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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Maxing the Moxy

“Go for yourself” (12:1)

One of the dominant genes of the Sinclair family is auto-didacticism. Hashem has blessed us that we seem to be able to ‘just pick things up’ as we go along. I never had a photography lesson in my life but I was able to put publish a book of fine art black and white photographs to some critical acclaim. (Mind you it’s just as well I didn’t choose to be a brain surgeon.)

One of my sons also has this ability. He opened a gourmet pizza shop called “La Piedra” here in Jerusalem, which has been featured in the national media and, *Baruch Hashem*, is packed out most nights. Someone asked him where in Italy he had apprenticed. I believe his greatest Italian learning experience was a guided tour of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He never had a formal lesson in cuisine in his life. He has a natural talent. He did a lot of research online and his commitment was total. He ended up importing an authentic stone oven from Italy. I asked him if he was nervous in the beginning about succeeding. He told me there was one moment where he was really scared. Just before he opened, he had everything in place – the oven, the menu, the logo, the décor – and then he suddenly realized he had put a dangerous amount of his own money and a lot of someone else’s money into something he didn’t actually know he could do. It’s one thing to whip up a great pizza in your mother’s kitchen, and another to actually run a restaurant, one of the hardest and most precarious livelihoods known to man. He said he’d never been so scared in his life. When he opened, business was slow at first. But that didn’t bother him because at that point he knew he could do the job, although just before he opened he was ‘sweating.’

The unknown is terrifying. As former US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld once put it, “There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the things we don’t know that we don’t know.” An “unknown unknown” is the scariest part of any project. And, yet, without the *moxy*, or “chutzpah” as we call it in Hebrew/Yiddish, to move out of our comfort zone, we would achieve very little.

If unknown unknowns are scary in the physical world, how much more frightening are they in the realm of the soul. To think we could really be better and holier people is a daunting prospect. The *Ba’alei Mussar* (masters of ethical development) teach us that a person can never know the level beyond the very next step up the spiritual ladder. Only when that next step is taken is the one that is after that one revealed.

Avraham Avinu is called “*HaIvri*” (root of the word ‘Hebrew’), meaning “the one who crossed over.” Abraham rejected idolatry at a time when idolatry was as self-evident to his world as the laws of physics are to ours. He stepped outside conventional wisdom to the extent that he became a social pariah, derided as ‘mule’ espousing a barren cosmology that would lead nowhere.

The first words in this week’s Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, are usually translated as “Go for yourself.” But they can also be translated as “Go to yourself.” The essential life-journey is to break the barriers of the limits we place on ourselves and realize that our true life’s work lies in facing the “unknown unknown” of the soul.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Lech Lecha: Nidah 9-15

Although He May Tarry

Rabbi Yossi says, “Ben David (i.e. Mashiach) will not arrive until all of the *neshamot* (souls) have been ‘finished’ from the *guf*.”

What does this seemingly enigmatic expression mean? Rashi explains that the *guf* is the name of a “room” that is designated by Heaven as a place of existence for all *neshamot* that will be born in the future. It appears that the physical name of *guf* – which means “body” – is a reference to the fact that the spiritual souls await there to be put into the physical bodies of new human life. Accordingly, Rabbi Yossi is teaching that Mashiach will not arrive until all *neshamot* are “emptied” from that place and given by G-d into physical, bodily “vessels” in the physical world.

According to Rashi, Rabbi Yossi is teaching that Mashiach will not arrive until this condition is fulfilled: all souls will be removed from the spiritual realm and will be present in the physical world.

Tosefot, however, finds this explanation difficult to understand. We learn in another *sugya* (Shabbat 118b) that if, in fact, all of the Jewish People had observed two Shabbats in the desert after receiving the Torah they would have been redeemed immediately (i.e. Mashiach would have immediately arrived). No mention is made there of a requirement for all *neshamot* to have been born. Therefore, Tosefot explains Rabbi Yossi’s teaching in a different manner. Immediately prior to Mashiach’s arrival, Tosefot states, there will be a boom in multiple births.

