

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### How Long is the Coast of Britain?

*“And he dreamt, and behold! A ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward; and behold angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it.” (28:12)*

**B**enoit B. Mandelbrot (1924-2010) was a Jewish Polish-born French-American mathematician and polymath. “What is the essence of a coastline?” he once asked. Mandelbrot asked this question in a paper that became a turning point for his thinking: “How Long is the Coast of Britain?”

Mandelbrot had come across the coastline question in an obscure posthumous article by an English scientist, Lewis F. Richardson. Wondering about coastlines and wiggly national borders, Richardson checked encyclopedias in Spain and Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands, and discovered discrepancies of twenty percent in the estimated lengths of their common frontiers. Mandelbrot argued that any coastline is, in a sense, infinitely long. In another sense, the answer depends on the length of your ruler.

“Consider one plausible method of measuring. A surveyor takes a set of dividers, opens them to a length of one yard, and walks them along the coastline. The resulting number of yards is just an approximation of the true length, because the dividers skip over twists and turns smaller than one

yard – but the surveyor writes the number down anyway.

“Then he sets the dividers to a smaller length – say, one foot– and repeats the process. He arrives at a somewhat greater length, because the dividers will capture more of the detail and it will take more than three one-foot steps to cover the distance previously covered by a one-yard step. He writes this new number down, sets the dividers at four inches and starts again.

“This mental experiment, using imaginary dividers, is a way of quantifying the effect of observing an object from different distances, at different scales. An observer trying to estimate the length of England’s coastline from a satellite will make a smaller guess than an observer trying to walk its coves and beaches, who will make a smaller guess in turn than a snail negotiating every pebble.”

If we measure our ascent on the spiritual ladder of our life like a snail, we will become disillusioned very quickly, for life has many twists and turns and setbacks. But if we take the satellite view, each one of us can follow in the footsteps of our father Yaakov – the ladder that is set on the ground but whose head reaches the heavens.

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# Q & A

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## Questions

1. When Yaakov traveled to Charan, the Torah stresses that he departed from Beer Sheva. Why?
2. On the night of his dream, Yaakov did something he hadn't done in 14 years. What?
3. G-d compressed the entire Land of Israel underneath the sleeping Yaakov. What did this symbolize?
4. Yaakov said "I will return with shalom." What did he mean by "shalom"?
5. Why did Yaakov rebuke the shepherds?
6. Why did Rachel, and not her brothers, tend her father's sheep?
7. Why did Yaakov cry when he met Rachel?
8. Why did Lavan run to greet Yaakov?
9. Why were Leah's eyes tender?
10. How old was Yaakov when he married?
11. What did Rachel find enviable about Leah?
12. Who was Yaakov's fifth son?
13. Who was Leah's handmaiden? Was she older or younger than Rache'ls handmaiden?
14. How do you say *dudaim* in Arabic?
15. "G-d remembered Rachel" (30:22). What did He remember?
16. What does "Yosef" mean? Why was he named that?
17. G-d forbade Lavan to speak to Yaakov "either of good or of bad." Why didn't G-d want Lavan to speak of good?
18. Where are there two Aramaic words in this weeks Parsha?
19. Who was Bilhah's father? Who was Zilpah's father?
20. Who escorted Yaakov into Eretz Yisrael?

## Answers

1. 28:10 - The departure of a righteous person leaves a noticeable void in that place.
2. 28:11 - Sleep at night lying down.
3. 28:13 - That the Land would be easy for his descendants to conquer.
4. 28:21 - Completely without sin.
5. 29:7 - He thought they were loafing, stopping work early in the day.
6. 30:27 - Her brothers weren't born yet.
7. 29:11 - He saw prophetically that they would not be buried together; or because he was penniless.
8. 29:13 - He thought Yaakov was carrying money.
9. 29:17 - She cried continually because she thought she was destined to marry Esav.
10. 29:21 - Eighty-four.
11. 30:1 - Her good deeds, thinking they were the reason Leah merited children.
12. 30:5 - Dan.
13. 30:10 - Zilpah. She was younger.
14. 30:14 - Jasmine (Yasmin).
15. 30:22 - That Rachel gave Leah the "signs of recognition" that Yaakov had taught her, so that Leah wouldn't be embarrassed.
16. 30:24 "Yosef" means "He will add." Rachel asked G-d for another son in addition to Yosef.
17. 31:24 - Because the "good" that comes from wicked people is bad for the righteous.
18. 31:41 - Yagar Sahaduta, meaning "wall of testimony."
19. 31:50 - Lavan.
20. 32:1 - The angels of Eretz Yisrael.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

