

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Never Forget

*“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, ‘When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their number, every man shall give an atonement for his soul...’” (30:11-12)*

**R**av Nosson Tzvi Finkel, Rosh HaYeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, suffered from Parkinson’s disease for 28 years. Rabbi Nochum Stillerman visited Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel’s home shortly after the latter became Rosh Yeshiva and there was a bottle of soda on the table. Wanting to honor his guest, Rav Nosson Tzvi tried to pour his guest a drink. Seeing the great difficulty that this caused him, Reb Nochum said he wasn’t thirsty. “If you don’t want to drink it, that’s your business, but I have to pour my guest a drink,” said Rav Nosson Tzvi.

He tried to lift the bottle and pour the drink, but his hands refused to cooperate. Reb Nochum was so disturbed by the sight of the Rosh Yeshiva struggling to pour a cup of soda that he blurted out: “Rosh Yeshiva, why do you deserve this?”

As soon as those words left his mouth, Reb Nochum wished he could somehow retract them. But it was too late.

“I was wondering the same thing,” replied Rav Nosson Tzvi. “And I think I know the reason,” he added.

He explained: “I love learning. In fact, I love learning so much that I think there’s no way I can learn Torah *lishmah* (for its own sake) because I enjoy it too much. Maybe I was stricken with this disease as a punishment for not learning Torah *lishmah*.”

Reb Nochum left the Rosh Yeshiva’s house deeply saddened, and stunned at the possibility that the Rosh Yeshiva’s Parkinson’s could be a punishment.

Twenty years passed, and the Rosh Yeshiva’s condition continued to deteriorate. During the last year of Rav Nosson Tzvi’s life in this world, around Pesach time, Reb Nochum came across a Gemara in the Talmud Yerushalmi, and was so excited by what he saw that he hurried to show it to the Rosh Yeshiva.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Horayot 3:5*) teaches that when Moses ascended to the Heavens and learned Torah there for 40 days and nights, he kept forgetting everything Hashem taught him. At the end of the 40 days, he received the entire Torah as a gift.

“Why?” asks the Talmud Yerushalmi. “So there will be a response to the fools,” answers the Talmud.

“Imagine Moses’ plight,” Reb Nochum said to the Rosh Yeshiva. “He’s in Heaven, learning from Hashem Himself, and each time he walks away for a moment and says, ‘What did I just learn?’ he draws a total blank. It must have been so frustrating.

“Why did Hashem do that to him? So that some unwise people who feel that they can’t learn because they keep forgetting the material will take heart and say, ‘If Moses could forget what he learned and still continue studying Torah, then so can we.’”

Reb Nochum then reminded Rav Nosson Tzvi that 20 years earlier, the Rosh Yeshiva had suggested that his Parkinson’s was a punishment for not learning for its own sake. “Maybe there’s a different reason,” suggested Reb Nochum. “Maybe the Rosh Yeshiva had to suffer from this illness so that in case any of us would say that we can’t learn because we aren’t feeling up to it, we would have the Rosh Yeshiva to look to as proof that one can learn even with a debilitating disease.”

The Rosh Yeshiva kissed Reb Nochum and said, paraphrasing a Gemara, “Akiva, you have comforted me; Akiva, you have comforted me.”

*“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: ‘When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their number, every man shall give an atonement for his soul...’”*

The Alshich Hakadosh (1508-1593) interprets this verse homiletically: When you appoint a head, a leader for the Children of Israel, appoint only someone who is prepared to sacrifice himself – *kofer nafsho* – for the community.

How many of us have shared the crushing feeling of investing years and years into our learning and have trouble remembering what we learned even last week. Rav Nosson Tzvi’s self-sacrifice is an inspiration to us. If he was able to push himself to learn Torah, and at the same time to support the largest Torah institution in the world, what right do we have to complain?

