

## Reflections 2006

### VAYIGASH

9th Tevet 5767 ~ 30th December 2006

*by Assael Romanelli*

This week we read about the biggest voluntary emigration in our people's history before the exile. Joseph convinces his family to leave the Promised Land and come to Egypt. One might wonder however, that if Joseph wielded such great power and financial influence why couldn't he sustain his family in Israel? Why must 130 year-old Jacob and his family immigrate to a foreign land to be taken care of?

Some commentators (including Ramban) think that Joseph feared that Pharaoh and the Egyptians questioned his loyalty so he wanted to prove that he was not going to betray Egypt. In spite of all that Joseph had done for the Egyptian empire, did he still feel that his position of authority was insecure in Egypt? Could that mean that Joseph may have been experiencing the problem of "dual loyalty"?

It is important to note that most of these commentators lived in the Diaspora, perhaps feeling that same duality themselves. A little voice saying: I don't feel completely accepted or at home here.

"Dual loyalty" can be experienced by individuals living within secular societies but who also identify with a strong religious community. "Dual loyalty" has been known to sometimes manifest itself when Jews live in the Diaspora. For these individuals, there exists a competing interest to prove their allegiance to both "Jewishness" and their secular State.

As Jews, do we feel like we need to act more British than other British nationals? Do we feel the need to celebrate the 350-year anniversary of the British allowing Jews back into the country (And without asking why they expelled us out in the first place)?

On the other hand, Rabbi Sforno thinks that the sons of Jacob (70 people at that time) needed to immigrate to Egypt in order to become a people (hence God's promise). In Israel, at that time, they were too similar to the natives, and the risk of assimilation was great. Moving to Egypt and becoming a distinct and foreign minority, would allow the Jewish people to bond, strengthen and build a strong identity (more than 600,000 strong leaving Egypt).

Working with the youth of the Masorti movement, I encounter the dual loyalty question all the time. How will we help our kids deal with this issue? How best should we approach the question of "dual loyalty"? What is the primary identity with which we wish our children to identify: Jewish or British? Is such a choice in modern society necessary?

With acknowledgement to the inspiring writings of R.Y. Leibowitz

*By Rachel Ain*

We are all on journeys. Yet, journeys by their very nature entail uncertainty and fear. In this week's parashah, Va-Yiggash, our ancestor Jacob makes a journey. Jacob leaves the Land of Israel, and descends to Egypt. Once he discovers that Joseph is alive and well in Egypt, he prepares to move his entire family to what he hopes will be a better place. He is leaving a land of famine, to dwell in Egypt, the land of plenty.

This journey of Jacob's is reminiscent of earlier journeys in the Torah. Like in Abraham's case, Jacob takes all of his possessions and family to Egypt. Also like Abraham, he is called by God twice. "Jacob, Jacob," he hears. And like Abraham and Isaac, Jacob is told, "al tirah" don't be afraid "for I will go down with you and I will bring you up." (Genesis 46:2-6)

These parallels are important to understand Jacob's feelings along the way. He must have known of the potential danger of leaving the land; Abraham did and God became angry. Isaac was not even able to leave the land to meet his future wife Rebecca.

What is Jacob really afraid of that requires reassurance from God? Rashi says that Jacob was afraid of being in a land without God. He says that Jacob did not want to be in a place where they worshipped idols. And he did not want to be in a place where he might be enslaved. These thoughts of Jacob are understandable. Yet, he was prepared to go on his journey anyway. Why? What allowed him to overlook his fears and leave the land that was a part of the covenant between himself and God, and between God and his family.

The first reason is that he, like some of the members of his family had developed a personal relationship with God. When he heard his name twice he realized that he was not alone. In fact, Rashi says that a doubling of a name indicates an endearing relationship between God and the person. Second, immediately after he makes the decision to move, the Torah recalls the many generations that came from his seed. (Genesis 46:8-28) This is crucial. At a moment when it looks like the covenant is in jeopardy, he is reassured that there will be a future for the Jewish people.

Journeys are never easy. And unlike Jacob, we don't necessarily hear God calling our names in the middle of the night. But if we listen a little harder and look ahead, we realize that there is hope. The National Jewish Population Survey's results were recently released. Although the overall Jewish population is down, day school enrolment is up and more students than ever are taking Judaic studies courses at universities. Here at JTS enrolment continues to increase in five schools. So yes, it is acceptable that we are fearful on this journey toward a Jewish future. We need to be vigilante and committed to the future. But we need to remember, that like Jacob, we can strive to have a personal and communal relationship with God. We must realize that by journeying in God's Presence we are able to open our eyes wide and embrace a hopeful future.