## Almonds in the Bible

When Jacob tried to induce the animals in his care to give birth to offspring that fit a certain look, Jacob placed various tree branches that mimicked those specifications in his animals' feeding trough. Among the sorts of branches that Jacob used, the Bible reports that he took a *luz* branch (Gen. 30:37). Targum Onkelos leaves the word *luz* untranslated when rendering this passage in Aramaic. Yet, Radak and Ibn Ezra cite Rabbi Saadia Gaon (892-942) as explaining that the word *luz* in this passage means "almond," as it does in Arabic. Ibn Ezra adds that Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic all belong to one language family (what modern linguists call "Semitic languages"), so it makes sense that a word in one language might carry over into the others. However, on top of all this, there is another Hebrew word for "almond" – *shaked*. This article explores the etymologies of *luz* and *shaked*, seeking to find what, if anything, is the difference between these two terms.

The connection between *luz* and *shaked* is also seen later in the Bible when Jacob sends gifts to the viceroy of Egypt. Listed among those various edibles that Jacob sent are *shkedim* (Gen. 43:11). The Targum known as Jonathan and Targum Neofiti (to Gen. 43:11) both translate the term *shkedim* in this verse as *m'shach d'luzin* ("almond oil/butter"). Similarly, when the Bible reports that Aaron's staff sprouted *shkadim* (Num. 17:23), those Targumim translate the word into Aramaic as *luzin*.

The upshot of this discussion is that it seems that the word *luz* is actually an Aramaic word, not a Hebrew word, while *shaked* seems to be a genuine Hebrew word. According to this, the two words mean the exact same thing – just that they come from different languages. Dr. Gary Rensburg of Rutgers University adds that even though *luz* is Aramaic, not Hebrew, the Torah still uses that word when narrating the story of how Laban the

Aramean tried to swindle Jacob because that story happened in Aram, the home of the Aramaic language. Using an Aramaic word in an Aramean context thus gives more authenticity to the account.

Alternatively, I was thinking that perhaps in Hebrew the term *shaked* refers to the "almond" fruit/nut itself, and refers to the "almond tree" only in a borrowed sense, while *luz* refers directly to the "almond tree." It seems that Avraham Even-Shoshan's dictionary follows this approach.

Just for the record, not everybody agrees that *luz* refers to the almond tree. An alternate version of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's commentary records him as explaining *luz* as the silverleaf poplar tree, while Menachem Ibn Saruk writes that the *luz* is related to the cedar. Finally, there are also many opinions which maintain that *luz* refers to hazel (see Rashi and Tosafot to *Bechorot* 8a, Rashi to Gen. 30:38, Judges 1:26). Targum Onkelos (to Gen. 43:11, Num. 17:23, see also Targum to Ecc. 12:5) seems to follow one of these approaches because he never translates *shaked* as *luz*, instead consistently translating the word as *segd* (which means "almond" in Syriac and Ethiopic, and seems to be derived from the Hebrew *shaked* through the interchangeability of GIMMEL and KUF).

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim (1740-1814) defines the core meaning of the two-letter root LAMMED-ZAYIN as "sideward deviation." Words that derive from this root can refer to simply moving to the side in a physical sense, or to a moralistic deviance that distances a person from the straight and narrow. In these ways, the *luz* tree beckons back to the core meaning of LAMMED-ZAYIN because it deviates from the nature of other trees in the sense that it shoots branch out from its trunk very early on. Another word derived from this root is *halaz* ("that one"). Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the antecedent of this pronoun is typically somebody

who is far away and thus has deviated/distanced himself from “here.”

Midrash *Sechel Tov* offers a homiletic explanation of *halaz*, arguing that when that word is used in reference to Isaac (Gen. 24:65), Joseph (Gen. 37:19), Zecharia (Zech. 2:8), and the Holy Land (Yechezkel 36:35), it is related to the word *luz* and refers to outwardly majestic beauty like that of the *luz* tree. The aesthetic quality of the almond may also be reflected in the almond-like decorations that are to be fixed (*meshukadim*) to the Menorah (Ex. 25:33-34, 37:19-29).

