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PARSHA INSIGHT

BY RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR

It's Nothing, Really!

"I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" (45:3)

How many times when you apologize to someone do you hear: *"It's nothing, really! Why are you making such a fuss out of it? What did you do, after all? Forget it! It's really nothing!"*

Now for some people, saying "It's nothing" is genuine forgiveness. It really is nothing to them. However, most of the time what people really mean is *"It's nothing really?! You must be joking! I don't even want to hear your voice. I just want to see you squirm around in front of me. I'm not letting you off the hook for anything. Apologize away. It's nothing really!"*

A person who refuses to accept an honest apology can make himself guiltier than the "guilty party". Just as Judaism prescribes the appropriate behavior for one who needs to apologize, so too there is a correct way to behave towards someone seeking forgiveness. Indeed, someone who turns a plea for forgiveness into an opportunity for vengeance, however subtle it might be, will very probably end up committing a graver sin than the original offense.

Picture Yosef's brothers standing in front of him with utter humiliation and guilt at facing their young brother whom they had wronged so terribly. Now they were facing a king who had the power of life and death over them. How did Yosef react in this situation? Human nature would suggest that Yosef would, at least, have laid out in some detail all the hardship and suffering they had caused him. However, what we read in the Torah sounds more like an extended "Thank You note" than a reproach.

"And now, be not distressed, nor reproach yourselves, for it was to be a provider that G-d sent me ahead of you. Thus, G-d has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you. It is not you who sent me here, but G-d."

The Torah teaches us that, as important as it is to say "Sorry", it's equally important to know how to say "I forgive you" in a way that genuinely comforts the offender.

• Source: Da'at Torah

PLEASE JOIN US...

...in saying Tehillim/Psalms and a special prayer to G-d for the safety and security of all of Klal Yisrael in these times of conflict and conclude with the following special prayer:

אֲחֵינוּ בְּלִבְיַת יִשְׂרָאֵל
"Our brothers, the entire family of Israel, who are delivered into distress and captivity, whether they are on sea or dry land – may G-d have mercy on them and remove them from stress to relief, from darkness to light, from subjugation to redemption now, speedily and soon."

Shavuot 16 - 22

Remembering and Guarding Shabbat

A beraita teaches: Zachor (“Remember” – in Shmot 20:8) and “Shamor” (“Guard” — in Devarim 5:12) were said in one utterance (“b’dibbur echad”) — a feat that a mouth cannot speak and an ear cannot hear.

These two words are actually what we see in two different verses in the Torah. “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it” is written in the Torah regarding the First Tablets of the Ten Commandments (Shmot 20:8) — and “Guard the Shabbat day to sanctify it” is written regarding the Second Tablets (Devarim 5:12).

Our *sugya* records that Rabbi Abahu learns an important Jewish law based on the fact that *Zachor* and *Shamor* were said simultaneously. He states, “Women are obligated in the mitzvah of *Kiddush* according to Torah law, since the verse states ‘Remember’ and ‘Guard’ — which teaches that whoever is obligated in the mitzvah to ‘Guard’ is also obligated in the mitzvah to ‘Remember’ — and since women have a Torah obligation to ‘Guard’ (since it’s a ‘negative commandment’, a mitzvah *to not do* certain activities on Shabbat called ‘*melacha*’ — which obligates men and women), they likewise have a Torah obligation to ‘Remember,’ meaning, according to Rabbi Abahu, that they also have a ‘positive commandment’ — a mitzvah *to do* something, taught here as being the mitzvah to make *Kiddush* for the Shabbat.”

Although women are generally *exempt* from a mitzvah that needs to be done at a specific time (also known as a *mitzvah she’hazman grama*), and we would think they should be exempt from the Torah mitzvah of making *Kiddush* on Shabbat (which needs to be done on a specific day of the week), Rabbi Abahu teaches that the mitzvah of *Kiddush* is an exception to the rule, and that women are indeed *obligated* to fulfill this mitzvah according to Torah law.

