

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Egyptian Pandemic Reaches Its Climax

*“Pharaoh said to him (Moshe), ‘Go from me!’” (10:28)*

As we near the end of the second year of the coronavirus pandemic, life without a mask seems like a fond memory. And no one has any idea as to how long it will go on. Having had the privilege of being born at the half-way mark of the twentieth century in a stable western democracy, I never experienced a catastrophe like war or famine. That is, of course, until COVID-19 was unleashed upon the world.

I recently finished reading "The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race" by Walter Isaacson. I guess I have always been a bit naïve about scientists. Like many people, I like to think of them as somewhat otherworldly and not interested in the flesh-pots. Nothing could be further from the truth. The world of bio-tech is big business, and intellectual property is as fiercely fought over and as guarded as the crown jewels. The egos involved are as large as in any Hollywood movie.

But the nightmare of Covid changed all that. There was no attempt, as Doudna put it, “to protect the university’s ability to profit from hypothetical inventions that might arise from scientists doing what we’re supposed to do – share our work with each other.”

She further writes: “Scientists around the world contributed to an open database of coronavirus sequences that, by the end of August 2020, had thirty-six thousand entries.

“The sense of urgency about COVID also brushed back the gatekeeper role played by expensive, peer-reviewed, paywall-protected scholarly journals such as Science and Nature. Instead of waiting months for the editors and reviewers to decide whether to publish a paper, researchers at the height of the coronavirus crisis were posting more than a hundred papers a day on preprint servers, such as medRxiv and bioRxiv, which were free and open and required a minimal review process.

“This allowed information to be shared in real time, freely, and even be dissected on social media. Despite the potential danger of spreading research that had not been fully vetted, the rapid and open dissemination worked well: it sped up the process of building on each new finding and allowed the public to follow the advance of science as it happened.

“On some important papers involving coronavirus, publication on the reprint servers led to crowdsourced vetting and wisdom from experts around the world.”

Pharaoh needed ten pandemics to humble his ego and let the Jews leave Egypt. It is encouraging that bio-tech scientists needed only one.

But maybe it is naïve to think that this spirit of humility and sharing will outlast the pandemic itself.

# Q & A

## Questions

1. What was Pharaoh's excuse for not releasing the Jewish children?
2. How did the locusts in the time of Moshe differ from those in the days of Yoel?
3. How did the first three days of darkness differ from the last three?
4. When the Jews asked the Egyptians for gold and silver vessels, the Egyptians were unable to deny ownership of such vessels. Why?
5. *Makat bechorot* took place at exactly midnight. Why did Moshe say it would take place at approximately midnight?
6. Why did the first-born of the animals die?
7. How did Moshe show respect to Pharaoh when he warned him about the aftermath of the plague of the first-born?
8. G-d told Moshe "so that My wonders will be multiplied" (11:9). What three wonders was G-d referring to?
9. Why did G-d command the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh to Aharon, and not only to Moshe?
10. Up to what age is an animal fit to be a Pesach offering?
11. Prior to the Exodus from Egypt, what mitzvot involving blood did G-d give to the Jewish People?
12. Rashi gives two explanations of the word "pasachti". What are they?
13. Why were the Jews told to stay indoors during *makat bechorot*?
14. What was Pharaoh screaming as he ran from door to door the night of *makat bechorot*?
15. Why did Pharaoh ask Moshe to bless him?
16. Why did the Jewish People carry their matzah on their shoulders rather than have their animals carry it?
17. Who comprised the *erev rav* (mixed multitude)?
18. What three historical events occurred on the 15th of Nissan, prior to the event of the Exodus from Egypt?
19. What is the source of the "milk and honey" found in Eretz Yisrael?
20. The only non-kosher animal whose first-born is redeemed is the donkey. What did the donkeys do to "earn" this distinction?