Luz is also the place name of an important biblical city. It was later renamed Beth-El and was actually the site of Jacob’s famous dream with the ladder (Gen. 28:19). The Bible relates that when the Tribe of Joseph besieged the Canaanite city of Luz, they waited until somebody left the impenetrable city and asked him to show the hidden entrance, which he obliged to do. It was only then that the Jewish army was able to enter the city and capture it. The Canaanite defector, who led the Jews into the city, later relocated to the Land of Hittites, where he established a new city named Luz (Judges 1:23-26).

The Midrash (*Bereishet Rabbah* 69:8) records some interesting facts about Luz, although it remains unclear whether this refers to Luz in the Holy Land or the other Luz: The population was not mixed up when Sennacherib conquered the area, it was not even destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and the Angel of Death has no dominion over this city. Rabbi Abba Bar Kahane adds that one who enters this city blossoms with mitzvahs and good deeds like a *luz*. The Sages also explained that just as an almond has no “opening,” so was the city of Luz completely impenetrable. Rabbi Symon adds that there was a *luz* (“almond tree”) at the entrance to the city, while Rabbi Pinchas bar Chamah explains that the city was accessible only via a cave whose entrance was concealed by a *luz* tree. Interestingly, Rabbi J. D. Eisenstein (1854-1956) claimed that the city of Luz referred to in this Midrash is the Tibetan city of Lhasa, whose population reputedly has longevity and could thus be said to elude the Angel of Death.

There is also the matter of the *luz* bone, which is said to be the kernel from which one will be

revived in the Resurrection of the Dead and which is only nurtured through the *Melava Malka* meal on *Motzei Shabbat* (see *Mateh Moshe* 513) – but that is for a different discussion.

Turning to the word *shaked*, this word seems to be related to the trilateral root SHIN-KUF-DALET (“watchfulness,” “vigilance,” “diligence,” “persistency”). In fact, grammarians as early as Rabbi Yonah Ibn Janach (990-1055) and Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235) intimated a connection between almonds and the core meaning of that root by explaining that the almond tree is especially zealous in making its fruits blossom faster than other trees (although *Machberet Menachem* does not seem to draw a connection between these two meanings). Similarly, botanist Dr. Joshua D. Klein of the Volcani Center explains that the term *shaked* is appropriate for almonds because of their tendency to stay on the tree and not fall off when ripe like most fleshy fruits do. This scientific fact thus serves a way of linking the verb *shoked* (“diligence”) to the noun *shaked* (“almond”), because the almond is “diligent” and “persistent” by tenaciously hanging onto the tree longer than most fruits.

The connection between these two meanings derived from the SHIN-KUF-DALET root might even predate the early grammarians, as it seems to be found in a sort of prophetic pun that G-d told Jeremiah:

“The word of G-d [came] to me saying: ‘What do you see Jeremiah?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch of an almond (*shaked*) tree.’ And G-d said to me: ‘You see goodness, for I am vigilant (*shoked*) about My word, to do it.’” (Jer. 1:11-12).

Rashi explains that just as the *shaked* tree is overly “attentive” to make sure it bears fruit before all the other trees, so is G-d especially “attentive” to fulfill the words relayed to the prophet. (By the way, see Jerusalemic Talmud *Taanit* 4:5, which paraphrases the word *shaked* in this passage as *luz*.)

In Modern Hebrew, the word *shaked* has an anatomical meaning – just like *luz* does. Except that the Modern Hebrew term does not refer to the mythical *luz* bone, it refers to the less-mythical “tonsils.” Even-Shoshan’s dictionary calls this

neologism a "folk usage" based on the similarity between the shape of the tonsils and the shape of an almond. As an aside, the Modern Hebrew word *shkadiyah* seems to have been invented by the poet Levin Kipnis (1894-1990), who used the word in his popular song about Tu B'Shvat. The word *shkadiyah* refers specifically to the "almond tree," as opposed to *shaked* which refers to the almond nut itself.

The English word *almond* sounds like it comes from Arabic (because of the *al* prefix), but we have already established that the Arabic word for "almond" is *luz*, just like it is in Aramaic. The etymological ancestor of *almond* seems to ultimately be the Latin *amygdala*, although it went through different variations in between. Some argue that the *al* prefix came about through contamination from the last syllable of the Latin etymon. Others argue that the Latin *amygdala* became *almendra* in

Spanish because of the Arabic influence on Spanish, in which *al* serves as the definite article ("the"), and the word only came to English through Spanish.