- *Source: Perseverance Over Parkinson’s by Rabbi Yehuda Heimowitz*

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# Q & A

## Questions

1. How many "geira" are in a shekel?
2. What was the minimum age of military service in the Jewish army?
3. What were the three different types of terumah donated?
4. The Jews were counted after Yom Kippur and again after Pesach. Both times they numbered the same amount. How can this be? Didn't some 19-year olds turn 20 during that six month period?
5. How many ingredients comprise the incense of the Mishkan?
6. According to Rashi, why are sailors called "malachim" ?
7. What is the difference between between chochma (wisdom), bina understanding),and da'at (knowledge)?
8. Shabbat is a "sign." What does it signify?
9. When did the Jewish People begin to give contributions for the building of the Mishkan?
10. How many books are there in Tanach?
11. From where did the men take the earrings that they donated to make the calf?
12. Why did Aharon build the altar for the golden calf by himself?
13. Why did Moshe break the Tablets?
14. How can two brothers belong to two different tribes?
15. Why did Moshe ask that his name be erased from the Torah?
16. How has the sin of the golden calf affected the Jewish People throughout history?
17. In verse 33:2, G-d says that the inhabitants of Eretz Canaan would be driven out of the Land. In that verse, only six of the seven Canaanite nations are mentioned. What happened to the seventh?
18. How did G-d show that He forgave the Jewish People?
19. How did Moshe become wealthy?
20. How do the light rays shining from Moshe's face show us the powerful effect of sin?

## Answers

1. 30:13 - Twenty.
2. 30:14 - Twenty.
3. 30:15 - For the adanim (sockets), for the purchase of communal sacrifices, and for the building of the Mishkan.
4. 30:16 - Their ages were calculated based on Rosh Hashana, not based on their individual birthdays.
5. 30:34 - Eleven ingredients were used making the incense.
6. 30:35 - Because they stir (malach) the water with their oars.
7. 31:3 - Chochma is knowledge acquired from others. Bina is the deduction of new knowledge from what one has already learned. Da'at is holy inspiration.
8. 31:13 - It is a sign between G-d and the Jewish People that He has chosen them and a sign to the nations of the world that He has sanctified the Jewish People.
9. 31:18 - The 11th of Tishrei.
10. 31:18 - 24.
11. 32:2,3 - From their ears.
12. 32:5 - He hoped that by building it by himself it would take longer and in the interim Moshe would return.
13. 32:19 - Moshe reasoned: If the Torah forbids those who have estranged themselves from the Torah to partake in even a single commandment (Pesach sacrifice), surely the entire Torah cannot be given to a whole nation which has estranged itself from G-d!
14. 32:27 - Half-brothers, sharing the same mother.
15. 32:32 - So people shouldn't say "Moshe was unworthy to plead for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people."
16. 32:34 - Whenever G-d punishes the Jewish People, part of that punishment comes as payment for the sin of the golden calf.
17. 33:2 - The seventh nation, the Girgashites, voluntarily emigrated.
18. 33:14 - He agreed to let His Shechina dwell among them.
19. 34:1 - Moshe carved the Tablets out of precious stone. G-d commanded Moshe to keep the leftover fragments.
20. 34:35 - Before the sin of the golden calf, the people would not have been afraid to look at the light rays, but after the sin they were afraid.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

## Between Books and Scrolls

**W**hen Moses pleaded with G-d to forgive the Jewish People for the sin of the Golden Calf, he said: “And now, if You leave behind their sin, [then good]. And if not, then please erase me from Your book (*sefer*) that You wrote.” (Ex. 33:32) In this passage, the Bible uses the Hebrew word *sefer* to denote “book” or “written document.” Besides the word *sefer*, there are various other terms used in the Bible and in later rabbinic discourse for “books.” As befits the People of the Book, several such terms have come into use. This essay explores some of those terms (including *iggeret*, *megillah*, *machzor*, and *kuntres*) and attempts to pinpoint their exact meanings and how they differ from one another.

We begin our discussion with an insightful analysis of the word *sefer*, the generic term applied to the twenty-four books of the Bible (although, some books are described as a *megillah*, see below). This word is also used to describe a Torah Scroll (*Sefer Torah*). But why is a Torah Scroll called a *sefer*? My illustrious ancestor, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk (1717-1786), explains that the word *sefer* is related to the word *sfar* (“border”), because just like a border protects a country in that one must clear the secured border in order to enter, so does the Torah protect the Jewish People by insuring their closeness to G-d. On the other hand, the word *sefer* is also applied to legal documents – like a Marriage Document, which the Mishna (*Yevamot* 15:3) calls a *Sefer Ketubah*.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro (1935-2017) explains how all words derived from the SAMECH-PEH-REISH root are interrelated and refer to the concept of “unifying” disparate parts. The verb

*sippur* (“storytelling”) denotes joining together multiple details to form a single narrative.