## MIKETZ Shabbat Chanukah II

2nd Tevet 5767 ~ 23rd December 2006

*by Michael Cohen*

In the first set of Joseph's dreams, 11 sheaves of wheat bow down to his sheaf of wheat. The clear interpretation of this dream was that Joseph was going to dominate his family. Conveying what would clearly be taken as bad news, Joseph shows no hesitation in telling his brothers exactly what he dreamt. Joseph said "Hear this dream which I have dreamed." After Joseph told his brothers the dream, their reaction clearly showed that the casual tone of Joseph indicated either arrogance on Joseph's part – he was convinced that being his father's favourite he would be protected – or ignorance – he was only seventeen and therefore could not anticipate the consequences of his actions.

The second time Joseph had a dream, he clearly learned nothing from his first encounter: "He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.'" This time, however, Joseph learned the potential consequences of stoking the flames of his brothers' jealousy. He was accosted, threatened with death, and then sold into slavery.

The next time that dreams play a large role in Joseph's life he seems to have learned from the hard misfortunes of his youth. Once in Egypt, Joseph is very clear each time that God is responsible for his ability to interpret the dream. With the Baker and the Cupbearer, Joseph said: "Surely God can interpret! Tell me your dreams." And with Pharaoh, Joseph said "God will see to Pharaoh's welfare!"

What brought about this sudden change of attitude? Is it that Joseph has come to believe in divine providence during his trip in Egypt, even though he had gone from one misfortune to the next? History is full of examples of people who find faith when they find hard times, and surely it is Joseph's faith in God's providence that leads him to attribute his interpretations to God.

Perhaps there is something else going on here though. Joseph learned the power of dreams the hard way. He told his brothers a dream they didn't want to hear, and so they sold him into slavery. Now Joseph is standing before the most powerful man in Egypt and he is about to tell him bad news: that in addition to seven years of plenty there would be seven years of famine. If Joseph made this out to be his interpretation, it's quite possible that Pharaoh would have taken his anger out on Joseph for the impending hard times. But by placing himself as merely the messenger for God's providence, Joseph distances himself from the bad news and places the responsibility on someone who is firmly out of Pharaoh's reach; namely the creator of the universe.

So was this a display of piety on Joseph's part? Possibly. But it is equally possible that this was just an older and wiser Joseph taking distinct measures for self-preservation. What we can learn from this model is that first of all it is good to keep our arrogance in check. Give credit where credit is due; if you have an unusual talent

or good fortune, chances are that it was God who arranged that for you. The second lesson is that by giving credit sometimes where it might not be due, can also have potentially lifesaving results.

*By Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun*

As the menorah shines with all eight candles on this Shabbat Hanukkah, I am inspired to reflect on the powerful spiritual metaphor of light in the Jewish tradition. Light is one of the enduring symbols for God in our sacred texts. The new Conservative chumash, *Etz Hayim*, offers a profound commentary on the lighting of the menorah in the Tabernacle and the Eternal Light which adorns the ark of every synagogue:

"Why has light been such a favourite symbol of God? Perhaps because light itself cannot be seen. We become aware of its presence when it enables us to see other things. Similarly, we cannot see God, but we become aware of God's presence when we see the beauty of the world, when we experience love and the goodness of our fellow human beings" (*Etz Hayim Commentary*, p. 503). Thus, as we gaze at the beautiful burning candles of the menorah, we are reminded of God's presence in our lives. As the light of the menorah illuminates our homes and the glowing faces of our loved ones, we can contemplate God's bountiful blessings.

Light also serves as a metaphor for Torah, mitzvot, and the human soul as the Proverbs teach, "A mitzvah is a candle, and the Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23) and "A candle of God is the soul of man" (Proverbs 20:27). The mystical commentator, Sefat Emet, explains that performing a mitzvah is like lighting an internal candle. He writes:

"Doing a mitzvah is like lighting a candle before God -- it is preparing a place where God's glorious presence can dwell. By means of this you enliven your soul, the candle... The more light a person brings about in the physical darkness, through doing the mitzvot, the more that one will enlighten one's soul from the light above" (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *Sefat Emet*, Parashat Tetzaveh). The mitzvot become spiritual tools for opening our souls to God's light and spreading that light into the world around us.