## Answers

1. 10:11 - Since children don't bring sacrifices there was no need for them to go.
2. 10:14 - The plague brought by Moshe was composed of one species of locust, whereas the plague in the days of Yoel was composed of many species.
3. 10:22 - During the first three days the Egyptians couldn't see. During the last three days they couldn't move.
4. 10:22 - During the plague of darkness the Jews could see and they searched for and found the Egyptians' vessels.
5. 11:4 - If Moshe said the plague would begin exactly at midnight, the Egyptians might miscalculate and accuse Moshe of being a fake.
6. 11:5 - Because the Egyptians worshiped them as gods, and when G-d punishes a nation He also punishes its gods.
7. 11:8 - Moshe warned that "All these servants of yours will come down to me" when, in fact, it was Pharaoh himself who actually came running to Moshe.
8. 11:9 - The plague of the first-born, the splitting of the sea, the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers.
9. 12:1 - As reward for his efforts in bringing about the plagues.
10. 12:5 - One year.
11. 12:6 - Circumcision and Korban Pesach.
12. 12:13 - "I had mercy" and "I skipped."
13. 12:22 - Since it was a night of destruction, it was not safe for anyone to leave the protected premises of his home.
14. 12:31 - "Where does Moshe live? Where does Aharon live?"
15. 12:32 - So he wouldn't die, for he himself was a first-born.
16. 12:34 - Because the commandment of matzah was dear to them.
17. 12:38 - People from other nations who became converts.
18. 12:41 - The angels came to promise that Sarah would have a son, Yitzchak was born, and the exile of the "covenant between the parts" was decreed.
19. 13:5 - Goat milk, date and fig honey.
20. 13:13 - They helped the Jews by carrying silver and gold out of Egypt.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

## Put in Place

Thus begins the Torah portion of *Bo*: “And G-d said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants so that I will place (*shat*) these signs of Mine within him, and so that you shall tell in the ears of your sons and your son’s sons that I had toyed with Egypt, and of My signs which I placed (*sam*) within them, and then you shall know that I am G-d” (Ex. 10:1-2). In these two verses, the Torah uses two different words to denote G-d “placing/putting” His signs within the Egyptians – *shat* and *sam*. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) takes note of this apparent inconsistency and uses this question to explain how the two words in question are not quite synonymous.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) explains that there are three different terms that refer to “putting/placing” something: *natan*, *sam*, and *shat*. The way he explains it, these terms become increasingly more specific. The verb *natan* – whose root is the biliteral TAV-NUN (“giving”) – refers to the most haphazard way of simply “placing” something somewhere. The term *sam*, in turn, refers to a more specific act of “placing” something in an especially-designated spot. This term thus implies “putting” something somewhere in a more deliberate way, as part of a greater plan or system. As Rabbi Pappenheim notes, in many instances the words *natan* and *sam* can actually be interchangeable, because at their core they simply refer to putting something somewhere.

Case in point: When the Torah describes erecting the walls of the Tabernacle, it says: “and he placed (*natan*) its sockets and he placed (*sam*) its beams and he placed (*natan*) its support-bars” (Ex. 40:18).

In this passage, the sockets and support-bars were placed in a less deliberate fashion because it was not important where each particular socket or support-bar was “placed,” so an inflection of *natan* is most appropriate. In contrast, the beams were “placed” in a more deliberate arrangement, as the Talmud (*Shabbat* 103a) explains that they wrote letters on each beam to help them identify where each beam ought to be placed. Because of this, explains Rabbi Pappenheim, the word *sam* is used.

While *sam* refers to a more specific form of “placing” than *natan*, Rabbi Pappenheim notes that *shat* refers to an even more specific way of “placing” than *sam*. The way he has it, *sam* simply denotes placing something in a specific place for an unspecified amount of time, but the verb *shat* refers to “placing” something in a deliberate way as part of a greater order/system (like *sam*) that will *remain in place for an inordinate amount of time*. Thus, *shat* denotes a more permanent type of “putting” something somewhere than the more haphazard ways of “placing” something denoted by *natan* and *sam*.

For example, the first time a cognate of *shat* appears in the Bible is when G-d punished the snake for its role in the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, saying: “I will place (*shat*) enmity between you and the woman...” (Gen. 3:15). If the Bible would have used the word *sam* in this context, Rabbi Pappenheim argues, that would have implied that there would be a mere temporary animosity between the snake and womankind. But because the Bible used a cognate of *shat*, this means that the animosity G-d placed between them

will be long-lasting, and in fact it even continues to this very day.