It is fascinating to note that the old name for Portugal when it was a Roman province was Lusitania. The Hungarian Maskilic scholar Solomon Löwisohn (1789-1821) writes that this name is derived from the Aramaic word *luz*, because when the Phoenicians came to the Iberian peninsula they saw a plentitude of almond trees. Löwisohn adds that there are several place-names in Portugal that refer to almonds, such as Calmende ("the house of almonds") and Castelmende ("the castle of almonds"), both of which are related to the Spanish/Portuguese words *almendron* ("almond"). It should be noted that this etymology for the name Lusitania is not widely-accepted nowadays.

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## COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

### THE BLESSINGS OF THE SHEMA (PART 7)

"The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched  
- they must be felt with the heart."  
(Helen Keller)

**T**he second blessing continues: "Bring us in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us with upright pride to our Land. For You effect salvations...You have chosen us from among every nation and every language."

One of the basic prerequisites for the Messianic era is the ingathering of the Jewish People from the "four corners of the earth." The Torah declares categorically (Devarim 30:3-5), "...[G-d] will gather you in from all the peoples to which G-d has scattered you... G-d will bring you to the Land that your forefathers possessed and you shall possess it..."

When the time is right, G-d will gather together *all* the Jews from all over the world and bring them to the Land of Israel. Not only does this include all Jews who may not even be aware that they are Jewish, but it will also include all the poor, misguided Jews who seem to think that Israel is a state that is built on apartheid policies and human rights abuses. But the verse promises even more. Everyone coming to the Land of Israel will do so with pride and dignity. At that time – may it happen very, very soon – it will be apparent to all that the Land of Israel will be the only conceivable place for Jews to live.

When a respected Rabbi in Romania decided to live out the rest of his days in Israel, he was asked why he



didn't just wait for the Messiah, and only afterwards go to Israel. He answered that he preferred to be found by the Messiah immediately in Jerusalem, rather than have him look all over for him in Bucharest!

Why does the blessing add the words, "and every language" if it has already stated that we have been chosen from every nation? Each nation has its own distinctive language, even when it is ostensibly the same language as another nation. Or, as Winston Churchill, the legendary Second World War Prime Minister of Great Britain was purported to have said about England and America: "They are two nations divided by a common language." What, then, are the words "and every language" adding to our understanding of the blessing? According to some of the commentaries, the difference is quite intriguing. The word "nation" is a reference to its physical nature, whereas "language" is a reference to its spiritual character. According to this interpretation we are emphasizing the fact that it is not enough that we – the Jewish Nation – are spiritually different from everyone else, but that we must remain physically different from the other nations as well. How do those differences manifest themselves? The spiritual differences should be heard through the way that we express ourselves. By avoiding offensive and hurtful speech and by being extremely vigilant to not insult someone even inadvertently. The physical differences can be seen by dressing in a way that is identifiably Jewish.

Another possible explanation is that "language" is alluding to foreign cultures. One of the most basic dimensions of nationhood is the unique culture each nation possesses. In many respects, it is the culture of each nation that differentiates it from its neighbor. Historically, it does not take too long for those settling into a new country to adopt its cultural mores. Sometimes it takes just one generation, sometimes two or three, but at some point the new citizens become culturally indistinguishable from their fellow compatriots. This is the way of the world and it makes perfect sense that it should be like this. In order for immigrants to establish themselves in their new country, they must adapt their national values to fit those of their newfound homeland. The only possible drawback to this process is that, by doing so, their original national identity is being supplanted by that of the country they have relocated to. For a new citizen, it might be a sad moment when they finally let go of their previous national identity,

but it is also thrilling to know that they have begun the process of integrating into their new place of residence. But for the Jewish People it is not a "sad moment." Rather, it is a devastating tragedy, because we are not supposed to integrate into other societies. We are commanded to retain our identity as Jews regardless of where we find ourselves.