This is similar to a *sfar* (“border”), which confines everything within its “boundary” and unites them into one political unit. These two terms are related to *mispar* (“number”) and *sofer* (“counting”), because the system of counting joins all numbers together in an organized and logical way. Finally, all of this relates back to the word *sefer* (“book”), which includes all the details and contents recorded therein, and binds them together into one entity. This explanation does not just apply to Holy Books, but to all books in general.

Professor Raymond P. Dougherty of Yale University (1877-1933) wrote the following insight to explain how *sefer* derives from the core meaning of “to count”: “The act of counting is primarily a mental process, but memory is fallible, and so there must be recourse to a written tally or record. Hence, the secondary meanings of the verb developed, with the result that *sofer* came to mean ‘scribe’ and *sefer* became a term for ‘record’, ‘letter’, ‘book.’”

Interestingly, the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 24b) notes that the Persian equivalent to the word *sefer* is *dvir*, and the Talmud uses this to explain the connection between the original name of the city Dvir and its newer name Kiryat Sefer (*Judges* 1:11).

As mentioned above, some books of the Bible are called a *megillah*, while some are called a *sefer*. Rabbi Shmuel Strashun (1794-1872) notices that

when the Talmud (*Bava Batra* 14b) lists the various books of Tanach, it is careful to use the word *sefer* when mentioning the Book of Psalms (*Sefer Tehillim*) and the word *megillah* when mentioning the Book of Esther (*Megillat Esther*), but does not use those two words when discussing any other of the twenty-four books of the Bible.

To explain this phenomenon, Rabbi Strashun postulates that the term *sefer* said about Psalms implies an affinity between that book and the quintessential *sefer* – the *Sefer Torah* (i.e., the Pentateuch). He accounts for this affinity by noting that like the Five Books of Moses, Psalms is also divided into “Five Books,” and the total amount of verses in Psalms is somehow similar to the total amount of verses in the entire Pentateuch (see *Kiddushin* 30a).

In explaining why the Book of Esther is called a *megillah*, Rabbi Strashun explains that this refers to the requirement that the Book of Esther to be read on Purim ought to be written on a separate scroll of parchment and not on a scroll that also includes other books of the Bible (see Radak to Jer. 36:1, and see also *Megillah* 19a).

In fact, throughout rabbinic literature the term *megillah* without further specification refers to *Megillat Esther*, and, similarly, the blessing that the rabbis instituted over reading *Megillat Esther* is *al mikra megillah*. As an aside, because Esther is seen as the quintessential *megillah*, Rabbi Strashun finds the position of *Masechet Sofrim* (14:3) difficult, because that work stipulates reciting the blessing *al mikra megillah* upon publicly reading any of the so-called Five Scrolls: Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Nonetheless, the Vilna Gaon (*Biur HaGra* to *Orach Chaim* §490) adopts this custom, and it is still followed by many communities in Israel.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740–1814) traces the word *megillah* to the biliteral root GIMMEL-LAMMED (“round/circular”). Other

words derived from this root include *gal* (“heap” of stones in a circular formation), *gollel* (“to roll”), *galgal* (“wheel”), *gulgolet* (“skull”), and *magal* (“sickle”). The word *megillah* fits with the core meaning of GIMMEL-LAMMED, because it refers to a scroll comprised of multiple sheets of parchment sewn together that are subsequently *rolled up*. Rabbi Pappenheim also notes that the word *gilayon* (often mispronounced as *gilyon*) similarly derives from this root and refers to a single sheet of parchment upon which one might write something and then roll it up. In later usage, the Hebrew word *gilayon* came to refer to the empty margins of a written document, and then to glosses often written in those margins.