This answer would seem to indicate an accounting difficulty. Would it have been possible for so many multiple births to have occurred in one week in the desert, enough to equal all future births we have witnessed until this very day, when Mashiach has not yet arrived? One approach is to consider a metaphoric count: the righteousness and greatness of the souls born during that week would be equivalent to the value of all of the *neshamot* in the *guf*. (Maharsha)

The *Rishonim* offer a completely different answer to Tosefot’s question, one that does not give birth to any accounting issue. The *gemara* in Masechet Shabbat is teaching an alternate way to know when Mashiach will arrive. In fact, unlike our *gemara* which seems to teach a “sign” that is a prerequisite for his arrival, the other *gemara* teaches a “reason” for his arrival. A reason that would override the accounting of the number of souls in the

world. The merit of observing two Shabbats would be so great, significant and powerful that Mashiach would immediately arrive, regardless of other factors. (Rabbeinu Asher)

Although we don’t have any humanly possible way of knowing when the “all of the *neshamot* in the *guf*” has actually occurred, I once heard an inspiring explanation regarding this subject. It was at the occasion of a festive meal celebration for the mitzvah of *brit milah* involving a great Rabbi in Jerusalem. At the time he was learning Torah in the Beit Midrash of Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem in the afternoons and I had the privilege to learn Torah from him. He and his *rebetzen* were blessed with newborn triplets, and at least one was a boy. I attended the joyous meal that followed the mitzvah of the *brit milah* (or three mitzvahs, I don’t recall), and listened to the words of the great Rabbi as he spoke to the gathering at the festive meal. He noted that there had recently been a very large number of multiple births of twins and triplets in his neighborhood, a fact that had been the topic of much amazement in the entire city – and perhaps beyond. Many saw this as a highly unusual coincidence, but he saw it as a sign from Above.

The Rabbi quoted the statement of Rabbi Yossi in our *sugya*, and the opinion of Tosefot here, and said with great joy that the recent multiple births that occurred in a limited geographic location and within a very short period of time were a clear sign from Heaven that it was a specially auspicious time for the arrival of Mashiach.

Although we are taught not to try to calculate the exact time of the long-anticipated arrival of Mashiach ben David, we seem to be given a glimpse in our *gemara* regarding his arrival. But regardless of our interpretation of our *sugya* or of the *gemara* in Shabbat, we are to believe that he will certainly arrive, and, in fact, we are to faithfully await his arrival each day. As the Rambam lays out in principle twelve of his work called *The Thirteen Principles of Faith*, the core beliefs of Judaism: “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Mashiach, and although he may tarry I still await him every day.”

▪ *Nidah 13b*

Questions

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?

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

Answers

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. 4:14 - 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.

ASK!

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Safed, Tsfas and Zefat

Peter wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

What is so significant about the city of Safed in Israel, and what major events took place there?

Dear Peter,

In Hebrew, the name “Safed” relates to the word for “view” (*tzuf*), a “mountaintop.” Safed offers a view both awe-inspiring and strategic.

On a deeper level, it is a city where a person can gain 'panoramic' insight into the Torah. Rabbi Avraham Azulai, the 17th century Kabbalist, writes that its refined air predestined Safed as the best place in Israel (excluding Jerusalem) for delving into the depths of Torah.

This allure could account for the many Torah giants, *tzaddikim* and Kabbalists who settled there: Rabbi Yosef

Karo (author of the *Shulchan Aruch*), the Arizal, Rabbi Yisrael Najara (author of Shabbat song "*Ka Ribbon Olam*"), Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (author of the Friday night prayer "*Lecha Dodi*"), *Shita MeKubetzet*, Rabbi Chaim Vital and many others.

During one 50-year period in the 16th century, Safed's Sages reinstated what is historically known as “*Smicha*” – the official Rabbinic ordination that began with Moses and disappeared during the exile that occurred with the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabbi Yosef Karo and Rabbi Chaim Vital were among those who received this *Smicha*.