Based on this, Rabbi Pappenheim notes that when describing how G-d's signs (i.e., the Plagues) will affect the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants, the Bible uses the term *shat* because that implies "placing" something in their hearts in a more permanent, long-term way. Rabbi Mecklenburg expands on this point to answer the question at the beginning of this essay by noting that the Torah's phraseology is quite deliberate. When the Torah spoke about how G-d's signs will affect the Pharaoh and his servants who lived through them and saw them first hand, the Torah uses the term *shat* to denote "placing" those signs in their hearts, because for those direct participants, the memory of these signs will be *permanently* etched in their hearts, and *shat* denotes placing something in a way that it is intended to remain there long-term. On the other hand, when the Torah spoke about how G-d's signs that were "placed" upon the Egyptians will be relayed to future generations, this "placement" becomes less permanent and solid, because the survivors of said Plagues will no longer be alive and their memory will only remain a religious tradition. In this case, the Torah purposely uses the word *sam* to denote "placing" those signs in their hearts for an unspecified amount of time.

Now that we understand the difference between *natan*, *sam*, and *shat*, we can explore their etymologies and see what related words share common roots with those terms.

Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *sam* (which is spelled with a SIN) to the biliteral root SAMECH-MEM, via the interchangeability of SIN and SAMECH. The core meaning of this root refers to "placing something in its place." Other words Rabbi Pappenheim sees as derived from this root include *samim* ("potion/elixir," or in Modern Hebrew, "drugs"), which are commonly stored in specifically-designated places; *bosem/besamim* ("fragrances"), which are commonly made from *samim* (even though the letter BET is usually

considered a radical in Rabbi Pappenheim's system of roots), and *osem* (Deut. 28:8, Prov. 3:10), which refers to a "storage-house" where *samim* are commonly placed.

Interestingly, Rabbi Pappenheim sees the Mishnaic Hebrew word *siman* ("sign") as derived from this root as well, as a sign serves as a way of placing/categorizing things in their proper way (see also Isa. 28:25). Others see *siman* as derived from the Greek word *semeion* ("sign/mark"), which is the etymon of such English words as *semantics* and *semiotics*.

Two words that Rabbi Pappenheim notes are etymologically-related to *shat* are *shatot* ("foundations" of a building) that are specifically laid to remain in place long-term and serve as support for the edifice built on top of them (Ps. 11:3), and *sheti* ("warp"), that is the vertical axis of a woven fabric (as opposed to the *erev*, "woof," i.e., the horizontal axis), which refers to the deliberate placement of threads within a greater structure. (In his work *Cheshek Shlomo*, Rabbi Pappenheim sees the root of *shat*, SHIN-TAV, as a standalone biliteral root, while in *Yeriot Shlomo* he understands that this root is ultimately derived from the root SHIN-ALEPH.)

Fascinatingly, Adam's youngest son Seth (*Shet*) was so-named because "G-d had provided (*shat*) me with other offspring, instead of Abel because Cain had killed him" (Gen. 4:25). In this case, by giving Adam another son, G-d had placed/regenerated humankind for the long-term, so a cognate of *shat* is apropos. Similarly, the Mishna (*Yoma* 5:2) relates that after the Ark of the Covenant had been hidden away, the focus of the Holy of Holies was a stone known as the *Even Shtiyah*, which the Talmud (*Yoma* 54b) explains was the foundation stone from whence the world was built.

Despite sharpening the difference between *sam* and *shat*, Rabbi Pappenheim concludes by noting that

in several cases the Bible uses both words indiscriminately:

- When Joseph advised the Pharaoh to “put” someone in charge of conserving supplies from the seven-year surplus before the seven-year famine begins, the Torah uses the word *shat* (Gen. 41:33); yet, when Joseph later tells his brothers that he had been “put in” as a lord for all of Egypt, the Torah uses the word *sam* (Gen. 45:9).
- When Jacob “placed” his right-hand on Joseph's younger son Ephraim instead of on the firstborn Manasseh, the Bible uses the word *shat* (Gen. 48:14, 48:17): yet when Joseph tells his father to “put” his right hand on Manasseh because he is the firstborn, the Bible uses the word *sam* (Gen. 48:18).
- When the Bible (Ex. 7:22) reports that the Pharaoh’s position in not freeing the Jews was not affected by the Plague of Blood, it says *lo shat libo* (“he did not place it on his heart”); yet when describing that those Egyptians who did not fear G-d did not bring their servants and livestock indoors during the Plague of Hail, it says about those people *lo sam libo* (“he did not place it on his heart”).