Ever since I was a child, I thought that the difference between the terms *sefer* and *megillah* lies in how many pins the scroll is roll up into. I understood that the word *sefer* denotes a scroll that is rolled up on two wooden pins (like a *Sefer Torah*, *Sefer Yehoshua*, *Sefer Yishaya*, or *Sefer Trei Asar*), while the term *megillah* refers specifically to a scroll that rolls up into one wooden pin (like *Megillat Esther* and the other four *Megillot*). More recently, I have tried to find a source for this distinction, but have come up empty-handed. If anybody has any relevant sources that they can point me to, please contact me directly.

We discussed earlier that the Book of Esther differs from all other books of the Bible in that it is specifically called a *megillah*. The truth is that the Amoraic sage Shmuel (*Megillah* 7a) said that the Book of Esther “was said in order to be read, not said in order to be written.” In fact, the Book of Esther actually refers to itself as an *iggeret* (Esther 9:26-29), which implies that it is somehow different from the other books included in Scripture, which are typically called a *sefer* (or *megillah*). How do we understand the term *iggeret* in this context, and how does it differ from a *sefer*?

In the Book of Chronicles (II Chron. 30:6), we find that when King Hezekiah attempted to effectuate a mass repentance movement, he



dispatched runners with royal proclamations (*iggeret*) that exhorted the Jewish People to return to G-d. Based on this passage, Rabbi Dr. Jose Faur (1934-2020) proffers that the term *iggeret* implies government decisions that were publicized orally via a royal herald who would recite those proclamations from written epistles. Because copies of such epistles were not made available to the public, one could say about such them they were given “in order to be read, not... to be written.” Faur explains that the term *sefer* implies an officially “published” book, from which other copies were allowed to be produced for the public’s use. This stands in contrast with the term *iggeret*, which he defines as a sort of “written memorandum” to be recited by heralds, but not made available to the public.

As Faur explains it, when a herald would recite an *iggeret*, he would typically unfold the entire scroll before reading it. Moreover, because an *iggeret* does not have the same status as a *sefer*, it would not be read with the traditional cantillation used for reading a *sefer*. Based on these two points, Faur concludes that the current way of reading Esther actually represents a synthesis or compromise between an *iggeret* and a *sefer*, because the prevailing custom is to read Esther on Purim with the traditional cantillation (like a *sefer*), but to also unfold the entire scroll before reading it (like an *iggeret*).

Rabbi Avraham ben Yom Tov of Seville (1250-1330), also known as the Ritva, writes that the difference between a *shtar* and an *iggeret* is that a *shtar* is written with the intention that it last a long time (ostensibly to serve as evidence to whatever transaction or event it records and testifies about), while an *iggeret* is not intended as long-term documentation. Without directly quoting Ritva, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) uses this sort of distinction to understand the difference between a *sefer* and an *iggeret*. He understands that a *sefer* implies a document that was meant to last a long time (see Jer. 32:14), while an *iggeret* is more like a temporary memo that is not meant to last for a long time. With this in mind, he explains a Talmudic passage (*Megillah* 19a) wherein Rav says

that although the Book of Esther is called an *iggeret* – which would lead one to think that its parchment parts can be sewed together with the less durable linen threads – since it is also called a *sefer*, it must be sewn with the more long-lasting animal sinews. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, Rav’s reasoning assumes that a *sefer* implies something that lasts longer, while an *iggeret* implies something that is not intended to last as long. (However, see *Sotah* 13a which uses the word *iggeret* in the sense of “document” that attests to a sale, which is more similar to a *shtar*.)

In Mishnaic Hebrew, the term *iggeret* typically refers to a writ or document issued by a rabbinic court. For example, the word *iggeret* is used in reference to a bill of divorce (*Gittin* 6:5), and indeed the Mishna (*Gittin* 9:3) uses the terms *sefer teiruchin*, *iggeret shevukin*, and *gett peturin* as synonyms for a bill of divorce. Similarly, an *iggeret mered* is issued against a woman who “rebels” by refusing to perform her wifely duties (*Yevamot* 64a) and an *iggeret bikoret* (*Ketuvot* 11:5) is a judicial proclamation of intention to sell a property. Similarly, we find the word *iggeret* used to describe “letters” that included Halachic rulings sent from the Holy Land to Babylon by Ravin (*Ketubot* 49b, *Bava Metzia* 114a, 139a, and *Niddah* 68a, see also *Shabbat* 115a, *Bava Batra* 41b, and *Sanhedrin* 29a). The Talmud (*Shabbat* 19a) even talks about sending an *iggeret* in the mail.