In this wintry season of darkness, we recognize both God's role and our own human efforts in bringing light into the world. God's light illuminates the universe with justice and righteousness. Each mitzvah we perform and each Torah text we study enables us to partner with God in shining that light through the world. This Hanukkah, may the burning candles of the menorah mirror the flaming candles of our souls, enlightened and enlivened by our commitment to God, to mitzvot, and to the study of Torah.

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## VAYESHEV

### Shabbat Chanukah I

25th Kislev 5767 ~ 16th December 2006

by *Harriet Oppenheimer*

This parashah traces not only Joseph's physical journey from Israel to Egypt, but also his emotional journey from a childhood that takes for granted his good fortune, to a responsible adulthood in which he understands not only what is given to him but also what is required of him.

Joseph loses his cloak twice – the first time when his brothers remove it and use it as false evidence to persuade Jacob of his death; the second time when Potiphar's wife grabs it as he flees from her presence having deflected her attempts to seduce him. Losing this outer layer is clearly symbolic, and after each incidence Joseph then goes into dangerous captivity with no worldly defence, yet God is with him and provides protection. Without the shield of the cloak, we can see the real Joseph revealed.

The difference between these two occasions is Joseph's state of mind. He knows from a very early age that he is marked out for a different fate from his brothers and parents. He behaves as if he thinks that the norms of society and civility don't apply to him, as he boasts of the glimpses he has seen of his elevated future – flaunting them not only to his brothers but also to his father. Even the adoring Jacob sees that this behaviour lacks humility and berates him for it. Joseph clearly believes that the evidence of God's preference for him is by itself enough to rest his future hopes on; he will be protected as a right, regardless of his own behaviour.

In Egypt Joseph has learnt some lessons. He understands that he must reject the attempts of Potiphar's wife to seduce him – whether on moral grounds, or on grounds of self-preservation because he fears discovery by Potiphar. Either way it seems that he has now understood that he too must abide by the laws that apply to other people.

In both instances of losing his cloak, Joseph has some foundation of confidence that God will protect him – in the first instance through his dreams alone; in the second instance through his dreams and through the evidence of his preservation through the dangers of the Egyptian slave trade. Yet in the second instance, and through the rest of the parashah, Joseph has learnt that to prosper and make good use of God's protection requires more than his passivity; it requires his own good efforts as well.

And thereafter, when Joseph is in jail and hears the cupbearer and the baker seeking interpretations of their dreams, he calls on God to help. He understands by this time that God's protection is most effective when he and God work together in active partnership.

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

Duplicitous behaviour is one of the hallmarks of the Genesis narratives. Jacob seizes the birthright and blessing from Esau, Lavan deceives his nephew Jacob repeatedly during the latter's sojourn, and Jacob's sons deceive the Hivites as they exact revenge for the rape of their sister Dinah. Of all of these deceitful episodes, none warrants stronger biblical condemnation than the acts of Jacob's sons in defending their people and honour. Simeon and Levi are explicitly condemned by their father Jacob — both in the immediate aftermath of the episode and then once again as their father lay on his deathbed. How are we to understand biblical duplicity? And do these brothers eventually learn a difficult lesson of harmonizing thought and deed? Parashat Va–yeishev provides interesting answers to these difficult queries.

In Genesis 34, subsequent to the rape of their sister Dinah, Jacob's sons are approached by Hamor, the chieftain of the Hivites. Hamor speaks to the sons on behalf of his own son, Shechem, who desires Dinah's hand in marriage. In response to Hamor's request, the Torah relates: "Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor, speaking with guile because he had defiled his sister Dinah, and said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace among us. Only on this condition will we agree with you; that you will become like us in that every male among you is circumcised'" (Genesis 34:13–15). Hamor and Shechem accede, their men are circumcised, and Simeon and Levi go on a rampage exacting retribution for the rape of Dinah. Jacob's sons act deceitfully — uttering one message of coexistence with their mouths, but intending something radically vengeful in deed.