Nevertheless, Rabbi Moshe Zuriel argues that Rabbi Pappenheim’s own explanation can be used to account for these three cases:

- When Joseph recommended that Pharaoh “put” somebody in charge of leading the conservation efforts, he used the word *shat* because he saw that as a long-term position; yet Pharaoh in his jealous stinginess did not want to appoint Joseph to a long-term post, and instead “put” him in a short-term position (hence, the term *sam*), but kept renewing his mandate.
- When the Bible records Jacob “placing” his right hand on Ephraim, this symbolic act represented the cosmic reality that throughout the generations, the Tribe of Ephraim will play a more prominent role than the Tribe of Manasseh. For this reason, the Bible used the word *shat* to

denote the long-term implications, yet Joseph thought that Jacob had simply placed his right hand on Ephraim haphazardly, so he used the word *sam* to represent a more haphazard way of “putting” down his hand.

- When Pharaoh refused to budge from his position after being faced with the Plague of Blood, he did not take heed to G-d’s orders, but instead sought to strengthen his conviction for the long-term and, indeed, he stubbornly refused to release the Jews even after they had already exited Egypt. For this reason, the Bible uses the word *shat* to denote his not wanting to take G-d’s message to heart. Yet, when describing the Egyptians who were not scared of the Plague of Hail, the Bible uses the word *sam* to denote their not placing the threat on their heart, because they did not do it out of any strong long-term conviction, but simply haphazardly failed to take the threat seriously.

Before we conclude, I just wanted to point out another explanation as to the difference between *sam* and *shat*. Rabbi Avraham Shick of Slonim (d. 1820) writes in *Eshed HaNechalim* (to *Shemot Rabbah* 32:2) that most times when cognates of *shat* appear in the Bible, the word appears in a negative context. For example, as we see above, the first time a cognate of this word appears in the Bible is when G-d punished the snake. In contrast, the term *sam* more often has a positive or even neutral connotation. What remains to be seen is whether this idea can be used to explain all the instances of *shat* and *sam* in the Bible.

By the way, according to Even-Shoshan’s concordance, cognates of *shat* appear some 85 times throughout the Bible, while cognates of *sam* appear 500 more times than that!

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## THE BLESSINGS OF THE SHEMA (PART 15)

“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched  
- they must be felt with the heart.”

(Helen Keller)

The third blessing concludes: “And all of them said, ‘Who is like You? ...’ G-d will reign for all eternity. Rock of Israel, arise to the aid of Israel and liberate, as You pledged, Judah and Israel. Our Redeemer ... the Holy One of Israel. Blessed are You, G-d, Who redeemed Israel.”

The straightforward understanding of our blessing is that it was Moshe Rabbeinu together with the Jewish People who declared, “Who is like You?” After experiencing the splitting of the Red Sea and the numerous other miracles that brought them to safety, they instinctively announced that there is no other entity that shares any comparison to G-d. However, the Eitz Yosef teaches that “Who is like You?” is not just referring to the Jewish People. Rather, as the Jewish nation made its declaration, the entire world, having become aware of the awesome miracles that G-d performed at the Red Sea, joined together with them and also proclaimed, “Who is like You?” What propelled them to make such a declaration? It was the splitting of the Red Sea that caused them to come to the irrefutable conclusion that none of their idols or images was capable of doing for them anything even remotely similar to what G-d had done for His nation.