Rabbeinu Tam (cited by *Tosafot* to *Ketuvot* 100b) explains that the legal term *iggeret* refers to a sort of document produced by a *Bet Din* in one locale to be sent to another *Bet Din* elsewhere. In line with this, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Leiter of Kiryat Sefer suggests that *iggeret* may be derived from the biliteral root GIMMEL-REISH (“temporary residence”), and thus implies that the *iggeret*’s original home is short-lived, because it was only written with the intention that it be sent elsewhere. Rabbi Pappenheim offers a similar understanding in explaining that an *iggeret* implies a document which is moved about all over a given province in order to thoroughly publicize its contents. (This is more in line with Rabbi Faur’s explanation.)

Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) explains that the word *iggeret* is related to *agur* (“collection”), which implies storing items long-term. In that sense, an *iggeret* refers to a document that was meant to be preserved for a long time. On the surface, this understanding of the etymology of *iggeret* seems to contradict the positions of Rabbi Faur and Rabbi Soloveitchik.

Professor Avi Hurvitz, a prominent linguist and historian, actually sees the terms *iggeret* and *sefer* as synonymous, with both meaning “letter.” However, he argues that the difference between the lexical terms used is simply reflective of different periods in the historical development of the Hebrew language, with *sefer* representing an older variant of the language, and *iggeret*, a later one. Indeed, the word *iggeret* and its variations only appear in the later, post-Exilic books of the Bible; namely, Esther, Ezra/Nechemiah, and II Chronicles.

In a short but sweet comment, the Malbim explains that *iggeret* refers to a document related to two parties, *sefer* refers to a document that “tells” (*misaper*) about a certain topic or story, *megillah* refers to a scroll that was written with intention that it be “rolled up” (*gollel*), *gilayon* refers to something written in a way that it was intended to be “revealed” (*gilui*) but not rolled up or folded up, and *ktav* is a general term for anything “written” (*kotev*).

In early Medieval sources, the Hebrew term for a Bible codex was *machzor*, while the word *sefer* referred specifically to a scroll. The term *machzor* derives from the Hebrew/Aramaic root CHET-

ZAYIN-REISH, which means “return” because when one finishes reading a codex, one can easily “return” to its beginning, unlike a scroll which has to be rolled from one end to the other. Another Medieval term that was used for Bible codices was *mitzchaf* (which was apparently borrowed from the Arabic word *mishaf*). In later times, this word fell into disuse and *machzor* came to refer to a special prayer book used for Jewish holidays. In that context, the word *machzor* recalls the cyclic nature of the Jewish Calendar, whose holidays “return” annually.

In contemporary speech, a *kuntres* (often translated as a “notebook”) refers to a short treatise that is not significant enough to be presented as an independent *sefer*. The Tosafists typically refer to Rashi’s Talmudic commentary as the *kuntres*. Although Rashi himself does not use this word to describe his own work, he does use it to describe his teacher’s commentary (see Rashi to *Gittin* 82a).

Scholars like Rabbi Binyamin Mussafia (1606-1675), Rabbi Dr. Ernest Klein (1899-1983), and Rabbi Daniel Sperber understand that this word comes from the Greek word *commentaries*, with Sperber explaining the origins of the term as referring to the records of the public register that documented official government activities. On the other hand, Rabbi Eliyahu HaBachur (1469-1549) in *Sefer HaTishbi* contends that the word *kuntres* is derived from the Latin *quinternus*, a quire comprised of five sheets of paper.

For a discussion about the differences between the terms *gett* and *shtar*, see my earlier essay “Divorce Bills and other Documents” (May 2020).

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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**M**oshe conducts a census by counting each silver half-shekel donated by all men age twenty and over. Moshe is commanded to make a copper laver for the Mishkan. The women donate the necessary metal. The formula of the anointing oil is specified, and Hashem instructs Moshe to use this oil only for dedicating the Mishkan, its vessels and Aharon and his sons. Hashem selects Betzalel and Oholiav as master craftsmen for the Mishkan and its vessels.