Parashat Va–yeishev gives us a subtle but dramatically different portrait of Jacob's sons. Witnessing the favouritism Jacob displays to his young son Joseph, the sons become envious, harbouring unbounded hatred against their sibling. Genesis 37:4 relates, "And when the brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him." Rashi's commentary on this verse is insightful: "From what is stated to their discredit we may infer something to their credit: they did not speak one thing with their mouths having another thing quite different in their hearts." Rashi praises the brothers for not acting unnaturally in the face of hurtful envy. Anger welled in their hearts; rather than engage in small, empty talk with Joseph, they simply could not speak 'peaceably' to him. Heart and mind were one — albeit for the sake of punishing an immature brother who sought to raise himself unfairly above his siblings.

While one certainly takes issue with the ramifications of hatred, harmony between one's thoughts and deeds crafts a mature human being. Whether the feeling be one of hatred or love, one's deeds must reflect one's heart. Disguising one's feelings only serves to deepen wounds and exacerbate tension. Confronting issues, honestly and openly, allows one to be consistent, bringing the redemption of this world that much closer.

## VAYISHLACH

18th Kislev 5767 ~ 9th December 2006

by Alan Orchover

Sandwiched between the dignified fraternal parting of Jacob and Esau and the death of Rachel giving birth to Benjamin is the problematic story of Dinah and the violent response of her brothers, Shimon and Levi.

During Jacob's tribulations and travels back to his homeland, Dinah, his only daughter, "goes out to visit the daughters of the land". Nachmanides says Jacob should not have allowed her to go unprotected amongst the gentiles. Shechem, whose name was also the name of the city in Canaan, kidnaps her and rapes her. Afterwards, as if contrite at his hasty action, he is drawn to her and speaks to her tenderly. He asks his father, Hamor, to get her as his wife. Then a savage story ensues in which deception – the continual strategy throughout Jacob's life and more deceptions and guile are to follow until the end of Bereshit – plays a central role. The community, not just Shechem and Hamor, are tricked into becoming circumcised so that Shechem will be acceptable as Dinah's husband.

On the third day after their circumcision "when they were in pain" Shimon and Levi come without prior warning, kill all the men of the community, rescue Dinah who has been "detained" all this time in Shechem's house and leave. The remaining sons of Jacob plunder and pillage the town and remove all their flocks and cattle. Their children and wives are taken as booty as if in a war.

Jacob's condemnation is reserved until the end of his life when, as he is giving blessings to all his children on his deathbed, he virtually curses Shimon and Levi in very strong language, almost disowning them. This may be the explanation why the tribes of Shimon and Levi get no individual territory.

Some commentators attempted to explain the guile and cruelty of the brothers. Why were the men of Shechem slain along with Hamor and his son, the offending leaders of the community? Because they countenanced the crime or were incapable of restraining their leaders, either of which rendered them co-responsible.

At the time of the event in what became the traditional attitude of the Jew in the Diaspora, Jacob is more concerned as to how the inhabitants of the land will react and treat him and his family as a result of the episode. "Should our sister be treated like a whore" was Shimon and Levi's response. No further mention is made of Dinah who has to rely on fanciful, if not outrageous Midrashim, to deal with her subsequent destiny. All this was written in an award winning novel, "The Red Tent" by Anita Diamant seeing the story from Dinah's perspective.

## By Rabbi Lewis Warshauer

Power - who has it, how it's used, and what it results in, is a major theme in the Bible. In an early example of the use of power, Cain overpowers Abel and kills him. The first murder is immediately preceded, though, by a non-use of power. God warns Cain: Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; Its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master. (Genesis 4:7)

Cain did not master sin; he let it master him. (Thanks to my student Adele Ilberman for pointing out this theme in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, which is in effect a midrash on the Cain and Abel story.) Two weeks ago, in Parashat Toledot, we heard the beginning of the Jacob and Esau story. These twin brothers arrive after their mother Rebekah has received a prophecy: the older shall serve the younger. (Genesis 25:24) What follows is a struggle for mastery between Jacob and Esau, resulting in Jacob's flight after having tricked Esau out of the paternal blessing.

Now, in Parashat Va-yishlah, Jacob is returning home many years later. Accompanied by his wives and children, he is about to encounter his twin. First, though, he wrestles with a man (usually understood to be an angel) who tells him:

Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel (Yisrael) for you have striven (sarita) with beings divine and human and you have prevailed. (literally: you have been able; Genesis 32:29)

A midrash understands the striving with human beings to mean Esau and his chieftans (Genesis Rabbah 78:3); Rashi adds that it refers to Laban as well. It would be understandable for the angel to commemorate Jacob's struggle with Laban; Jacob did struggle with his uncle, who was also his father-in-law, and was able to leave his domain with his family and possessions intact. But why praise Jacob for having striven with Esau when he had not yet encountered him? Perhaps the angel was referring to Jacob's youth when he got for himself both the birthright and blessing intended for Esau.