Tosefot cites a *gemara* in *Masechet Nazir* (4a) which seems to indicate that the mitzvah to make *Kiddush* over a cup of wine on Shabbat is not a Torah mitzvah, but rather a Rabbinical mitzvah. This seems to pose a contradiction to our *gemara* which states that *Kiddush* is in fact a Torah mitzvah. One answer that Tosefot offers, which seems to be the main approach of the authorities, is that there is definitely a mitzvah of Torah origin to say the words of the *Kiddush* — as we do in the blessing of *Kiddush* that is said over a cup of wine — but the requirement to do so “over a cup of wine” is only of Rabbinical origin. A second approach that Tosefot suggests is that saying *Kiddush* over a cup of wine is indeed a Torah mitzvah, but the *halacha* that the person saying the *Kiddush* should also drink from the cup is a Rabbinical mitzvah.

Rashi and the Ramban in Chumash both explain that the mitzvah “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it” applies to every day of the week. The Ramban cites the *Mechilta* that explains that this mitzvah entails constantly remembering the Shabbat — every day of the week. By doing this we will constantly be reminded of the Creation, and we will constantly acknowledge that there is a Creator who gave us the Shabbat as a special sign between Him and us that He is the Creator of everything and guides our way throughout life.

Based on this idea, the Ramban notes that we should count the days of the week in the order of their relationship to Shabbat, thereby fulfilling this Torah mitzvah. Instead of giving each day of the week a name based on “whatever” — such as the sun and the moon — we should call the first day of the week “*yom rishon b’Shabbat*” and the next day “*yom sheini b’Shabbat*” — and so on. By doing so we fulfill the mitzvah of constantly remembering Shabbat. (Therefore, when we say the *Shir shel Yom* — “the Psalm of the day” — as we do in the morning prayers, we preface it by saying: “Today is *the first day to Shabbat*, on which day the Levites would say in the Beit Hamikdash” with intent to fulfill the Torah mitzvah to “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it”.)

• *Shavuot 20b*

PARSHA Q&A?

1. What threatening words did Yehuda say to Yosef?
 2. Why did Yehuda say his missing brother died?
 3. Why was Yehuda the one to plead for Binyamin?
 4. What do we learn from Yosef telling his brothers, “Go up to my father”?
 5. What two things did the brothers see that helped prove that he was really Yosef?
 6. Why did Binyamin weep on Yosef’s neck?
 7. Why did Yosef send old wine to Yaakov?
 8. What did Yosef mean when he said, “Don’t dispute on the way”?
 9. What happened to Yaakov when he realized Yosef was alive?
 10. Why did G-d tell Yaakov, “Don’t fear going down to Egypt”?
 11. “I will bring you up” from Egypt. To what did this allude?
 12. What happened to the property that Yaakov acquired in Padan Aram?
 13. Who was the mother of Shaul ben HaCanaanit?
 14. When listing Yaakov’s children, the verse refers to Rachel as “Rachel, wife of Yaakov.” Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah are not referred to as Yaakov’s wives. Why?
 15. Yosef harnessed his own chariot instead of letting a servant do it. Why?
 16. Why were shepherds abhorrent to the Egyptians?
 17. Why did Yosef pick the weakest brothers to stand before Pharaoh?
 18. What blessing did Yaakov give Pharaoh when he left his presence?
 19. Yosef resettled the land of Egypt, moving the people from city to city. What were his two motives for this?
 20. Whose fields were not bought by Yosef?
-

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this week’s questions! - All references are to the verses and Rashi’s commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 44:18 - He threatened that Yosef would be stricken with leprosy, like Pharaoh when he took Sarah from Avraham. Alternatively, Yehuda threatened to kill Yosef and Pharaoh.
 2. 44:20 - Yehuda feared that if he said his missing brother was alive, Yosef would demand to see him.
 3. 44:32 - He was the one who took “soul” responsibility for him.
 4. 45:9 - We learn that *Eretz Yisrael* is higher than all other lands.
 5. 45:12 - He was circumcised like they were, and he spoke *lashon hakodesh*.
 6. 45:14 - Binyamin wept for the destruction of *Mishkan Shilo* built in Yosef’s territory.
 7. 45:23 - Elderly people appreciate old wine.
 8. 45:24 - He warned that if they engage in halachic disputes, they might not be alert to possible travel dangers.
 9. 45:27 - His *ruach hakodesh* (prophetic spirit) returned.
 10. 46:3 - Because Yaakov was grieved to leave Eretz Canaan.
 11. 46:4 - That Yaakov would be buried in Eretz Canaan.
 12. 46:6 - He traded it for Esav’s portion in the Cave of Machpelah.
 13. 46:10 - Dina *bat* Yaakov.
 14. 46:19 - Rachel was regarded as the mainstay of the family.
 15. 46:29 - Yosef wanted to hasten to honor his father.
 16. 46:34 - Because the Egyptians worshipped sheep.
 17. 47:2 - So Pharaoh wouldn’t see their strength and draft them.
 18. 47:10 - That the waters of the Nile should rise to greet Pharaoh.
 19. 47:21 - In order to remind them that they no longer owned the land, and to help his family by removing the stigma of being strangers.
 20. 47:22 - The Egyptian priests.
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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