The Jewish People are commanded to keep the Shabbat, an eternal sign that Hashem made the world. Moshe receives the two Tablets of Testimony on which are written the Ten Commandments.

The mixed multitude who left Egypt with the Jewish People panic when Moshe's descent seems to be delayed, and so they force Aharon to make a golden calf for them to worship. Aharon stalls, trying to delay them. Hashem tells Moshe to return to the people immediately, threatening to destroy everyone and build a new nation from Moshe. When Moshe sees the camp of idol-worship, he smashes the Tablets and destroys the golden calf. The sons of Levi volunteer to punish the transgressors, executing 3,000 men.

Moshe ascends the mountain again to pray for forgiveness for the people, and Hashem accepts his prayer. Moshe sets up the Mishkan, and Hashem's clouds of glory return. Moshe asks Hashem to show him the rules by which He conducts the world, but he is granted only a small portion of this request. Hashem tells Moshe to hew new Tablets, and reveals to him the text of the prayer that will invoke Divine mercy.

Idol worship, intermarriage and the combination of milk and meat are prohibited. The laws of Pesach, the first-born, the first-fruits, Shabbat, Shavuot and Succot are taught. When Moshe descends with the second set of Tablets, his face is luminous as a result of contact with the Divine.

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## THE AMIDAH (PART 5) – BIRKAT HA'AVOT

*“Prayer is not a miracle. It is a tool, man’s paintbrush in the art of life. Prayer is man’s weapon to defend himself in the struggle of life. It is a reality. A fact of life.”*

(Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer)

The second blessing reads, “You are eternally mighty, my G-d, You are the Resuscitator of the dead; abundantly able to save. He sustains the living with kindness, resuscitates with abundant mercy, supports the fallen, heals the sick, releases the confined, and maintains His faith to those asleep in the dust. Who is like You, Master of mighty deeds, and who is comparable to You, King, Who causes death and restores life and makes salvation sprout. And You are faithful to resurrect the dead. Blessed are You, G-d, Who resurrects the dead.”

The second blessing is known as the blessing of “*gevurot* – strength” as it is a partial description of G-d’s power, with an emphasis on the Resurrection of the Dead. As mentioned before, this blessing corresponds to Yitzchak, who, according to the Midrashic texts of *Pirkei d’Rebbi Eliezer* and *Midrash HaGadol*, experienced a form of resurrection at the *Akeidah*, when his soul was returned to him after it had left his body. As Jews, we are beholden to live lives that utilize the disparate concepts of spirituality and physicality, and to blend them together to create a spiritual reality within the mundane. Perhaps this is why that sense of duality is reflected through the *second* blessing and through the *second* forefather, Yitzchak.

Rabbi Yitzchak Zeev Soloveitchik (1886-1959), more commonly known as the Brisker Rav, was a scion of the famous Soloveitchik dynasty. Together with his righteousness, he was renowned for his intense focus on understanding every detail of the Torah, and for his meticulousness in mitzvah observance. He

succeeded his father as the Rabbi of Brisk in Belarus and served as the Rosh Yeshiva of its illustrious Yeshiva until destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust. On his arrival in Israel, he set about reestablishing the Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, which became famous for its intensity and exacting scholarship. The Brisker Rav’s innovative Torah thoughts are still pored over and debated by scholars today. The Brisker Rav asks what the word “eternally” adds to our understanding of our blessing. He explains that there have been many occasions in Jewish history when it appears to us as if G-d’s might has waned. A person may come to the erroneous conclusion that the countless persecutions that have continuously plagued the Jewish Nation are an indication that G-d can no longer protect and watch over us. However, that is not true. The word “eternally” highlights that G-d’s might is timeless and that He is with us at all times, controlling His creation, even when it may appear to us to the contrary.