Interestingly, our blessing then continues by describing Hashem as the “Rock of Israel.” The concept of Hashem being analogous to a rock is “borrowed” from Tehillim 19:15 where Hashem is described as “my Rock.” Rabbi David Kimche

(1160-1235) is considered to be one of the most brilliant grammarians in Jewish history. He wrote commentaries on the Prophets, Tehillim, Chronicles and the Chumash (of which only his commentary on *Bereishet* is still extant). In his commentary on Tehillim he explains the significance of G-d being described as a rock. In the same way as a rock is something of inestimable strength, so too is G-d Omnipotent. And only G-d is the One who can realize my entreaties. Subsequently, it is particularly fitting to use the phrase “Rock of Israel” immediately before we begin the *Amidah*, when we will turn to G-d and beseech Him to grant us the things that are closest to our hearts.

Our blessing concludes with a plea to G-d that He act with us as He did with the generation that left Egypt. In the same way that He redeemed the Jewish People from slavery and banishment, so too may He redeem us from our present type of exile. However, as the person leading the prayers recites “*Baruch Atah Hashem Go'al Yisrael* – Blessed are You, G-d, Who redeemed Israel” – we do not answer “amen” as is normally the case upon hearing a blessing. Rather, we are supposed to begin the *Amidah* straightaway. (In order to avoid answering *amen* to the blessing by mistake, many congregations have the custom for everyone to recite the blessing together aloud and then begin the *Amidah* simultaneously.) The Talmud (*Brachot* 4b) teaches that when we start the *Amidah* immediately after the final blessing, without pausing to answer *amen*, we are connecting the two foundational concepts of redemption and prayer.

The importance of doing this is described by Rabbi Yochanan, who teaches that a person who does so is worthy of the World to Come. Rashi, citing the Jerusalem Talmud (*Brachot* 1:1), explains that redemption without prayer is akin to a person who does not bother finishing what he has begun. It is analogous to the monarch's beloved courtier, who, when knocking upon the king's private door to seek an audience, does not even wait for the king to open the door. Rather, he disappears, and when the door is opened the king sees that there is no one there. In the blessings before and after the Shema we have drawn ourselves closer and closer to G-d, culminating now with our praises for the redemption from Egypt. Our Sages are teaching us here that to stop at this point, with the Divine Presence directly present in front of us, and to not continue onwards with the *Amidah* and our personal requests, is to misunderstand the very essence of prayer.

Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerondi (1180-1263), left an indelible impact on the Jewish nation. He is famous for his profound ethical treatises such as his legendary work, *Shaarei Teshuvah* – the Gates of Repentance – which are still being keenly studied today. He and his students also wrote a commentary on Tractate *Brachot* that is replete with brilliant and novel interpretations. Rabbeinu Yonah offers two explanations for why a person is worthy of the World to Come when he joins together the blessing of redemption with the *Amidah*.

One: the Torah states categorically that we were granted our freedom from Egypt in order to serve G-d (*Vayikra* 25:55). In the poignantly evocative words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the fact that we belong to G-d precludes our belonging to anyone or anything else. How are we to serve G-d? Our Sages teach us (*Bava Kama* 92b) that the central part of our worship is prayer, and specifically the *Amidah*. Therefore, a person who occupies himself with the *Amidah* immediately after mentioning the redemption is bearing witness to the fact that the very essence of our deliverance from slavery in Egypt was to grant us the opportunity to be able to serve G-d. Living with such a mindset is an indication that a person is truly worthy of the World to Come.

Rabbeinu Yonah's second interpretation is that during the enslavement in Egypt the Jewish nation's prayers were answered because they placed all their trust in G-d. In the same way, a person who focuses on the redemption and then begins the recitation of the *Amidah* without pausing reveals that they, too, trust that G-d will answer all of their requests. Therefore, they too will merit the World to Come.

It is with the intertwined concepts of redemption and prayer that we now conclude the blessings of the *Shema* and are set to begin our journey of exploration into the *Amidah*.

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Megillah 16-22

### K Is for Kavana

“One who has read the Megillah of Esther while writing it or explaining it or proofreading it – if he had kavana in his heart (“intent”), he fulfilled the mitzvah to read it on Purim; and if not, he did not fulfill the mitzvah.”

