory of the community. Community became the end, instead of the means. Their tower was intended to be an everlasting monument to the power of the community, and its preeminence over the individual. Because they built on foundations other than G-d’s moral law, instead of community complementing the individual, as it must, their community defeated the individual. Man was no longer called up to serve G-d, assisted by community; rather man was called upon to serve community, for its own sake — a view that spelled disaster for the moral mission of the world.

The earlier generation of the Flood was guilty of great moral corruption and the subsequent breakdown

of civic society — the land was full of *chamas*, wrongdoing facilitated by cunning. Once the conscience, along with the welfare of society was destroyed, seeing no future for mankind, G-d wiped out humanity and began anew with the family of Noach. After the Flood, G-d swore that He will never again want to destroy all of mankind. Instead, in order than man not reach the same depths of depravation, He designed and directed a plan of education, aimed at leading man to the knowledge of G-d. The plan, explains Rav Hirsch, is known to us as “history,” and the Tower of Bavel is the first chapter.

In that chapter, G-d’s response to the tower was to disperse the people, dismembering their global community by making communication impossible. The purpose was twofold: to disrupt their goal, and to further diversify the experience of mankind on earth. The setting for G-d’s educational plan had already begun to take shape after the flood: changes in world climate and land and sea formations would dictate profound differences in human experience across the globe. Instead of a single family or community, where corruption at one end would quickly infect the whole, humanity is dispersed so that it may be able to rejuvenate itself: “a corrupt branch, after it has passed through all stages of human delusion, will make way for a hardier, more robust one, which will start a new life.” The cumulative effect of the varied experiences of mankind — history — ought to teach man that his mission is higher than accumulating wealth or indulging in pleasures, and lead him to the awareness that those, too, are only a means to the end of service of G-d.

As Rav Hirsch writes,

The events of our chapter are not the only instance in history where lust for glory prompted the building of a “tower” and the indiscriminate consumption of all else, in order to obtain the building blocks for its own triumphs. These events are a recurring phenomenon in world history.

Imaginary towers of glory have come and gone. Societies have built them. Individuals have built them. But our position in history is unique; we are the generation of a different tower, and it is up to us to set the goal of this tower. Internet towers have harnessed the power of community in a way unimagined, even by the builders of the Tower of Bavel. We crowdsource, crowdfund, and even provide real time information to each other about the whereabouts of police officers on nearly every stretch of road across the globe. At the same time, the reach of the individual is greatly expanded — a word written is instantly transmitted to millions,

Continued on page eight

oceans away. New modes and platforms of networking have enabled individuals to build virtual empires of “friends, “contacts,” and “followers.” But what is this online community servicing? And what are the individual’s aims? Is there any higher moral purpose being pursued by means of this most potent tool? Or, is it a community intoxicated with its own power, glorifying the artificial means at its disposal?

As citizens of this digital society, the answer is up to us. G-d descended to see the city and the tower that they built. (*Ber. 11:5*) G-d wished to investigate the matter before making His judgment. There is nothing wrong with building a city or tower per se. The judgment would depend on the purpose for which it was built, and the attitude that accompanied their actions. When He comes to pass judgment on our towers, the outcome will likewise depend on our goals. Instead of “*naaseh lanu shem*”, may we be able to show our purposeful use of this tower to glorify His name — *v’naaseh lo shem*.

• *Commentary to Bereishet 11:4; The Nineteen Letters, Letter Six*

Lech Lecha

The Promised Land:

Milk and Honey or Famine and War?

This week, Avraham sets off, by G-d’s instruction, to the Promised Land. Barely settled in the future homeland of his children, his first trial is famine; his second is war.

This was a war between five kings in the Jordan valley against the mighty king K’darlaomer and three of his allies. K’darlaomer and his allies plow through Eretz Canaan and its surrounding regions, conquering the five kings. Upon hearing that his nephew Lot was taken captive, Avraham galvanizes his “army” of the 318 men of his household and briskly conquers the victorious kings. And if the textual description was not overtly miraculous enough, our Sages add that the choice weapon of Avraham’s men was the dust of the land, which, when thrown, became arrows perfectly aimed at their targets. A miraculous defeat by the Hand of G-d.