However, perhaps the angel meant something different: Jacob had mastered himself in a way that Cain had not. This story of brothers is not like the first. The Jacob and Esau story ends peacefully; neither is killed. When Jacob re-encounters his twin, he does so not with the trickery of the past, but with extreme humility. Jacob does not master Esau in their re-encounter; he masters the situation. He does not threaten Esau, and does what he can to deflect a potential threat from him.

It is for this reason that Jacob is renamed Yisrael and that the nation that sprung from him took that name. The history of the nation of Israel is not one of mastery through conquest, but mastery of situations, including and especially adversity. It is a nation that has prevailed, not in the sense of always defeating its enemies, but continually being able, able to prevail over the forces of history that wiped out other larger and more formidable nations.

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**VAYETZE**

11th Kislev 5767 ~ 2nd December 2006

by **Rabbi Jeremy Gordon**

I love Midrash; the peculiar, half commentary, half plaything Rabbinic engagement with Bible. There is a wonderful example in this week's Parasha.

Jacob falls for Rachel at the local singles hangout. He tells her that her father and his mother are brother and sister. Rachel runs off to tell her father - Laban. Laban seems excited to meet his nephew and putative son-in-law. The Biblical text tells us [Laban] ran towards him, he embraced him and kissed him. It is hardly a provocative comment. Many a father has looked forward to meeting the man who will marry their daughter and, to have such a suitor come from within the mishpochah – family – would have been considered a tremendous advantage in ancient times. Then the Rabbis go to work.

The whole passage of Jacob meeting Rachel; the well, the watering of the flock etc. echoes the way in which Abraham's servant Eliezer met Isaac's wife, Rebecca at the same well. On that occasion Eliezer was bearing gifts, ten laden camels and gold jewellery. No wonder Laban was impressed by the suit. But Jacob has fled in fear of his life, from his brother and the house of his parents. He has nothing, but Laban doesn't know this:

Laban ran towards him – he thought Jacob was laden with money.

He embraced him – when Laban did not see anything with Jacob he said to himself, 'perhaps he has brought golden coins and they are in his bosom.

He kissed him – He said, 'perhaps he has brought pearls and they are in his mouth.' (Bereishit Rabba 70:13)

A world of insight into Laban's personality opens up, an entire persona is squeezed into an opening in the Biblical text that only exists because the Rabbis are prepared to imbue the text with such vitality and joie de vivre. The Rabbis work the Torah like dough, filling it with oxygen, transforming it, improving it. Indeed they use, in Vayikra Rabba, a parable of two princes who are given raw ingredients to look after. The one who returns some time later with raw ingredients is rejected, but the one who has made a cake is applauded. It is a delicate dance, nothing is discarded in this radical expansion of possibility. The sanctity of the Torah is preserved, or rather it receives something more special than preservation – it is imbued with yet more life.

This process is not merely an exercise in commentary, it is the essence of what it is to be Masorti; strengthening the connection to the past, while simultaneously imbuing the tradition with new energy and life. The similarity between a baker and a beggar is that both knead/need dough. And so it is for us, our life; the vitality and contemporary vigour of our faith and peoplehood comes from this sleeves rolled up engagement with the raw materials of our past. It is only in this way that we stand as the faithful inheritors of our traditions and as ancestors for generations to come.

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## By Rabbi Melissa Crespy

A parashah of deep passion, Vayetze often tears me apart while reading it. One disturbing incident in the parashah sends the commentators scurrying to their pens. Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loves and desires in the first place, is barren. In a society where bearing children is a woman's mark of distinction and worth, this is a particularly cruel fate. Rachel watches her sister give birth to son after son, and can no longer bear the pain. She cries out to Jacob: "Give me children, or I shall die." (Genesis 30:1) Jacob is "incensed" at Rachel and says: "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" (30:2) The rabbis of the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 71:7), sensitive to Rachel's pain, tell us: "Said the Holy One, blessed be God, to Jacob: 'Is that a way to answer a woman in distress? By your life, your children will one day stand [in supplication] before her son [Joseph], (who will answer them, 'Am I in the place of God?' (Genesis 50:19)) These rabbis are not only comparing identical wording in the Torah, but they are stating that just as Jacob judged Rachel harshly for crying out in pain, so, too, will Rachel's son be in the position to judge Jacob's other sons harshly - but he [Joseph] will show compassion and spare their lives.