This *mishna* teaches an essential factor necessary for fulfilling a mitzvah: *kavana*, i.e. “intent.” There are a variety of ways in which the word *kavana*/intent is used in connection with the fulfillment of a mitzvah. One is the intent to understand what one is doing or saying, such as the *kavana* one must possess in understanding the words (at least the first verse) when saying “*Shema Yisrael*.” “Hear O Israel, Hashem, our G-d, Hashem is One.” Hashem who is nowadays recognized in the “limited role” as G-d of the Jewish People, in the future will be recognized and known by all to be G-d of all people and of all existence. (For further explanation, see Aruch Hashulchan 60:1-4.)

Another meaning of *kavana* is to understand the reason behind the mitzvah. For example, this would mean having in mind – while dwelling in the succah on the festival of Succot – the reason why the Torah says to do so. The Torah states, “You shall dwell in succahs for seven days, in order that future generations will know that I placed the Jewish People in succah dwellings when I brought them out of Egypt.” (Vayikra 23:42-43)

Yet another meaning of *kavana* is in a Kabbalistic sense, such as the connection of a mitzvah with the names of Hashem, the letters of those names and the various combinations of those letters. Much has been written in classic texts on this highly metaphysical topic, which involves a deeper understanding of the manner in which Hashem interacts with His physical creation.

However, none of these meanings of *kavana* is the main point of the halacha in our *mishna* that addresses reading the Megillah and fulfilling the mitzvah. The *kavana* in our *mishna* is *kavana* in its

most pure and basic sense: Doing the act of a mitzvah for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah. Not reading the Megillah in order to write another copy of the Megillah next to it; not to read the words in the Megillah for the sake of teaching a Torah lesson; and not to read it for the purpose of merely proofreading it to make sure it is kosher.

(An aside: in my youth, I bought my first Megillah – with quite beautiful writing – from a close friend. He told me it had been checked by another scribe when it was written and that he had also quietly read from it in shul for the past five years when following the reading of the *chazzan* of the congregation. However, the first Purim, when I was reading it at home for my wife who had recently given birth and was still homebound, I noticed a missing letter in the word *chodesh* and stopped in shock. My neighbor helped us complete the Megillah reading by lending us his Megillah. When I told my friend after Purim, he was more than surprised, but we decided that we are only human. He said that he would not only pay for a scribe to make the correction, but that he would also pay to have it checked by a computer scan for accuracy, just in case. And just like with the Purim story, all ended well with my Megillah!)

Now, back to our *mishna*. There is a fascinating question throughout Shas as to whether “mitzvahs need *kavana*.” Does a person fulfill a mitzvah by merely doing the correct action or saying the correct words? Or, in order to fulfill a mitzvah is there also a requirement that the person specifically have in mind that he is doing it in order to fulfill the mitzvah? This subject is discussed at length by the *Poskim* and may have different answers depending on whether it pertains to a Torah mitzvah or a rabbinical one (such as Purim); whether it is a mitzvah that is performed by an action as opposed to by speaking; is it self-

evident from the time/place/manner of doing the mitzvah that it is being done for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah? And possibly more factors, as well.

The commentaries ask why our *mishna* – which requires *kavana* for fulfillment of the mitzvah of reading the Megillah – is not mentioned in *Shas* as proof that mitzvahs need *kavana*, or, alternatively, is not cited as refutation to the view that a person does not require *kavana*. Many answers are presented by the Torah commentaries, and here is but one. In the cases of our *mishna* – reading to copy it, reading to expound on it, and proofreading it for errors – the person is reading the Megillah expressly *not* for the purpose of fulfilling the mitzvah to read it. For example, his reading is for proofreading it, and not at all for fulfilling the mitzvah to read it on Purim. Therefore, in this case he does not fulfill the mitzvah unless he consciously has in mind that his reading is *also* for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah and he is careful to read it with correct pronunciation of the words (an effort not normally the concern of one who is merely proofreading). So, even if it would be true that a person fulfills a mitzvah with a lack of *kavana*, nonetheless, if there is a *different* intent involved that could diminish the mitzvah significance of the person's action, the mitzvah is not fulfilled

This is akin to a person who is actively thinking to not want to fulfill the mitzvah that he is currently doing, and is certainly not fulfilling his obligation against his will.