Naburia — Home of Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i

Not far from Tzefat is a tomb reputed to be that of the Talmudic Sage Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i. Aside from his Aggadic interpretations in the Babylonian Talmud, which gained great respect from his colleagues, this Sage was the center of a dramatic historic incident recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud.

A relative of Bar Kochba (who led a revolt against the Romans), Rabbi Eliezer fasted daily and prayed in Beitar that G-d should not sit in judgment, which might stifle



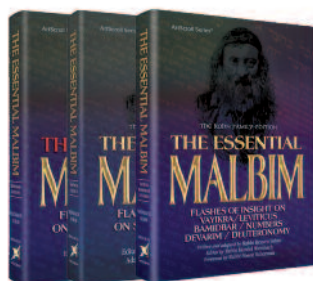
the revolt. Bar Kochba, however, was tricked into believing that Rabbi Eliezer was in collusion with the Romans and, as a result, Bar Kochba killed him.

A Heavenly voice then informed him that as punishment for “breaking the arm of Israel and blinding its eye” his arms would become useless and his eyes darkened. After a three-and-a-half year siege of Beitar the Romans succeeded in penetrating its walls, killing Bar Kochba and crushing the revolt.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

With the discovery of the goblet in Binyamin's sack, the brothers are confused. Yehuda alone steps forward and eloquently but firmly petitions Yosef for Binyamin's release, offering himself instead. As a result of this act of total selflessness, Yosef finally has irrefutable proof that his brothers are different people from the ones who cast him into the pit, and so he now reveals to them that he is none other than their brother. The brothers shrink from him in shame, but Yosef consoles them, telling them that everything has been part of G-d's plan. He sends them back to their father Yaakov with a message to come and reside in the land of Goshen. At first, Yaakov cannot accept the news, but when he recognizes hidden signs in the message which positively identify the sender as his son Yosef, his spirit is revived. Yaakov together with all his family and possessions sets out for Goshen. G-d communicates with Yaakov in a vision at night. He tells him not to fear going down to Egypt and its negative spiritual consequences,

because it is there that G-d will establish the Children of Israel as a great nation even though they will be dwelling in a land steeped in immorality and corruption. The Torah lists Yaakov's offspring and hints to the birth of Yocheved, who will be the mother of Moshe Rabbeinu. Seventy souls in total descend into Egypt, where Yosef is reunited with his father after 22 years of separation. He embraces his father and weeps, overflowing with joy. Yosef secures the settlement of his family in Goshen. Yosef takes his father Yaakov and five of the least threatening of his brothers to be presented to Pharaoh, and Yaakov blesses Pharaoh. Yosef instructs that, in return for grain, all the people of Egypt must give everything to Pharaoh, including themselves as his slaves. Yosef then redistributes the population, except for the Egyptian priests who are directly supported by a stipend from Pharaoh. The Children of Israel become settled, and their numbers multiply greatly.



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BY RABBI YIRMIYAHU ULLMAN

Noahide Laws

From: Maggy Moens

*Dear Rabbi,
I am a non-Jewish woman who loves to browse your website because there are pearls of wisdom in it. I have a problem. I read that the commands given to Noah must be obeyed by all of mankind. Jews are no missionaries. Who shall teach these commands in the right way to non-Jewish people who seek to live a life pleasant in the eyes of the Divine Architect? I know very well that your flock is enormous and that I am “stealing” your time. Thank you for answering me, if you have time.*

Dear Maggy,

Thank you for your kind words. Consider yourself part of the flock, and it’s a pleasure to answer your question, which interests others as well.

Before the giving of the Torah there was no specific legal definition of a Jew because the Law had not been given yet. This means that the people who came to Mount Sinai were not Jews in a legal sense. In fact, the Revelation at Mount Sinai can be viewed as a mass conversion to Judaism of millions of descendants of Abraham. In this sense, every Jew is descended from a convert — some go back to Sinai, and some to later in history.