These events foreshadow our national history. The four kings represent the four empires who subjugate the Jews in exile — in fact, two of them, Bavel and Madai, are named as kings. They will each, successively, conquer Eretz Yisrael and its surrounding regions. Ultimately, they will all fall into the hands of *melech hamashiach*, who will triumph by the power of G-d.

But there is more that we learn from this story. Avraham quickly discovered that the Land of Israel does not, by its nature, provide material prosperity and political independence. Quite the contrary — it is unpredictable in its yield and vulnerable to invaders. But precisely for this reason was it chosen. Peace and prosperity in this Land will be granted or withheld directly by G-d. It is situated at the crossroads where Europe, Asia and Africa meet, ensuring it will be caught in the crosshairs of conflict and war between other nations.

According to Rav Hirsch, the trials of Avraham serve as a warning to us, those “destined to live in the environs of the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah”: If there is no countervailing moral force, abundance and luxury are the natural enemies of freedom. Only by devotion to G-d and His Torah can the Jew hope to find peace and prosperity in the Land of Israel.

These features of Eretz Yisrael are alive and well today. Israel’s economic, political and military conditions abound with paradox and disproportion. One small lake is the water source for millions. The precarious red and black lines of the Kinneret are a constant reminder that we depend solely on G-d to keep the fountain flowing. As the “start-up nation,” wowing the world with our advances, one would expect great prosperity and luxury to be our lot. But low salaries and high living costs make it exponentially harder to even own a home in Eretz Yisrael than in most other countries. With all of our cutting edge defense technology, we still cannot protect ourselves from the kitchen knives of our teenage Arab neighbors. And even when we have the defense tools in our possession, we are often prevented by the force of world politics to adequately protect ourselves against the 200 million Arabs who wish to drive us into the sea.

As the resettlers of the Land, we repeatedly observe what our father Avraham did: This Land does not, by its nature, provide material prosperity and political independence. Rather, these are given — or withheld — by the Hand of G-d. Investing effort to build wealth and achieve protection — Intel and the Iron Dome — will not, by itself, yield enduring results. If we wish to conquer the Land, and bring upon it peace and prosperity, we must follow the path set forth by Avraham — a life of passionate commitment to G-d and his Torah. If we can do this right we might just merit a different sort of disproportion, the likes of the one seen when Avraham’s meager squad of men conquered the mighty regional powers. May it be speedily in our days.

• *Commentary to Bereishet 14:1*

PRAYER Essentials

BY RABBI YITZCHAK BOTTON

Directing the Heart

“One who prays must direct his eyes downward and his heart upward.” (Yevamot 105b, Rambam in Laws of Prayer 5:4)

The heart represents the seat of one’s concentration. Therefore, an instruction to direct one’s heart upward implies that one should concentrate on his prayers, directing them to G-d. The instruction to direct one’s eyes downward towards the ground is in order for the worshiper not to be distracted. Since a person’s thoughts are affected by what he sees, if he would be looking straight ahead the different things happening around might cause him to become distracted from his prayers (See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 97).

“For you are dust and to dust you will return.” (Ber. 3:19)

In yet a deeper sense, the mentioning of one’s eyes can be understood as a reference to the “mind’s eye”. One of the implications in directing the mind’s eye downward towards the ground can be seen as a directive to remind a person that his physical body originates from earth, where he will inevitably be forced to return one day. In contrast to this, the heart is directed

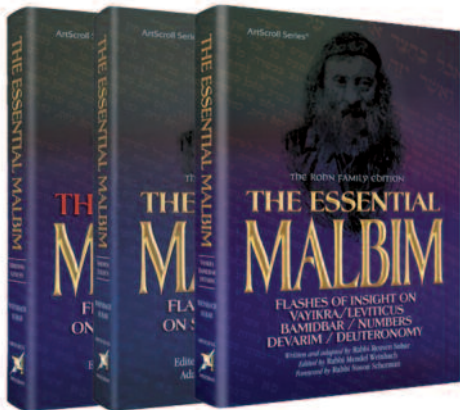
upwards, to remind a person that his main concern should be for his soul, which comes from under G-d’s Heavenly throne of glory. This thought echoes the verse, “Thus the dust (i.e. the body) returns to the ground, as it was, and the spirit returns to G-d, Who gave it.” (Kohelet 12:7)

With this idea in mind the worshiper will be reminded to pray for the eternal soul that is within him, and for that which is truly important, instead of just asking for material things, which are often in the end of little and no lasting benefit.