The Chofetz Chaim questions why the word “You” is repeated. If it were removed, the sentence would read more smoothly. The Chofetz Chaim cites the Talmud (*Ta’anit 2a*), which teaches that there are three “keys” that G-d does not entrust to His angels, due to their intrinsic importance. They are: the key of rain (livelihood), the key of childbirth, and the key for the resurrection of the dead. Angels, not being a part of the Divine system that includes the attribute of mercy, can evaluate a person’s merits only according to the strict attribute of judgment, which, by definition, would mean that most people would not deserve a livelihood, children or to be resurrected

at the End of Days. Therefore, G-d keeps these essential aspects to Himself to use at His discretion. Our blessing emphasizes this fact by referencing two out of these three. Hence, “Resuscitator of the dead are You” is a reference to the resurrection, and “abundantly able to save” is referring to our livelihood.

The word this blessing uses for “sustains” is *mechalkel*. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains the root of the word *mechalkel* as closely related to the word *kalo*, which means restrain. *Mechalkel*, therefore, means that G-d sustains us according to our needs – and not necessarily according to our desires. Everything G-d grants us in this world is exactly measured, including G-d’s kindness. The *Iyun Tefillah* writes that, very often, powerful people use their might to dominate others, to rule over them. Not so, G-d. G-d uses His might to sustain life and to nurture mankind.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab explains that supporting the fallen, healing the sick and releasing the confined all

appear here because each one is a form of resurrection. A person who has fallen upon hard times and then finds a way out of their predicament has, in a certain sense, been reborn. So, too has someone who was cured from their sickness. And a person who was released from captivity has also been revived and has experienced a form of resurrection.

In a somewhat esoteric approach, the *Iyun Tefillah* notes that the Resurrection of the Dead is mentioned four times in our blessing and alluded to once. The Midrash (*Devarim Rabbah*) teaches that the spiritual dimension of each Jew is formed from five different elements: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayah* and *yechidah*. Each time that the resurrection is mentioned, it is referring to one of these five elements that compose our souls. Some of these elements are so acutely spiritual that only the most spiritually elevated people are capable of relating to them. However, when the resurrection takes place, we will all be able to discern and comprehend every dimension of our souls and how they fuse together harmoniously to serve G-d.

*To be continued...*

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## PEREK SHIRA: The Song of Existence

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by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

### THE SONG OF THE LIGHTNING

The Lightning says:

“Lightning He made for rains, He takes out wind from His storehouses.”

(*Tehillim* 135:7)

Hashem created lightning and its earthshaking thunder in order to humble man and straighten crookedness in his heart. It reminds us to live responsibly, knowing that it is Hashem Who watches all and Whose might fills the world. Only after we are “struck” and “enlightened” by lightning can rains be showered.

We should live with awe of the Creator and fulfill His mitzvahs with reverence. Only the humble are fitting receptacles for the bounty that Hashem wishes to bestow upon us.

▪ Sources: *Berachot* 59a

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

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Mo'ed Katan 23-29

### Birthday Significance

Rabbah said, “Death between the ages of fifty and sixty is the death of *karet* (expiation).” When Rav Yosef reached his sixtieth birthday, he prepared a festive *seudah* for the Torah scholars. He reasoned, “Now that I have reached the age of sixty, I see that I was not liable to receive the punishment of *karet*.”

The other day, for some reason, I found myself thinking about my upcoming birthday. I briefly pondered the Torah perspective of birthday observance/celebration. Of course, the thirteenth one was important since it was my Bar Mitzvah. However, I realized it to not be really a celebration of birth, but rather a celebration of being obligated in mitzvahs according to the Torah. As we learn, “*Gadol ha'metzuveh v'oseh m'she'eino metzuveh v'oseh* – Greater is one who is obligated in a mitzvah and fulfills it than one who is not obligated in a mitzvah and nevertheless does it.”

I continued to wonder if there is anything in the Torah about birthday celebrations or whether they are exclusively a non-Jewish practice (even on the Jewish birthday date). In the Torah, the only birthday celebration I recall seeing is that of Pharaoh: “Now it came about on the third day, on Pharaoh's birthday, that Pharaoh made a feast for all his servants.” (Ber. 40:20)

And then, as I was reviewing Daf Yomi, I was reminded of the festive *seudah* that Rav Yosef made in celebration of his sixtieth birthday. But then again, I realized that this was not a “pure birthday party” but a celebration of reaching an age which precluded him from dying early as a result of the Heavenly punishment of *karet*.