The idea of conversion after Mount Sinai is mentioned in the Torah itself and we are exhorted more than thirty times to treat converts kindly. One example is, “When a convert lives among you in your land, do not oppress him. The convert shall be like one of your citizens and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:33-34) However, in general we do not encourage conversion. Judaism does not consider non-Jews to be condemned

to damnation. We believe that a person can be completely righteous and merit the World-to-Come without conversion, by adhering to the basic moral laws revealed by G-d to Noah. If a gentile keeps the seven Noahide laws, he merits a portion in the World-to-Come, and there is no imperative for him to become Jewish.

These Seven Universal Laws include six prohibitions:

- Idolatry
- Blasphemy and cursing the Name of G-d
- Murder
- Robbery and theft
- Immorality and forbidden relations
- Removing and eating a limb from a live animal

And in addition, they include one requirement:

Establishment of a justice system and courts of law to enforce the other six laws.

Any non-Jew who keeps these laws in all their detail because G-d commanded to do so in the Torah as revealed through Moses, and not simply out of logic, is considered a righteous gentile deserving the World-to-Come.

Rambam writes (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 8:10): “Moses was commanded from the mouth of G-d to convince all the inhabitants of the world to observe the commandments given to the Children of Noah.” However, it may be that this is only so when the Jews are clearly recognized as the Chosen People of G-d and will be listened to. If that is not the case (as has been for well over two thousand years), there may no longer be an obligation to do so. Nevertheless, if non-Jews sincerely seek to learn and observe the Noahide laws from authoritative rabbis, they would certainly be accepted.

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WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

Speaking in Tongues

In the Hebrew language there are two different words for “language” — *safa* and *lashon*. If taken hyper-literally, these two words actually refer to body parts. *Safa* means “lip” and *lashon* means “tongue”. The connection between lips and tongues to language is obvious, but why do we need two different words for language? Regarding Hebrew’s role as the language spoken by pre-Babel civilization, the Bible (Gen. 11:1) refers to their single language as a *safa* (“lip”), but the Hebrew language is traditionally called *Lashon HaKodesh* (literally, “the Holy Tongue”, but more loosely, “the Holy Language”) or *Lashon Ivri* (“the Hebrew Tongue”, or “the Hebrew language”). In Modern Hebrew, the word for “language” is *safa*, and Hebrew is called *Safa Ha’Ivrit* (“the Hebrew lip”, or the “the Hebrew language”). Why are there two different words for language and what is the difference between them?

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953) explains the difference between these two terms as follows: One’s “lip” is an external feature of his body, while one’s “tongue” is an internal feature. Consequently, one can only refer to a language as a *lashon* (“tongue”) when its speakers embody the inner meaning of that language. By contrast, a language can be called a *safa* (“lip”) when its speakers embody only the technical, external features of the language, but not its core values. As a result, we refer to Hebrew as *Lashon HaKodesh* because we strive to internalize the moral and esteemed values signified by that language. Although the sinners of the generation of Babel spoke the same language, they only applied it externally, without incorporating its essence. The moral standards and expectations represented by *Lashon HaKodesh* are actually alluded to in the story of Joseph and his brothers. When describing the encounters between the viceroy of Egypt (crypto-Joseph) and his brothers, the Torah mentions that Reuven told his brothers that their difficulties were a punishment for their mistreatment of Joseph. The Torah explains that Joseph’s brothers felt free to speak frankly about Joseph in front of the Egyptian viceroy, because they did not realize that he understood *Lashon HaKodesh*. About this, the Torah writes: “And they did not know that Joseph was listening, because a translator was between them” (Genesis 42:23).

Rashi, in his commentary there, explains that throughout his encounters with his brothers, Joseph purposely employed a translator to serve as an intermediary between him and his brothers. Since Joseph pretended to speak only Egyptian, and his brothers only spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*, the translator needed to speak both *Lashon HaKodesh* and Egyptian, implying to Joseph’s brothers that the viceroy himself did not understand *Lashon HaKodesh* without the aid of the translator. Many commentators, including Rashi, explain that when Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers, he began to speak to them in *Lashon HaKodesh* — without an interpreter — in order to prove that he was really whom he claimed to be.