According to the above we can understand why prayer helps change a person’s perspective on life. Talking to G-d forces a person to think more truthfully. The idea of G-d’s eternity will cause a person to think more responsibly, realizing how far-reaching his actions are. Consequently, by talking to G-d and confiding in Him, a person will come to banish the foolish wants and desires from his heart. For, how can one face G-d with his trivial requests without being embarrassed, knowing that G-d is aware of his thoughts? Rather, one who is praying to G-d should make himself a proper vessel for G-d’s truth.

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WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

Energizing the Tired and Exhausted

In one of Isaiah's prophecies (that happens to be read as the Haftarah for Parshat Lech Lecha), he describes G-d as "The Giver of strength to the tired (*yaef*), and to those without energy, an abundance of might" (Isa. 40:29). The first part of this verse is paraphrased in a blessing recited every morning, "*baruch... ha'noten la'yaef koach*". It is also commonly appended to the end of different works of Torah literature as the author's way of expressing that his ability to endure weariness while authoring his work is from Above. However, there are another two words in the Bible which mean "tired": *ayef* and *yagea*. In fact, the modern Hebrew word for "tired" is not *yaef*, but *ayef* (which actually appears in the Bible a few more times than *yaef* does). So what, if anything, is the difference between the words *yaef* and *ayef* and how do they differ from *yagea*?

Some explain that *yaef* and *ayef* are actually synonymous and are indicative of a linguistic phenomenon known as metathesis (that is, the transposition of sounds or letters in a word). Thus, *ayef* and *yaef* are really the same word, but the first two letters switch positions (i.e. *ayef* is spelled AYIN-YUD-FEH and *yaef* is spelled YUD-AYIN-FEH). Indeed, Rabbi Yishaya of Trani (1180-1250), an important Italian Talmudist known as the Rid, compares the case of *ayef/yaef* to another well-known case of metathetical synonyms: *kesev/keves* which both mean "lamb" in the Bible.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab (1908-1995), on the other hand, takes a different approach. When discussing the morning blessing that refers to G-d giving strength to the tired, Rabbi Schwab focuses on the word choice of using *yaef* for that blessing instead of *ayef*. On the surface, the phraseology of the blessing simply mimics Isaiah's above-mentioned vision. However, Rabbi Schwab understands that there is more to this. He explains that while *ayef* and *yaef* both mean "tired," they denote two different degrees of tiredness: *ayef* denotes somebody who is tired but still retains some energy, while *yaef* is somebody who is so tired that he has exhausted all his energy. For this reason, when praising G-d as the Giver of energy to the tired, we use

the word *yaef* for maximum effect. In other words, not only does G-d strengthen those who are tired, He also energizes those who are completely exhausted.

Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) explains that the word *ayef* denotes extreme fatigue to the point of fainting. Because of this, a borrowed meaning of the word *ayef* is "thirsty" (e.g., see Job 22:7 and Ps. 63:2) — as Radak notes in *Sefer ha'Shorashim* — because dehydration is generally what causes tired people to faint.

Rabbi Yosef of Saragossa (d. 1420), a student of Rabbi Nissim of Gerona (1320-1380), explains the difference between *ayef/yaef* and *yagea*. He understands that both mean "tired" in the same way, but connote tiredness resulting from different causes. *Ayef* refers to one who is tired after having repeatedly performed certain movements. In this case it is the persistence of action which makes one tired. The word *yagea*, in contrast, refers specifically to tiredness resulting from the speed of one's actions. In other words, one described as *ayef* is tired and worn out from continuous activity, while one who is *yagea* has depleted his energies by performing his deeds too fast and overexerting himself.

Malbim also understands that *ayef* and *yagea* refer to tiredness resulting from different causes. The word *ayef* refers to the regular state of tiredness which one with natural low-energy levels experiences, while the word *yagea* refers to tiredness which is the result of (over)exerting oneself. In fact, the very word *yagea* (which only appears in the Bible three times, in Deut. 25:18, II Sam. 17:2, and Ecc. 1:8) is related to the root of the verb *yaga* ("he toiled").