Besides its past, Safed has an illustrious future. According to the Zohar, the dead will rise and gather in Safed, there the Mashiach will reveal himself to the world, and together they will march to Jerusalem!

Sources: *Safed the Mystical City*, Dovid Rossoff pp. 22-35

YIDDLE RIDDLE

Some people once found a discarded, yet complete, Torah Scroll and wondered whether it was kosher or not. If it was written by a competent, certified scribe it would be kosher, but if by someone else, it would not be kosher. They posed their question to the renowned *Noda B'Yehuda*, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau. His ingenious answer was simply "*Minhag Yisrael Torah He*" (which literally means "Jewish custom has the status of Torah").

Question: What did his answer mean?

(Hint: There is a widespread Jewish custom concerning the writing of a Torah scroll that could indicate

whether or not the scroll had been duly commissioned by a Jewish community.)

Answer:

It is a widespread Jewish custom that the scribe omits the last few letters from the Torah scroll, and at the completion ceremony allows a number of people the privilege of writing them. Therefore, by looking at the final letters of the Torah it should be evident whether or not they were written by one person or several. If they were written by several people – evidence of *Minhag Yisrael* (Jewish custom) – then “*Torah He*” – it is a valid Torah scroll!

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language
by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Dirt, Dust and Ashes

When G-d promised Avraham that his descendants will be numerous, He said, “I will make your descendants like the dirt (*afar*) of the land, such that if a person could count the dirt (*afar*) of the land, so too will your descendants be countable” (Gen. 13:16). In this passage the Torah uses the word *afar*, “dirt.” *Afar* is often paired with *eifer*, “ashes.” Other similar words include *avak*, “dust,” and *deshen*, which also mean “ashes.” In this essay we explore the similarities and differences between these words.

In some cases *afar* and *eifer* are used together. For example, when Avraham prayed for G-d to spare the city of Sodom he prefaced his prayers with the admission, “I am but *afar* and *eifer* (Gen. 19:27)” – dirt and ashes. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), the venerated Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin, explains that sometimes prayers are answered in the merit of one’s righteous forefathers (see Rashi to Gen. 25:21) or one’s righteous descendants (see *Ber. Rabbah* §29:5). Avraham therefore prefaced his prayers by appealing directly to G-d’s mercy. He referred to himself as *afar* because *afar* has no useful past, just as Avraham had no righteous ancestry (his father Terach was an idolater). And he called himself *eifer* because *eifer* has no fruitful future, just like – as far as Avraham could tell – he was not destined to father any righteous descendants, as Yitzchak had not yet been born.

Another case of *afar* and *eifer* is found regarding the Torah’s commandment to cover the blood of a slaughtered kosher wild animal or bird. In that context the Torah calls for covering the blood with *afar*, “dirt” (Lev. 17:13). The House of Shammai argues that only literal *afar*, “soil,” may be used, while the House of Hillel maintains that *eifer*, “ashes,” may also be used (*Chullin* 88b). The question at hand is whether *afar* is a specific term which refers exclusively to “soil,” or a general term (“dirt”) which includes both soil and ashes. As is usually the case, the halacha follows the House of Hillel’s opinion, and indeed elsewhere, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 18a) and Rashi (to *Ta’anit* 15a) imply

that *afar* and *eifer* are synonyms (or at least interchangeable in some contexts).

That being said, there remains a fundamental difference between *afar*, “dirt,” and *eifer*, “ashes.” The Zohar (*Vayishlach* 170a) writes that *eifer/avak* is what remains after a fire has consumed something, and cannot facilitate growth. While the Zohar implies that both *eifer* and *avak* are perfect synonyms for burnt remnants, this is a bit of an oversimplification. In truth, *eifer* and *avak* are both formed via a violent destructive process, but they do not exactly mean the same thing: *eifer* is produced by being burned, while *avak* (“powdery dust”) is produced by being pulverized. The Zohar’s critical point is that while *afar* is the crucible from which all growth emerges, there is no hope that anything will grow from *eifer/avak*.