For a more in-depth halachic understanding of the subject of “mitzvahs needing *kavana*” I highly recommend learning the Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 60:4, with the Mishneh Berurah and Bi'ur Halacha there, along with the Aruch Hashulchan in *simanin* 60 and 61. And, as always, it is extremely important to ask a local halachic authority in any practical, real situation, for which one needs to know the halachic ruling.

I would be remiss in not adding another point regarding the significance of always having *kavana* to fulfill any mitzvah, whether or not one has achieved post-facto fulfillment of a mitzvah without conscious intent to fulfill the mitzvah. The Torah instructs each member of Klal Yisrael to love and serve Hashem with all of one's heart, soul and might. Therefore, it is certainly ideal that a person should be conscious, aware and have clear intent as to why he is doing any mitzvah: because Hashem said to do so. (See the Mishnah Berurah 60 at the end of letter *yod*.)

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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**H**ashem tells Moshe that He is hardening Pharaoh's heart so that through miraculous plagues the world will know for all time that He is the one true G-d. Pharaoh is warned about the plague of locusts and is told how severe it will be. Pharaoh agrees to release only the men, but Moshe insists that everyone must go. During the plague, Pharaoh calls for Moshe and Aharon to remove the locusts, and he admits he has sinned.

Hashem ends the plague but hardens Pharaoh's heart, and again Pharaoh fails to free the Jews. The country, except for the Jewish People, is then engulfed in a palpable darkness. Pharaoh calls for Moshe and tells him to take all the Jews out of Egypt, but to leave their flocks behind. Moshe tells him that not only will they take their own flocks, but Pharaoh must add his own too.

Moshe tells Pharaoh that Hashem is going to bring one

more plague, the death of the firstborn, and then the Jews will leave Egypt. Hashem again hardens Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh warns Moshe that if he sees him again, Moshe will be put to death. G-d tells Moshe that the month of Nissan will be the chief month.

The Jewish People are commanded to take a sheep on the 10th of the month and guard it until the 14th. The sheep is then to be slaughtered as a Pesach offering, its blood put on their doorposts, and its roasted meat eaten. The blood on the doorpost will be a sign that their homes will be passed-over when Hashem strikes the firstborn of Egypt. The Jewish People are told to memorialize this day as the Exodus from Egypt by never eating *chametz* on Pesach.

Moshe relays Hashem's commands, and the Jewish People fulfill them flawlessly. Hashem sends the final plague,

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# PEREK SHIRA: The Song of Existence

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by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

## THE SONG OF THE SUN

**T**he sun says: “The sun and the moon each stood in its place. By the light of Your arrows they shall go forth, by the glow of Your spearhead.” (*Chavakuk* 3:11)

The sun is a giant sphere of burning hydrogen and helium, comprising 99.85% of the total mass of our solar system. Temperatures at its core can reach 15 million degrees Celsius. Such heat would cause it to explode and scatter, were it not for its immense gravitational pull that holds it together, allowing it to release only moderated heat-energy, which is essential for all life on earth.

Clearly, this massive and brilliant servant of Hashem was created only in order to benefit the relatively diminutive dwellers on earth, primarily mankind. The sun holds the earth in perpetual orbit, and provides for it. It nourishes all earthly life, warms the atmosphere, influences weather patterns, and marks the passage of time. It illuminates the darkness, stimulates the spirit, and gladdens the heart.

Not surprisingly, the sun was the chief object of idol-worship in ancient times. Even kings would prostrate themselves before it each morning. Although idolatry contradicts the very purpose of Creation, which is to reveal Hashem’s presence in His world, He nevertheless showers His kindness upon the world by allowing the sun to shine. And in contrast to the sun-worshippers, the Jewish People rise each morning, some as early as pre-dawn, and bless Hashem, the Fashioner of Luminaries, for shining His goodness daily upon His creations.

Shortly after the Exodus from Egypt, Korach instigated a revolt against Moshe's leadership. The Sages teach that in response to this disgrace of Hashem's righteous servant and prophet, the sun and

the moon refused to shine, demanding instead that Hashem mete out justice. Hashem admonished the sun and the moon sternly, “Each day, people throughout the world bow down to you, yet you shine nonetheless and do not protest for the sake of My honor. And now, you protest for the sake of flesh and blood!?”