However, Nachmanides (1194-1270) writes (in his commentary to Genesis 45:12) that the fact that Joseph spoke *Lashon HaKodesh* could not serve as proof of his identity. Nachmanides reasons that it would not have been out of the ordinary for an Egyptian to speak *Lashon HaKodesh* because the inhabitants of neighboring Canaan spoke *Lashon HaKodesh*. (In fact, Isaiah 19:18 refers to *Lashon HaKodesh* as “the Canaanite language.”) Furthermore, it is quite common for the king of a particular nation to be familiar with the languages of nearby countries. An example of this is Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who spoke Hebrew even though his advisors answered him in Aramaic (see Daniel 2:2-4). Thus, Joseph would not have proved anything to his brothers by speaking *Lashon HaKodesh*, because, as viceroy of Egypt, he would be expected to be familiar with neighboring languages.

To answer these questions, Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762-1839) — known as the Chatam Sofer — offers a novel interpretation of the exchange between Joseph and his brothers. He begins by noting an interesting historical phenomenon. Although the local inhabitants of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia did not speak German at all, it was the main language of the Jews found in those areas (i.e., they spoke Yiddish, which is a form of Judeo-German). He explains that most Jews of Eastern Europe descended from the Jews who had previously lived in Western Europe (thus they are called *Ashkenazim* which literally means “Germans”) and were ousted during the First Crusade, migrating east-

Continued on page seven

Joining Redemption & Prayer — Part 1

The blessing that follows the Shema prayer, called “Geulah”, Redemption, must be joined to the Shemoneh Esrei prayer. One is not even allowed to interrupt to answer amen to the congregation leader’s recital of “Ga’al Yisrael” at the conclusion of the blessing. Rema: There is an opinion that it is permissible to answer “amen” to the congregation leader’s blessing of “Ga’al Yisrael”. (Shulchan Aruch 111:1)

The Mishnah Berurah writes (67:35) that in order to fulfill both opinions one should conclude his own blessing together with the congregation leader so as not to obligate himself to answer *amen*. Another custom is discussed by later Rabbis, explaining that the congregation leader concludes the final words of the blessing of *Ga’al Yisrael* quietly, since in this way the congregation does not become obligated to answer. Rav Chaim Kanievsky agrees with this custom, while Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner disagree, maintaining that the congregation leader should conclude in a loud voice. Two reasons given for this are that this “quiet” solution is not mentioned by the earlier commentators on the Shulchan Aruch, and it also seems disrespectful to the blessing not to conclude in a loud voice (Dirshu 111:12).

From the words of the Mishnah Berurah (111:5) it seems that all agree, including the Rema, that it is forbidden to answer to *Kaddish* and *Kedusha* between *Geulah*

and the Shemoneh Esrei. Ideally one should not even wait the time it takes to say “*Shalom Aleichem Rabbi*” between *Geulah* and the Shemoneh Esrei (Mishnah Berurah). The Ben Ish Chai explains that according to Kabbalah one should not delay even a little, explaining that it is for this reason that the Rabbis did not institute saying *Kaddish* before the Shemoneh Esrei, as they did between the other parts of *Shacharit*. The Piskei Teshuvot explains that it is ideal to connect the two blessings in one breath, namely to say *Ga’al Yisrael* and “*Ado-noi Sfatai...*” in one breath (Mekor Chaim).

In light of how much importance is placed on connecting redemption to prayer, the question arises: Is it alright to take some time to gather one’s thoughts in order to pray properly before beginning the Shemoneh Esrei? Considering that having proper intention for the first blessing is crucial, one would assume that it is alright, and if it is absolutely necessary one may in fact take time to gather his thoughts. However, when possible, one should gather his thoughts beforehand, towards the ending of the blessing of *Geulah*, or if one already said *Ga’al Yisrael* he can say the phrase of “*Adon-noi Sfatai...*” slowly, while gathering his thoughts, since in this way he fulfills the mitzvah in the best way without compromising proper intention for the first blessing.

What’s In a Word...continued from page six

wards. Nonetheless, even after many generations, they had still preserved this dialect of German as their principal language. Rabbi Sofer posits that this occurred because each Jewish family raised their children to speak German, and had been doing so for hundreds of years.