Sometimes it can be overwhelmingly difficult to identify as a Jew – especially if it might come at the price of one's life. Rabbi Moshe Aharon Stern (1926-1998), revered spiritual mentor to thousands and the *Mashgiach* of the Kamenitz Yeshiva in Jerusalem, would tell over a true story that happened during the Bolshevik revolution. As has almost always been the case during wartime, the Jews were on the wrong side. When the Red Army swept through an area, the Jews were accused of being royalists and they were killed. On the other hand, when the White Army seized control, they accused the Jews of being Bolsheviks and murdered them indiscriminately. Once, the Bolsheviks reached a certain town and immediately rounded up all the Jews with the intention of lining them up against a wall to shoot them. There were three hundred Jews reciting the *Shema* in anticipation of their death at the hands of the Bolsheviks.

As the Bolsheviks waited for the order to fire, the town pharmacist, who was the only person in the whole area with any medical knowledge, came rushing up to the commanding officer and asked what was going on. On being told that the town's Jewish population was going to be massacred, he stepped forward and told the commanding officer that he too was Jewish, and if they were planning on murdering every single Jew, he demanded to be included with them. On hearing this, the commander was dumbfounded. In all the years that the commanding officer had known the pharmacist, he had never shown any affinity to Judaism. In fact, no one had even the slightest clue that he was Jewish. And now, all of a sudden, it transpired that the one and only person who had any medical know-how was Jewish. What a dilemma! On the one hand, he desperately wanted to kill all the Jews, but on the other hand the pharmacist was the only one who was able to treat his wounded soldiers. In the end, left with no other alternative, the pharmacist and his three hundred "brothers" were left alive.

*To be continued...*

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Rosh Hashana 23-29

### Blessing the New Moon: Renewal of King David's Dynasty

Rebbi said to Rabbi Chiya, “Go to Ein Tab and sanctify the moon. And then send me the following message as a sign that you succeeded: ‘David, King of Israel, is alive and well (David, melech Yisrael, chai v’kayam).’ ”

There is a mitzvah to say a special *bracha* at the beginning of each new month. This *bracha* is referred to in halacha and in the vernacular as *birkat ha’levana* or *kiddush levana*. It is said by the congregation outside the synagogue after they briefly look at the new moon, and is usually said immediately after the evening prayers that conclude the Shabbat. The text of the *bracha* and accompanying words of praise to Hashem are found in any *siddur* – and sometimes even on the outside front wall of the synagogue!

The commentaries explain the significance of the statement in our *gemara*, which connects the new moon and King David. Rashi, on our *daf*, cites a verse in Tehillim (89:37) that draws a comparison between the moon and the royal dynasty of King David: “[The Kingdom of David] is like the moon, which is established forever and is a witness in the sky.” Rashi in Tanach explains: “The moon and the sun are witnesses to him [King David] – as long as they exist, his kingdom will exist, as it is written (Yirmiyahu 33:20), ‘If you break My covenant with the day, and My covenant with the night... also My covenant with David will be broken.’ ”

The accepted practice nowadays to mention these words of about King David as part of *kiddush levana* is first codified by the Rema in Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 426:2. The Rema writes: “Our custom is to say ‘David, melech Yisrael, chai v’kayam’ (David, the King of Israel, is alive and well).’ Why? Since David’s

kingdom is compared to the moon (in Tanach), his kingdom will therefore be renewed in the future, just as the moon is renewed nowadays monthly. When King David’s dynasty is renewed, the Jewish nation will then again cleave to its ‘Husband,’ meaning the Holy One, Blessed be He. This connection between the Jewish People and Hashem is similar to the manner in which the moon renews itself in connection with the sun. As a result of our renewed awareness of Hashem’s promise to restore the Davidic dynasty and draw us closer to Him, we celebrate at this time with dancing and other signs of joy, as we would do at a wedding.” (Based on Rabbeinu Bechayei to the Torah portion of Vayeishev; see also Maharitz Chuiyus, Maharsha and Midrash Rabbah Shemot 15.)

Other expressions of our happiness at the time of *kiddush levana* – due to our special relationship with Hashem and the restoration of King David’s dynasty with the arrival of the Mashiach (a descendant of King David) – are part of this monthly ceremony. For example, we say three times “*Siman tov u’mazal tov*” – “May this be a good sign and good fortune for us and the entire Jewish nation.” In addition, each person in the group says to three nearby people, “*Shalom Aleichem*,” thus wishing them peace, happiness and success.

Some sources write that the phrase “David, King of Israel, is alive and well” has the same *gematria* as “Rosh Chodesh.” *Iyun Tefillah*, a commentary on the *siddur* by Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, suggests that this *gematria* equivalence was indeed Rebbi’s intention when requesting those specific words as a sign of the declaration of a new month, a sign or renewal.