Radak, a 13th century commentator, seems to sense in Jacob a deep feeling of frustration. He says: "Jacob said to Rachel, It is God, not I, Who has stopped you; ask Him to give you sons. I have given you what is necessary for me to give you; I sleep with you, and what can I do if you are barren because of God's will?" In this commentary, Radak tries to understand Jacob's anger in the verse as coming from his frustration at not being able to do anything more for the wife whom he loves. From Leah's reaction in the parashah, we get the sense that Jacob is spending more time in Rachel's bed than anyone else's: why then can't Jacob get Rachel pregnant? Though phrased in a way that might be construed as "blaming the victim", perhaps Jacob's anger at Rachel really is anger at his inability to produce a child for her and make her happy.

And back to the midrash, Rachel says to Jacob, didn't your father Isaac pray for your mother Rebecca, so that she would be blessed with children? (Genesis Rabbah 71:7) You may not be God, and you may not be empowered to give me a child by just sharing my bed, but you can pray for me, you can pray along with me! Your anger may be from your sense of frustration, but there is something more you can do for me. You can add your prayers to mine, and ask God for a child for us. Your father did it for your mother so that you might be born. The least you can do is pray for me, cry along with me—and perhaps God will hear both of our prayers.

Rachel's infertility, Jacob's anger and the commentators' words help us understand the complexity of our ancestors' lives. But perhaps more importantly, they can give us insight into ourselves—what motivates us to action, what causes us to stand by immobile; where our anger comes from—and how we might direct it in a better way; and how we can try to understand the pain our loved ones feel—and be better partners for them in their time of desperate need.

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**TOLEDOT**

4th Kislev 5767 ~ 25th November 2006

Deborah Silver

This is one of the most riveting sidrot in the whole of the Torah. It holds us from its opening words, the pithy and baffling statement that the 'generations' of Isaac are that Abraham was his father, to the cliffhanger ending, with Jacob fleeing into the sunset and Esau getting married to the daughter of Ishmael, his father's old arch-rival. Even the passage about Isaac and the Philistines serves only to heighten our awareness of how Isaac tries to emulate his father and makes the denouement, in which he is betrayed both by his wife and by his youngest son, that much more poignant. It is as if the virtual camera tracks back for a final shot, showing us Isaac – the one ancestor who is described as having loved his wife - left finally, and utterly, alone as the credits roll.

As my teacher, Chani Smith, writes, the tradition of chanting the Torah is ancient. The musical notes (or rather, patterns of notes) are called 'ta'amei hamikra' in Hebrew. Chani points out that 'ta'am' is a word with a wide semantic range, covering taste, flavour, meaning and reasoning. The notes of the Torah, then, can be understood as a kind of super-commentary on the text, which is very obvious when we look at a couple of instances this week.

Take, for example, the moment at which Jacob brings Isaac the meal which will seal both their fates and Isaac eats it (27:25). The phrase 'And he [Jacob] brought him [Isaac] wine, which he drank' contains a 'double merkha' which has an unusually long, syncopated tune. This note occurs only five times in the whole Torah. It makes us pause just after one of the most suspense-filled parts of the narrative – will Isaac recognise Jacob or not? No: the meal is eaten and the wine drunk. As the note draws our attention to this turning point, can we read Isaac's drunkenness into its swirling music, or wonder whether the fact that it's a doubled note is an indication of Jacob's duplicity?

There's a second example in verse 33 of the same chapter. Isaac's agonised question, 'Then who was the one who hunted and brought me food, which I ate before you came, and whom I blessed?' is set to a pattern where a note called pazer is repeated. This is unusual – pazer is a fancy note which is normally worked up to and sung only once. Its name means 'scattered' or 'fragmented'. Can we read into this an indication that everything is quite literally falling apart for Isaac and Esau at this point? And, once again, can we read duplicity into the repetition? I believe we can.

So in addition to everything else we might be thinking while listening to the drama of Toldot, let us also notice the work the Masorettes did in the sixth century. Had they not taken the trouble to record the notes of Torah for us, after all, this magnificent narrative would be a silent movie.