In light of this, Rabbi Sofer notes that it is quite remarkable that after a mere seventy-year exile to Babylon the Jews very quickly forgot Hebrew. The Bible attests to the fact that only half of the Jews returning from the Babylonian exile spoke Hebrew (Nechemiah 13:24). Why was Hebrew forgotten so quickly, yet German continued to exist in the homes of Jewish families for generations after they left Germany? Rabbi Sofer explains that Hebrew is different from all other languages, because only one who maintains a certain degree of holiness can preserve Hebrew. Consequently, Hebrew can be easily forgotten due to a lapse in holi-

ness, while German can be passed on for generations.

Accordingly, explains Rabbi Sofer, Joseph spoke in *Lashon HaKodesh* to prove to his brothers that although he remained in Egypt for many years, he had maintained the degree of purity and holiness required to retain the language. He had not defiled himself by pursuing the promiscuous lifestyle epitomized by Egyptian culture. In this way, Joseph typified the use of Hebrew as a *lashon* — something he internalized, as opposed to a *safa*.

For more information about the history of the Hebrew language and its spiritual significance, check out my book, Lashon HaKodesh: History, Holiness, & Hebrew (Mosaica Press, 2015). Available online and at Jewish bookstores.

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

BY RABBI YOSEF HERSHMAN

A Day in the Life

When Yosef presents his father Yaakov to Pharaoh, Pharaoh asks him: *How many are the days of the years of your life?* Not, *how many years*, but *how many days of the years*. Yaakov's answer is cryptic: *the days of the years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty years; the days of my life have been few and unhappy, and they have not reached the days of the lives of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.* The days of his sojourning were one hundred and thirty years, but the days of his life were few and unhappy, and did not measure up to his fathers' days. What does this mean? What is the difference between days of sojourning and days of life?

When one counts by years, one does not reckon days. Few see the one-day wonder of each day — and see in it a special mission. But only one who can seize the day can, in the end, win the day. Our entire lifespan of seventy or eighty years is an insignificant speck in history. We survey only a small window, and are incapable of comprehending the larger context. But from the perspective of G-d, *a thousand years...are but as yesterday when it is passing* (Tehillim 90:4). A thousand years, in the eyes of G-d, frequently have no more significance than a

transition point, a moment of time that lies between one day and the next.

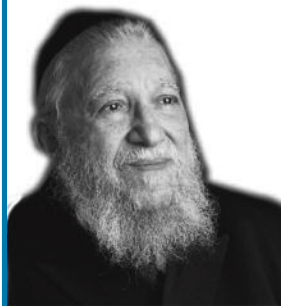
G-d recognizes the days of those who live wholly with Him (Ibid. 37:18). It is not the years that are noticed — it is the days, and the minutes of those days that are recorded before Him. Therefore, we ask, *teach us to count the days — then we will bring home a heart of wisdom* (Ibid. 90:12). Teach us to make each day count, and fill it with acts of worthiness.

Pharaoh asks: How many *days* have you *lived* in the years of your life? In his response, Yaakov differentiates between living and existing: I have not *lived* much, but I have *sojourned* on earth a hundred and thirty years. The days of the years that I can call my *life* — a fulfillment of my mission — are few. In his humility, Yaakov considers the *days* of his life as woefully short of the *days* of the lives of His fathers. In his mind, their *days* added up to lives of greater moral worth.

Yaakov here teaches us that the way to live a full life is by living day to day and by utilizing each day to the fullest.

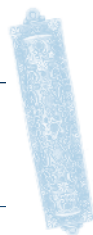
• Sources: *Commentary Bereishet 47:8; Bereishet 23:1; Tehillim 90*

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Rav Bulman zt"l

on the
Torah Portion of the Week



BY RABBI ZE'EV KRAINES

Cosmic Runes

Three unintelligible “words,” comprised of fourteen Hebrew letters, can be seen written upside-down on the back of a mezuzah scroll: כוז במוכסז כוז. These letters are actually an encrypted form of the Divine names written in the third, fourth, and fifth words of the Shema Yisrael. They are written upside-down so that they will correspond to their matching letter on the front of the mezuzah.

To “hack” this code you must decipher the letters using a method of substitution known as a one-shift “Caesar cipher,” meaning that these letters are shifted one letter up from the letter they are meant to encrypt. (Reportedly, Julius Caesar used similar codes to encrypt his documents.)