■ Rosh Hashana 25a

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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

## Tefillat Haderech: A Prayer to Travel Through Life

**Y**aakov has just left his home, and is headed to Haran to find a wife from the house of Lavan. He will spend the next twenty years building his family, and establishing his financial independence. En route, he vows to G-d: *If G-d will be with me, and guard me on this path on which I am going, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and I return in peace to my father's house – then G-d will be G-d to me.*

In the context of the priestly blessing, we first mention material blessing (*yivarechecha*) and then ask that G-d protect that blessing (*v'yishmirecha*). But here, Yaakov first asks for protection (*guard me on this path*) and then for the blessing (*bread to eat and food to wear*). Since he has no more than the shirt on his back, he cannot be referring to his possessions. But there is something he did pack for his journey, in abundant supply – his spiritual and moral attainments.

Until now, Yaakov has been a *yoshev ohalim*, dwelling in the tents of study. He now sets out to seek a wife and a livelihood to support a family. He is right to fear the dangers that lurk ahead. Once Paradise was lost, and man was to eat by the sweat of his brow, earning an independent livelihood became complex. More than effort and skill are required to gain that loaf of bread. Rarely is the race for that loaf unaccompanied by pressure to attain social status. That “path to bread and clothing”, having become a dizzying quest for success, is ridden with potholes. Unscrupulous business practices, dubious marketing techniques, unfair competition, and undignified treatment of employees are but a few of the

stumbling blocks on this path. “This path,” our Sages comment, alludes to cardinal sins such as idolatry, illicit relations, murder, and slander. It takes courage and conviction to walk this road with honesty and integrity, to continue to value hard work, even as the outcomes of clever cunning seem ever more gainful. The path is indeed steep and thorny, with luxuries and windfalls beckoning the traveler to stray from his honest and law-abiding toil.

Yaakov's prayer is a model for similarly situated travelers. First, he prays for the preservation of his character, that he not forfeit his integrity. Only then does he ask for respectable sustenance (food) and social position (clothing). His third wish is for “shalom” – peace – and “return to his father's home” – intact family ties.

Finally, Yaakov vows that he will respond to G-d's preservation and blessing by declaring, “G-d will be to me Elokim.” Most who have been so blessed would surely wish to continue that relationship with the G-d of mercy (*Hashem* – spelled *Yud, heh, vav* and *heh*), but Yaakov expresses the lofty wish of the Jew, to continue the relationship also with G-d as Lawgiver (*Elokim*). He vows: *The G-d who showered upon me the bounty of His love and goodness will be to me G-d Who not only gives and bestows, but also demands that His Will be done with all that bounty.* With that vow he has directed every thought in his mind, every sentiment in his heart, and every penny in his possession to be used in accordance with the Will of G-d.

- Source: Commentary, Bereishet 28:20-21



# Perek Shira: The Song of Existence

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

## THE SONG OF THE DESERT

*The desert says: "The desert and the wasteland will rejoice and the plains will be gladdened. They will sprout like a flower."  
(Yeshayahu 35:1)*

There is nothing the empty desert ought to sing about. Nevertheless, with its very desolation, it sings how the desert-like Land of Israel will transform into a joyful irrigated land by the future redemption. Accordingly, the more dead a desert appears, the more it sings of Hashem's ingathering of His nation, which for so many centuries seemed hopelessly lost in exile.

It was specifically in the desert that our people received the Torah, our eternal heritage, and it was there that we became a glorious nation. That period of nomadic desert life was an exceptional circumstance. Ordinarily, the physical world is necessary for regular human life. However, that period can serve as a symbolic lesson for all generations that whenever the physical world is empty and silent, the soft voice of the soul can be heard from within.

Thus, even the desolate patches of life are opportunities for growth in one way or another, and they are indispensable components of the universe's song. Even when going through a dismal period of life, a Jew must not lose hope. The lower a person is, the more magnificent it will be when Hashem draws him close again. The desert's song may seem unpleasant to us, but to Hashem it is as beautiful as that of the Land of Israel.