Every day since, the sun and moon hesitate to go forth and shine. Abiding that lesson, they fear that mankind will become deluded by their light and thereby fail to discern the world’s true Benefactor. Choosing to hide His kindness within nature, Hashem summons forth these luminaries anyway for the well-being of the world, while still preserving the opportunity for those who honestly seek His presence to discover Him.

It is this idea that the sun, which is the primary luminary of the world, sings about each day. It declares that, along with the moon, they both wish to stand still in their places in protest of those who dishonor Hashem by erroneously glorifying them. But, in His largesse, Hashem overlooks His own honor and figuratively employs His “arrows and spears” to command them to come forth and shine.

At dawn, the sun breaks through the darkness, rising steadily, crowning the heavens at its zenith. But then it descends, bowing westward, to the direction of the Divine Presence. As it gradually weakens and then disappears into the horizon, it submits to Hashem, signifying that He is the One and Only Power of the universe.

▪ *Source: Nedarim 39b*

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

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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*

## Beyond the Moon

**T**he first national mitzvah to the Jewish People is the sanctification of the new moon: *This renewal of the moon shall be for you a beginning of new moons.* (Shemot 12:2) The new month is to be determined by the actual sighting of the recurring new light.

Some have wondered whether the ancient Jewish People simply lacked astronomical knowledge of the lunar cycle, and therefore depended on actual sightings. But the mitzvah is certainly based on astronomical knowledge. Rosh Chodesh could have been only one of two days: the thirtieth or the thirty-first after the last moon. If the moon was sighted on the thirtieth day and reported by proper witnesses, the court would declare the thirtieth day to be Rosh Chodesh. If there was no sighting, the thirty-first would mark the beginning of the month. But a closer consideration of the laws of sanctification of the new moon reveals its significance and purpose to be far more exalted than a precise astronomical determination. Now, other halachic determination of time – such as sunrise and sundown, which determine times for prayer and the entry of Shabbat and other holidays – have no parallel procedure. These are determined by astronomical certainty. The new month is different – astronomical certainty is not only not required, it is also insufficient – the month must be consecrated by subjective perception.

The first clue is that the *Beit Din* procedure has the features of a civil hearing, and has the definite stamp of human social relationship. It must be performed during the day, only by a bench of three judges, and two witnesses are required.

Second, if the new moon was visible to the judges and to all of Israel, or witnesses were examined but the court did not have time to complete the proclamation of “It is consecrated!” before nightfall, the thirtieth day did not become Rosh Chodesh. Instead, the thirty-first day began the new month. Obviously, then, it is not the actual sighting of a

heavenly phenomenon, but rather the sanctifying enactment of the representatives of the community that determined the new month.

Rosh Chodesh, and the festivals that follow it, are referred to as *mo’ed* – a designated meeting time or place. They are meant to be mutual, voluntary meetings between G-d and his people. G-d specifies general terms of the time for these meetings, but it is up to the Jewish community to set the exact date for the meeting. It is not the natural phenomenon of the moon finding the light of the sun that determines the beginning of the month; rather G-d wants His people to find their way back to Him, so that His light may shine on them.

This explains other laws of sanctification as well. In the interests of the community, the representatives of the community may decide to declare the thirty-first day as the beginning of the new month, even if the moon was sighted on the thirtieth day, for example so that Shabbat and Yom Kippur would not fall on consecutive days. Furthermore, even if through error, or by design, or through being lead astray by false witnesses, the court designated the beginning of the month erroneously, the new month is still consecrated, and the festivals are set accordingly. When the details of the law are examined, it becomes evident that the sighting of the new moon is merely an inducement for the community to designate the new month. Once the community has declared it to be *mo’ed* – a meeting time – G-d joins that meeting.

And, the verse comes to life: *This renewal of the moon shall be for you a beginning of new moons.* Our perception of the renewed moon should inspire us to undertake spiritual renewal – not an astronomical calendar, but our own months, our own meeting times with G-d. And may we indeed find our way back to Him, so He may shine His light on us.

*Sources: Commentary, Shemot 12:2*