It is therefore significant that the Torah (Num. 19:17) calls the ashes of the Red Heifer *afar* (which generally means “dirt”) instead of *eifer* (“ashes”). Rabbi Moshe Shapiro (1935-2017) explains that this teaches us that sometimes items which seem to be the products of destruction (such as ashes) can be transformed into the impetus for creation. Unlike regular ashes, the ashes of the Red Heifer *do* facilitate growth. When a person contracts ritual impurity via contact with a corpse, this ritual impurity represents the mistaken notion that physical death marks the end of existence. However, when a person is sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer, he now understands that what seemed to be a dead-end actually represents renewal and rejuvenation. This is because death is actually a transformative process as the soul moves from This World to the Next. To convey this lesson, the Torah uses the fecunditious term *afar* precisely where one would have expected it to use the infertile *eifer*.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) traces the root of the word *eifer* to the biliteral root PEH-REISH, which refers to “breaking something down into smaller components.” Following this rubric, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *eifer* refers to an item

that is broken down into carbonate particles through conflagration. Other words derived from this root include *perurim* (“crumbs”), *parur* (a special “pot” for cooking crumbs or other small grains), *pur* (a special “box” used for drawing lots that resembles a *parur*), *pri* (a “fruit,” which is a microcosm of a tree that spawns from the tree), *par/parah* (“uncastrated bovine” that are used for their reproductive abilities), *pe’er/tiferet* (“all-encompassing beauty” that breaks down into multiple aspects), *hafarah* (the act of “disintegrating” or “nullifying” a vow), *primah* (the act of “tearing” clothing into multiple shreds), and *tefirah* (“sewing,” the means of rectifying the damage done by *primah*).

In Rabbi Pappenheim’s system, the word *afar* cannot be related to the two-letter root PEH-REISH because Rabbi Pappenheim understands that two-letter roots may only be joined with the letters HEY, ALEPH, MEM, NUN, TAV, YUD, or VAV to create a three-letter root, yet the word *afar* begins with an AYIN. Nevertheless, other proponents of the two-letter root theory do connect *afar* with PEH-REISH. For example, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) connects the word *afar* to the root PEH-REISH by explaining that *afar* is an indispensable part of growing fruit (*pri*). Similarly, Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843-1916) in his work *Barzilai* traces both *afar* and *eifer* to the root PEH-REISH. Elsewhere, in his work *Keses HaSofer*, Rabbi Marcus writes that *afar* is a portmanteau of the root AYIN-PEH (“flying”) and PEH-REISH.

Now let us move on to another term, *avak*. Rabbi Pappenheim similarly explains that *afar* refers to run-of-the-mill “dirt,” while *avak* refers to finer “dust.” Rabbi Moshe Shapiro explains that *avak* denotes something which has been rubbed down to its core particles, and is so light it can be blown in the wind. In this spirit, the Rabbis use the term *avak* to refer to “rubbing up” against certain sins without technically violating the letter of the law: *avak lashon hara* (*Bava Batra* 165a), *avak ribbit* (*Temurah* 6b), *avak sheviit* (*Succah* 40b), *avak avodah zarah* (*Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 1:3). In all these cases the sinner “brushes up” against the boundary of acceptable behavior but does not necessarily pass that threshold.

Rabbi Shapiro further notes that *avak* is always the product of a struggle. When Yaakov grappled with Eisav’s angel, the resulting *avak* was said to have

reached G-d’s Throne of Glory (*Chullin* 91a). Rabbi Yehuda Leib Edel (1760-1828) proposes that since ALEPH and CHET are sometimes interchangeable, the word *avak* may therefore be related to the word *chavak/chibbuk* (“hug”), referring to the fact that the particles of powder are so small and insignificant on their own that one only encounters them as residue clinging on to or “hugging” other objects. Interestingly, when describing Yaakov’s struggle with the angel, Rashi (to Gen. 32:25) characterizes their wrestling-embrace as *chovek* – which literally means “hugging.”