- Sources: Radak; Shir HaShirim Rabbah (2:1); Sifsei Renanos; Mishlei Yaakov. See also Bamidbar Rabbah (23:4)

*\*In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib*

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by Rabbi Shlomo Simon

## A Rabbi on a Special NATO Mission



A few weeks ago, our distinguished colleague, Rabbi Dr. Guy Matalon, Director of the Mechina Program, received an invitation to lecture at the NATO Defense College (NDC) in Rome, Italy.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established in 1947, soon after WWII, as a defense pact consisting of 10 European nations, the United States and Canada. Its initial purpose was to present a unified defense against future attacks by Germany and the Soviet Union. Over the years, NATO has expanded its membership to 30 nations, including Germany and a number of former member states of the Soviet Bloc.

The NDC was established in 1951 by then General and future President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower. In its mission statement, General Eisenhower set forth a number of goals, one of which was to “prepare selected officers and officials for important NATO and NATO related multinational appointments.” In preparing those officers and officials, it was deemed necessary to teach them about the major religions and their impact on world history and on contemporary political and military realities.

The invitation to Rabbi Dr. Matalon to present a dissertation on Judaism to the College came as a seemingly fortuitous combination of unrelated circumstances. For the past number of years, the Israeli diplomat, Dr. Hillel Newman, a religious Jew, had given the yearly lecture to the group.

Recently, the Israeli Foreign Office named Dr. Newman as its Counsel General in Los Angeles. He was not able to travel to Rome for the lecture this

year, and he called a close friend from his yeshiva days to fill in for him. That friend, a very prominent Rav involved in *kashrut* in Israel, lives next door to Rabbi Matalon. The lecture was to be in English, and since the Rav’s English was not very fluent, he suggested to Dr. Newman that his good friend and neighbor Guy Matalon would be eminently qualified for the job. Rabbi Matalon has a Ph.D. from NYU in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Thought, and is the Director of the Mechina Program at Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem.

Dr. Newman contacted the College and they agreed to invite Rabbi Matalon to give the lecture and appear on a panel with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and Islam. The lecture took place during the last week of October.

A funny thing happened on the Arkia flight to Rome. Rabbi Matalon’s *chevrusah* (Torah study partner) is a pilot for Arkia, and Rabbi Matalon wondered whether he might be the pilot for his Rome flight! He was not, but his *chevrusah* contacted the pilot and co-pilot for that flight to tell them about their special passenger. Rabbi Matalon was invited into the cockpit, and, to his surprise, he discovered that the co-pilot, Akiva Brown, had been a student at Ohr Somayach 23 years earlier. A small world.

The lecture was very well received by the participants. The *imam*, an Italian representing Islam, was particularly impressed. He expressed the hope that the two of them could work together promoting warmer relations and better understanding of Judaism and Jews among the Muslims of Europe and the Middle East.

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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**F**leeing from Esav, Yaakov leaves Be'er Sheva and sets out for Charan, the home of his mother's family. After a 14-year stint in the Torah Academy of Shem and Ever, he resumes his journey and comes to Mount Moriah, the place where his father Yitzchak was brought as an offering, and the future site of the Beit Hamikdash. He sleeps there and dreams of angels going up and down a ladder between Heaven and Earth. Hashem promises him the Land of Israel, that he will found a great nation and that he will enjoy Divine protection. Yaakov wakes and vows to build an altar there and tithe all that he will receive.

Then he travels to Charan and meets his cousin Rachel at the well. He arranges with her father, Lavan, to work seven years for her hand in marriage, but Lavan fools Yaakov, substituting Rachel's older sister, Leah. Yaakov commits himself to work another seven years in order to also marry Rachel. Leah bears four sons: Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda, the first Tribes of Israel. Rachel is barren, and in an attempt to give Yaakov children, she gives her handmaiden Bilhah to Yaakov as a wife. Bilhah bears Dan and Naftali. Leah also gives Yaakov her handmaiden Zilpah, who bears Gad and Asher. Leah then bears Yissaschar, Zevulun, and a daughter, Dina. Hashem finally blesses Rachel with a son, Yosef.

Yaakov decides to leave Lavan, but Lavan, aware of the wealth Yaakov has made for him, is reluctant to let him go, and concludes a contract of employment with him. Lavan tries to swindle Yaakov, but Yaakov becomes extremely wealthy. Six years later, Yaakov, aware that Lavan has become dangerously resentful of his wealth, flees with his family. Lavan pursues them but is warned by Hashem not to harm them. Yaakov and Lavan agree to a covenant and Lavan returns home. Yaakov continues on his way to face his brother Esav.

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