So if you are wary of weariness and want to avoid fatigue, remember that all energy comes from G-d. As one popular figure was wont to say, "Say your prayers, eat your Wheaties, take your vitamins, and you will never go wrong."

Ellyu Nishmat my mother Bracha bat R' Dovid
and my grandmother Shprintza bat R' Meir

BY RABBI ZE'EV KRAINES

It's the Thought that Counts

The most important part of a mezuzah is invisible. The thoughts and intentions of the *sofer* breathe soul into the letters, transforming a piece of animal hide into a pulsating “power-pack.”

As the *sofer* sits down to write a mezuzah he must focus and say: “Behold I am writing for the sake of the holiness of mezuzah.” If these words were in the *sofer*'s mind but not verbally expressed at the outset, the mezuzah is invalid. Although this one declaration is effective for the duration of the entire writing process, if the *sofer* takes a break for eating, sleeping, or other activities, ideally, he should repeat the declaration upon resuming.

That's not all. A special declaration is verbalized before the writing of every one of the many Divine names in the mezuzah: “Behold I am writing for the sake of the holiness of the Divine Name.” Before adding this enhanced level of intention, the *sofer* first sanctifies the ink on his quill by writing a letter in the scroll.

Aside from these thoughts, exceptionally learned *sofrim* infuse their writing with kabbalistic intentions, especially when inscribing the Divine names. A *sofer* must also keep in mind at all times the many intricate rules and protocols of proper halachic writing.

Once he begins writing the name of Hashem he is forbidden to interrupt. I once arrived at the home of a *sofer* for a meeting. I knew he was there, but for some reason he did not respond to the doorbell. Finally, he appeared and explained apologetically that even if I was David, King of Israel, he could not have come to the door earlier as he was in the middle of writing the

Name of G-d.

The Mishnah records that a certain scribe had mastered a special method of writing the four letters of G-d's name simultaneously with four quills tied to his fingers. He mastered this to ensure that the Name would never be in an incomplete state.

All of this requires extraordinary focus, diligence, and devotion. It is no wonder that the Sages write that the most important quality of a *sofer* is his “fear of Heaven” — even more important than the beauty of his script. Additionally, our rabbis have asserted that the piety of the *sofer* enhances the holiness and power of the *mezuzot* that he writes. Many *sofrim* are accustomed to purifying themselves before writing by immersing in a mikveh.

Fear of Heaven is a crucial quality for a more basic reason. Many of the errors that disqualify a mezuzah are undetectable, and some cannot be corrected later. An unscrupulous *sofer* can pass on an invalid mezuzah as kosher, with only Heaven as his witness. This is another reason why a person should be careful to purchase his scrolls from a reputable source.

We often are happy to spend money purchasing a beautiful mezuzah cover to grace our home. But we are in shock when we discover what a properly written kosher scroll costs. We must just remember: It's the thought that counts!

*Got a mezuzah question or story?
Email rabbi@ohrsandton.com or submit on
my website mymezuzahstory.com*

Parsha Insights...continued from page one

You want sun? No problem! A couple of libations to the “sun god”. Avraham was smashing the idea that life is about getting what you want.

Avraham looked into the world and saw design. He saw purpose. He saw that life demands connecting to that purpose. He gave the world the elevated life.

The Midrash says: Rav Yitzchak said, “A traveler was journeying from place to place, and he saw a mansion ablaze with light. He said, ‘Is it possible that this mansion is without a master?’ The owner of the mansion then peeked out and said: ‘I am the owner of the mansion.’ So, too, our father Avraham said, ‘Is it possible

that the world is without a Master?’ G-d then looked out at him and said, ‘I am the Master of the world.’” (Midrash Rabbah 39:1)

“*These are the generations of the heavens and the earth in their creation*” (written “*B'hibaram*”) (Bereishet 2:4). Don't read the word as “*B'hibaram*,” but (rearrange the world's lettering and read it as) “*B'Avraham*” — for Avraham. (Bereishet Rabbah 12:9)

When G-d created the heavens and the earth, He had in mind someone like Avraham, someone who would raise the eyes of the world from its self-serving graffiti and look to the sublime.

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