## By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

When all is going smoothly, God is but a footnote in the rapid pace of our daily lives. Parashat Toledot, this week's Torah reading, seems to confirm this deeply human reflex — that of turning to God in a time of crisis. Accordingly, the parashah forces us to ask the question, "How can we have a more meaningful and consistent relationship with God — in the good times as well as in the bad times?" Rabbinic commentary on Rebekah's search for God is replete with answers.

At the opening of our parashah, we confront another example of an ancestral couple wrestling with infertility. Isaac and Rebekah are childless; yet unlike the example of his father Abraham, or his son Jacob, Isaac sensitively turns in prayer to God. The couple prays together. Quite movingly, the Talmud comments on the verse "Isaac entreated Adonai facing his wife, because she was barren" (Genesis 25:21): "Isaac stood in one corner and prayed while Rebekah stood in the other corner and prayed" (Yevamot 64a). They pray together, as a couple, and God answers their prayers. Rebekah conceives and we are immediately told of the struggle within her womb. Rebekah responds, "If this is so, why is this happening to me?" (Genesis 25:22). In her crisis, Rebekah seeks answers — turning to none other than God. The Hebrew word employed by the Torah is *lidrosh*, "to seek after." Although an anachronism, Rashi, the classical medieval commentator, explains that Rebekah literally went to seek answers in the text — in the *beit midrash* of Shem. Rashi continues his commentary: "[She went to seek God] so that he would tell her what would be in the end." Hence, rabbinic exegesis imagines Rebekah seeking answers to her crisis within a text (*midrash*). Through this seeking in text, she would perhaps uncover the answer she is looking for. While the Torah responds to Rebekah's query with a literal response from God (Genesis 25:23), the response is not wholly dissimilar from our encounter with *midrash* and learning today. Professor Ze'ev Falk *z"l* writes, "Rebekah's seeking of God is to be understood in its primary sense. It is our obligation to search *midrash* not only for what it teaches us about Torah but also what it teaches about God. After every experience of learning, one must always ask, 'what aspect of God was revealed in this text?'" (Falk, *Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 58).

Learning is far more than a simple encounter with sacred text. Our experiences in life and reading of Torah have the potential to allude to God's presence, giving us precious and rare windows into the eternal. Though we do not have the ability like our foremother Rebekah to turn directly to God, we do have the ability to seek God in Torah (as the rabbis imagined in their *midrash* of Rebekah's seeking). Patience and mindfulness in the textual encounter deeply enrich our experience of God. If only we pause to ask the question so sincerely articulated by Professor Ze'ev Falk — "What aspect of God was revealed in this text?" — we can then begin to seek and be sought. Only then, can we train ourselves not to simply seek God in times of crisis, but to continually search for God in every reading of Torah, every day of our lives.

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**CHAYE SARA**

27th Cheshvan 5767 ~ 18th November 2006

Renee Bravo

It is a favourite subject of rabbinic homily that every word in the Torah has a purpose beyond the literal meaning of the word. Especially the title of the sedra has significance beyond its prosaic purpose as a title.

This sedra, entitled 'The Life of Sara' starts with the death of Sara, so what do we glean from this apparent paradox. Everything that follows in the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is coloured with and reflects the influence of Sara. She came from the Haran people, where the women were educated, and played a full part in family and civil life, and had rights as people not only as wives.

Remember the incident with Hagar, when Abraham goes to God and complains about Sara's behaviour, God tells him to go home and do whatever Sara wants him to. No suggestion of the little woman sitting quietly at home. Yet when Abraham looks for a wife for Isaac, he wants one like Sara, from their own people, educated and self-reliant. When Isaac marries Rebecca, he takes her into his mother's tent, and her love comforted him for the death of his mother. The influence of Sarah permeates the lives of the young couple, even though she is not there.

Abraham takes another wife, and has six sons. We must assume that there were some daughters as well. He gives them all gifts, but "he gave all he had to Isaac", the child of his marriage to Sarah. He even sent the others away, so that they should be a threat to Isaac.

Is there a lesson here for all of us. We are biological creatures, flesh and blood, our lives come to an end. But the influence of our lives carries on far beyond our lifespan. Psychiatrists tell us that a girl chooses her partner on the basis of her relationship to her father, and a boy to that of his mother. It is quite a frightening thought that you marry someone because you fancy them, and your choice may determine your children's happiness.