In addition to *eifer*, another Hebrew word for “ashes” is *deshen*. Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) cites Rabbi Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein’s work *Shem Olam* that *deshen* is something burnt while the fire still glows within it, like an ember, while *eifer* is something completely burnt with no remaining fire. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Shapira-Frankfurter (1743-1826), who was Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch’s great-uncle, writes that *eifer* refers to all ordinary ashes while *deshen* refers exclusively to the ashes born of the rituals in the Temple.

Rabbi Pappenheim explains that “ashes” is a secondary meaning of the word *deshen*, whose primary meaning is “fat” (*Deut.* 31:20, *Ps.* 63:6, *Prov.* 15:30). Fat is an organic substance found in all living creatures, and when such organisms are burned their ashes are called *deshen* because of the residual “fat” that remains. In other words, according to Rabbi Pappenheim *deshen* refers exclusively to ashes derived from burnt animals. On the other hand, fruit/vegetable oils are called *deshe* (*Gen.* 1:11), and burnt flora only yields *eifer*, but not *deshen*. Needless to say, Rabbi Pappenheim connects the word *deshe* and the two meanings of *deshen* by explaining that they all derive from the two-letter root DALET-SHIN.

We have discussed four words: *afar*, *eifer*, *avak* and *deshen*. *Afar* is “dirt/soil,” a fairly general term notable because it connotes the ability to cause growth. This is in contrast to *eifer*, “ashes,” and *avak*, “dust,” which are products of destruction and not causative of growth. *Eifer* is a more general term for ashes, while *deshen* refers to a more specific type of ashes. Rabbi Pappenheim concludes that despite their subtle differences, since these words are quite similar they are often used interchangeably.

- For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at rcklein@ohr.edu

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch
by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Go It Alone

Our Torah portion begins with the very first command given to Avraham: *Go alone, for yourself, from your country, from your birthplace, and from the house of your father, to the land I will show you.* This was not merely a directive to go to Canaan. If that were the only purpose, the sentence would be much shorter: *Leave to Canaan.* The departure necessarily includes leaving his country, his birthplace and his home. *Lech*, explains Rav Hirsch, implies detachment and separation (related to *chalak*, divide). *Lech lecha – for you –* then means “go for yourself, go your own way, isolate yourself.”

One’s *eretz*, homeland, and *moledet*, birthplace, exert a powerful influence on a person’s physical, mental and moral states. One’s home is the private sphere in which the individual thrives and develops under the special care of his family. In full recognition of the value of home and homeland, Hashem tells Avraham to leave these behind. He is to isolate himself.

The tendency of that generation was to *centralize*. They began to build a tower (the Tower of Babel) to glorify the collective power of man. The individual was reduced to a mere instrument of the masses. A move toward centralization and the power of community gives rise to the false belief in the exclusive authority of the majority. Any value held sacred by the majority is automatically revered and held sacred by every individual.

Now, the community should represent exalted values. Indeed, Judaism attaches importance to community and cautions not to separate oneself from the community. Nevertheless, at the outset of Jewish history, Avraham is told: *Go for yourself, go your own way.* If the principle adopted by the majority is untrue – then go it alone and serve G-d!

This single command was to characterize the mission of the Jew. The bond that attaches a Jew to his ultimate mission must be stronger than the bond that ties him to his home and his nationality. From our father Avraham we inherited the courage to be a *minority*. This is reason he was called “ha’ivri” – “the one from over there” – *Chazal* note, because the entire world stood at one side, championing polytheism, and Avraham stood alone, on the other side, resolute in His monotheistic truth and piety. When everyone else in the world was seeking to integrate, to establish himself, and win the rights of a citizen, Avraham gave up his homeland and his rights of citizenship. For the sake of G-d’s mission he became an outsider and openly denied their gods.

For many centuries it was the test to remain faithful to Judaism in the face of “outside” persecution from the gentile nations. In Rav Hirsch’s time the challenges were from within. The strength to withstand the pressure to “update” Judaism to fit with the times – a pressure that exists no less today than it did in Rav Hirsch’s time – is bequeathed to us by virtue of Avraham’s fulfillment of this first command.