This custom is not universal. Sephardic authorities do not allow any other writing anywhere on the mezuzah aside from the customary Divine Name Shadai (see Mezuzah Maven “What’s in a Name” in Ohrnet Vayeitzei). These authorities base their hesitation on Rambam’s sharp rejection of similar practices:

It is a common custom to write Sha-dai, on the outside of a mezuzah opposite the empty space left between the two passages. There is no difficulty in this, since [the addition is made] outside.

Those, however, who write the names of angels, other sacred names, verses, or forms, on the inside, are among those who do not have a portion in the World-to-Come. Not only do these fools nullify the mitzvah, but furthermore, they make from a great mitzvah — reflecting G-d’s unity, and the love of Him and the service of Him — a talisman for their own benefit. They, in their foolish conception, think that this will help them regarding the vanities of the world.

In a similar vein, Rambam writes elsewhere:

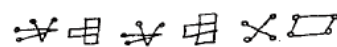
A person who whispers an incantation over a wound and then recites a verse from the Torah..., or who places a Torah scroll or tefillin over a baby so that it will sleep, is considered to be a soothsayer or one who casts spells. Furthermore, such people are included among those who deny the Torah, because they

relate to the words of the Torah as if they are cures for the body, when, in fact, they are cures for the soul, as Proverbs 3:22 states: “And they shall be life for your soul.”

Although Rambam would acknowledge the protective power that comes in the merit of the mitzvah itself, he scorns those who portray the mezuzah as nothing more than a tool to achieve material aims.

Curiously, however, the insertion of these mysterious letters has been accepted in Ashkenazic practice from at least the eleventh century. The authorities justify this custom by pointing out that Rambam referred to those who made additions to the *inside* of the parchment, whereas these letters, like the Name Shadai, are specifically written on the backside to accentuate that they are not meant to be considered part of the mitzvah itself.

Even so, Ashkenazic custom disallows writing any of the other angelic names, codes, and runes mentioned by Rambam on either side of the parchment. Yet this was not always the case. Before Rambam’s view was accepted as normative halacha, symbolic runes and Biblical passages were often inserted in the margins of the parchment at strategic places in an effort to “supercharge” the protective power of the mezuzah. Many of these symbols are actually representations of letters from the ancient Paleo-Hebrew alphabet found in archaeological inscriptions and coins in Israel.



- Sources: Rambam, *Hilchot Sefer Torah U'Mezuzah* 5:4 and *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 11:12; *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah* 288:15

Got a mezuzah question or story?
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Eighth, Ninth and Tenth of Tevet

Chazal tell us that on the eighth, ninth and tenth of Tevet there were tragedies that came upon *Klal Yisrael*. Let us analyze each one. On the eighth of Tevet under King Ptolemy's rule, the Torah was translated into Greek (See Masechet Sofrim 1:7-8; Megillah 9a). In light of the fact that many years before this event G-d Himself commanded for the Torah to be translated into seventy languages for the other nations of the world (see Sotah 36a), one may ask: "Why is this event so tragic?"

The commentaries explain that the answer to this question lies in the fact that the translation during King Ptolemy's time was very different from the translation that G-d commanded. First of all, Ptolemy had evil intentions. His main purpose was to show that the Torah was written by man. The Gemara says that he chose 72 elders and placed them in 72 different rooms, and told them to translate "Moshe's Torah" — instead of "G-d's Torah" (Megillah 9a). Also, by placing the 72 elders in different rooms he wanted them to each translate differently so that he could claim that the Torah is subject to different explanations, thereby giving him the excuse to interpret the Torah as he pleases. On the other hand, the translations into seventy languages that G-d commanded were meant to bring the other nations toward the Torah.

Also, as the Gemara says, the translation during Ptolemy's rule was not done accurately. This is because the elders had to purposely make certain changes to be sure that Ptolemy wouldn't use the Torah to support his own crooked ideology (see Megillah 9a-9b for examples). Though the elders had a good reason for making these changes, and miraculously they all made the same changes, these changes nevertheless detracted from the Torah's authenticity.

Furthermore, others point out that the superior knowledge of the Torah at the time that it was translated into seventy languages, in addition to the extra help from G-d, Who told them to translate it to begin with, resulted in a translation that was accurate. During the days of Ptolemy, however, when their

knowledge was mixed with doubts and uncertainties, the translation was not a success (See Ya'arot D'vash).