It is nowadays a widespread custom to make a festive meal to celebrate on one's sixtieth birthday, as we see was the practice of Rav Yosef on our *daf*. However, since a variety of Torah commentaries explain *karet* differently than Rav Yosef (e.g. Rambam, Ramban, Abarbanel), the *Poskim* write that one should try to make a *siyum* on that birthday to assure that the festive meal is a *seudat mitzvah*. Others add that it is an admirable practice to have a new fruit at the meal in order to say the *she'hechi'yanu brachah*.

In respect to other birthdays, there is much discussion regarding how to view the day from a Torah perspective. Some commentaries and authorities encourage some type of celebration, while others claim it is a non-Jewish practice and discourage any special celebration.

The Jerusalem Talmud seems to indicate that one's birthday is a “lucky day” for the person. When the Amalekites attacked the Jewish People after the Exodus, they chose soldiers whose birthday was on the day of the battle. They perceived that a person's birthday is a lucky day for him and he would therefore be successful in battle.

The Ben Ish Chai (Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad) writes that some people celebrate their birthday because the day is a good sign for that person. He personally celebrated birthdays in his home. Rabbi Yisrael Lifshitz (author of the Tiferet Yisrael commentary on the Mishna) instructed his children that when one of them has a birthday, the others should visit and bless him. Similarly, distinguished members of Jerusalem's Jewish community were accustomed to visit Rabbi Shmuel Salant on his birthday and offer him their blessings. I have heard that the Chafetz Chaim made a point to publicly celebrate his birthday in his later years in order to show that people who “guard their tongue” are rewarded with long life.

Others emphasize the more serious side of birthdays. Rabbi Avraham Binyamin Sofer (author of the *Ktav Sofer* responses) would sequester himself on his birthday to “soul-search.” On the day a person is born, he receives the most precious gift of all – life! Therefore, it is a day for introspection, a day for asking, “Am I using this gift of my life to its utmost potential?”

- Sources: Ben Ish Chai, Parshat Re'eh 17; Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashana 3:8; Iggeret Tiferet Yisrael 6; Sefer Mayim HaHalacha; Sefer Chut HaMeshulash

▪ Mo'ed Katan 28a

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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*

## A Complete Half-Shekel

One half, one, one and a half, two, two and a half, three.... Take the final count and multiply by two, and you have the total population. Would it not have been simpler to count by ones?

The counting of Israel is in halves – each Jew was commanded to donate one half-Shekel to the construction of the Mishkan, and through this donation, the people were counted. In later years, this half-Shekel would be collected annually for the communal sacrificial offerings.

It is significant that the count is accomplished by way of donation. In order to be counted among the people of Israel, an individual must *contribute*. A person who merely exists and lives for himself does not become an integral part of the nation. Rather, he who gives and contributes earns his place in the community. He may then become “one of the counted.” (Shemot 30:13) Only one who asks not what the community can do for him, but resolves to do for the community, joins the ennobled circle of those counted before G-d.

He does not give a full Shekel, but one half-Shekel. Even the fullest, whole-hearted contribution to community can only be a “half.” One member can

never accomplish all of the work. His accomplishments must always be met by the contribution of his brother. The half-Shekel reminds each member, *the task is not for you to complete*. (Avot 2:16)

One Shekel was equivalent to twenty *geirah* (approximately 20 grams), and thus the half-Shekel was ten *geirah*. Although he gives one half-Shekel, the measurement is a unit of ten, a number which represents a complete unit, a full set. Subjectively, he is to give a complete measure of himself, of his talents, of his efforts. He is not to view his effort as half-hearted, waiting for someone else to pitch in. Rather, he gives his full ten *geirah*, understanding that while *the task is not his to complete*, he is not free to excuse himself from his part. (Avot 2:16)

We all become co-builders of the Mishkan, of the community when we make our individual donations. The rich give no more than the poor – everyone gives his “half.” When each gives his *whole* half, his full contribution, the total strength of the community is realized, and we may be counted among those who G-d numbers as His own.

- Sources: Commentary, Shemot 30:12-13; Collected Writings, Vol. II, Adar II, p. 380