Source: *Commentary, Genesis 12.1*

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Profiles of Ohr Somayach students, alumni and staff

by Rabbi Shlomo Simon

Natan Eliyahu Age: 28 Born: Friedberg, Germany

Diploma in Engineering – Munich

Team Leader Search Engine Optimization – Munich and Vienna

The path to Judaism is different for every *ger* (convert). We believe that the *neshamot* of all the Jewish People, present and future, including *gerim*, stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. But, somehow, thereafter, the *neshamot* of future *gerim* were dispersed among the nations of the World. Many *gerim* have found their way back because their fathers, relatives or ancestors were Jewish and they grew up with a Jewish identity. Others, after extensive reading and study, have become disillusioned with the falsity and contradictions of their own religions and have recognized the truth of the Torah. Others have felt a natural affinity to Jews and Judaism. German converts often have been influenced by the sins of the Nazis and a desire to repent for their nation's guilt. At least one has sought to reconnect with his *neshama* through his pursuit of excellence in martial arts. His name is Natan Eliyahu.

Natan grew up in the tiny hamlet of Reichertshofen, Bavaria. His parents do not practice any organized religion, and so he and his older brother grew up without church or religious training. His primary and secondary education was at a liberal Montessori-type school and Natan absorbed the progressive values that were taught there. A precocious child, he gravitated towards science and math, beginning Engineering College at age 16. Although Holocaust education was part of the curriculum at school, with a visit to nearby concentration camps obligatory, Natan, although empathizing with the suffering of the Jewish People, felt neither personally responsible nor guilty for the Germany of previous generations.

When he was 18 he was offered an engineering job with an online marketing firm in Munich, where his brother was employed. The work was interesting and he was good at it. Natan received regular promotions and after two years became a team leader in the company's search engine optimization unit.

At about the same time as he started work, he began classes at a *Ninjutsu* martial arts school. Both the owner of the school, Moshe, and one of the school's principal teachers, happened to be Orthodox Jews with long beards and head coverings.

Martial arts is not just about fighting, it is also training one's mind to anticipate the unexpected and to become one with the body. While not a religious philosophy, a meditative and philosophical mindset is an element of the Asian martial arts. His teachers had a decidedly different philosophy and "take" on life than Natan had ever heard of. He didn't realize it at the time, but that different "take" came as a result of learning Torah and keeping *mitzvot*.

Until he met the teachers at the *Ninjutsu dojo*, Natan had never knowingly met a Jew. Oddly enough, although he was taught about the Jewish People in school, he had learned that they were an ethnic group, not a religious one. As his respect for his teachers grew, so did his interest in their philosophy.

After about three years of study at the school in Munich, Natan made two important decisions. One was to keep the *Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach* and the second was to spend a Sabbatical year in Asia. Natan had been fascinated by Japanese culture and etiquette and had begun to study the language. He was also planning to live for part of the year in the Philippines. In Japan he studied with the Grand *Sensei of Ninjutsu* in Japan, Maasaki Hatsumi, and some of his top students. After eight weeks of study with students of Hatsumi, Natan moved to the Philippines where he worked long distance for his company.

While working in the Philippines he would listen online to as many as seven to eight Torah *shiurim* a day. His *neshama* had found its nest. He now felt compelled to do more to increase his *dveikut* (attachment) to Hashem. He moved to Vienna, which was both near his family and has



a vibrant Jewish community. Still in touch with one of his teachers from Munich, he told him that he wanted to convert. Natan was directed to Rabbi Michoel Pressburger, a *chassidische* rabbi in Vienna, who prepared him for *gerut* and who made arrangements with the London Beit Din for Natan's conversion. After a two-year

intensive period of study, his conversion was finalized in December 2018. After wrapping up his affairs in Vienna and upon his teachers' suggestions, he came to Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem in Elul. He is now in Rabbi Selingut's shiur in the Center Program and reveling in his reconnection with the Torah.

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 recognize G-d's existence, and thus merits G-d appearing to him. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, 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 would 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 weekly portion concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a Divine covenant. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and his entire household.

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