Finally, we can suggest that the translation of the Torah into other languages was meant to bring the other nations closer to Torah but not to be used by the Jewish People, who had already received the Torah at Har Sinai. *Klal Yisrael* was always supposed to learn the Torah in *Lashon HaKodesh*, as the Torah contains layers of depth that can only be uncovered through learning it in the original language in which it was given. Even one *pasuk* in the Torah can often include many different explanations. These explanations are obtained through methods of derivation, which were given along with the Torah at Har Sinai, that draw on similarity in words used in different *pesukim*, derivations based on extra letters or omitted letters, dots on top of letters or words and even the shapes of the letters. Though it may have been beneficial for the other nations to have access to the Torah in their own language, it was tragic that *Klal Yisrael* used this translation (See Peirush Mishnayot of Rambam on beginning of the second *perek* of Megillah). This is because it meant that they would lose all the things that are learned out from the intricacies of *Lashon HaKodesh*. Not only did this detract from the level of Torah learning but it also eventually led many to other Greek philosophical works, which turned them away from the Torah (See Derashot Chatam Sofer).

It says in Megillat Ta'anit that the Rabbis didn't write what happened on the ninth of Tevet. Some say that on this day Ezra HaSofer — and according to others also Nechemia — passed away (Kol Bo, B'hag, Magen Avraham and Taz). This was very significant, since following the Jewish People's expulsion from Eretz Yisrael during the time of Nevuchadnetzar, Ezra and Nechemia led the Jewish People during their return from Bavel. Their deaths marked the end of the powerful leadership that brought the Jewish People back to Torah. Others note that this was the day that the leader of Christianity was born. According to this reason, the Rabbis did not explicitly

Continued on page eleven

record the tragedy from fear of Christian retaliation.

On the tenth of Tevet Nevuchadnetzar laid siege on Yerushlayim. Two-and-a-half years later, on the ninth of Tammuz, the walls were breached. Finally, on the ninth of Av, the first Beit Hamikdash was destroyed (see Melachim II 25, Rosh Hashanah 18b and Tosefot there).

Day of Teshuva

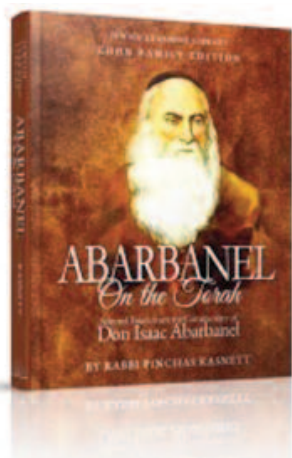
The purpose of fasting on Asarah B'Tevet, in addition to other fast days, is not only to mourn the past, but to awaken us to do *teshuva*. The Rambam says: *We fast on days of calamities because it arouses our hearts and opens paths to repentance for us. It serves as a reminder of our wicked ways and that of our ancestors, which resemble our present ways, and which thereby brought these calamities upon them and upon us; so that through remembering these things we will return and [fix our ways] as it says: They will confess their sins and their father's sins* (Rambam Hilchot Ta'anit 5:1).

This is why the commentaries point out that fasting is only a preparation for *teshuva*, and therefore those who spend the day fasting while involving themselves with idle activities have grabbed onto the secondary point of fasting and missed the main and essential

part (See Mishna Berura 549:1 in the name of the Chayei Adam). We learn this from the story of Yonah, who told the people of Ninveh to do *teshuva*. Regarding them, the *pasuk* says: "And G-d saw their deeds; that they repented from their evil way". It does not say G-d saw their fasting and sackcloth; rather G-d saw their *deeds*. *Chazal* learn from here that the main purpose of fasting is to bring one to *teshuva* (Ta'anit 16a).

The Chatam Sofer (*Torat Moshe, drasha l'zayin Adar*) says that historically, on Asarah B'Tevet the Heavenly court was adjudicating the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. It was on this day that the final verdict of its destruction was reached. Thus it was then that the siege surrounding Yerushalayim began. However, this wasn't a one-time event. Every year on the tenth of Tevet the Heavenly court reassembles and reassesses whether the Beit Hamikdash will be destroyed, as we are taught that every generation in which the Beit Hamikdash is not rebuilt is as if it was in that generation that it was destroyed (Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1). May we merit utilizing this day for *teshuva* — and thereby merit passing the judgment and seeing the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash speedily in our days.

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