I am writing this just before Rosh Hashanah, when we naturally start to think about "who shall live and who shall die....." It is ironic that we spend so much time worrying about how we are going to die, and not give so much thought to how we are going to live. When we read this Sedra called "The Life of Sarah", but which starts with her death, we realise that although death may be the end of our physical existence, it is only a step on the continuing path of our influence.

Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun

In a traditional Jewish wedding, there is a beautiful and dramatic ceremony before the chuppah known as the "bedeken" (Yiddish for "veiling"). At this celebratory moment, a groom is escorted with song and dance to meet his bride as he lowers the veil over her face. One popular explanation for the custom of bedeken is that the groom is "checking" (from the Hebrew root b-d-k) to make sure that he is marrying the correct woman. Jacob was tricked by Laban into marrying Leah, instead of Rachel, because

she was masked behind a veil. However, the origin of the bedeken, "veiling," ceremony is found in this week's Torah portion.

In parashat Hayyei Sarah, Rebecca leaves her childhood home to join her future husband, Isaac. Upon seeing Isaac in the distance, Rebecca "took her veil and covered herself" (Genesis 24:65). Jewish brides replicate Rebecca's gesture at every marriage by covering their faces with a veil. At the bedeken, it is also customary to bless the bride with the same blessing bestowed upon Rebecca, "O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads" (Genesis 24:60). Given this biblical precedent for the bedeken ceremony, the question still remains -- what is the purpose of veiling a bride? Veiling is usually understood as a sign of modesty. A bride veils herself to signify that she will reserve herself solely for her husband. They alone will share a sacred intimacy. However, I would like to propose another symbolic theme of veiling suggested by our parashah.

Notice that Rebecca does not veil herself after meeting and wedding Isaac, as a sign that she is saving herself for the sole purview of her husband. Rather, she veils herself before approaching Isaac. Similarly today, a bride veils herself before the chuppah. The veil suggests that, despite the intimate union of marriage, a bride will retain her independence and her unique identity. Rebecca veils herself as if to say, "I will give myself to you, but there will always be a part of myself that is separate and distinct from you." In the modern bedeken ceremony, when the groom himself lowers the veil over his bride, he affirms and respects his wife's privacy and her individual self worth.

Marriage is a delicate balance. On the one hand, a loving marriage embraces the union, intimacy and selfless sharing of two lives. On the other hand, a successful marriage supports and fosters the personal growth and unique journeys of each partner throughout their lives. At a Jewish wedding, the chuppah represents the holy union of a bride and groom as they create a shared home together. The gossamer veil suggests that in the midst of their deep connection, each spouse will retain a healthy independence.

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## **VAYERA**

20th Cheshvan 5767 ~ 11th November 2006

Rabbi Joel Levy

Was there something special about Abraham, which caused God to pluck him from obscurity and to enter into an eternal covenant with him? Our tradition offers many different responses to this question.

“For I know him (Ki Y’dativ), that he will command his children and his household after him, that they shall keep the way of God...” [Genesis 18:19]

According to one reading of this verse Abraham is special (or God chooses Abraham) because God knows (“Y’ dativ”) that Abraham will be capable of creating an on-going, self-sustaining community that will preserve God’s message. There could have been other people who were morally worthy of entering into a covenant with God but only Abraham was able to “command his children and his household after him”. The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 56b) bases itself on the verse above when it acknowledges Abraham as the archetypal human commander (m’tsaveh). To put it crudely, Abraham was “Mr. Continuity”. We live in a world where, for better and for worse, the Abrahamic traditions dominate most of the planet. It does seem as if there was, at least mythologically, something special about Abraham’s ability to create self-perpetuating religious traditions.

But surely continuity is not enough. Conor Cruise O'Brien who represented Ireland at the UN in 1956 and who, since representatives sat in the alphabetical order of their nations, sat between the representatives of Iraq, Iran and Israel, was led to ponder whether religious traditions are really just another unpleasant facet of nationalism. The Abrahamic traditions may be good at self-replicating, but so are flu viruses!

God may have known from the outset that Abraham could be relied upon to perpetuate God’s ways, but it is only at the end of the parasha, after the story of the binding of Isaac and Abraham’s apparent willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, that God comes to know that this desire and ability to perpetuate is not merely an expression of self-interest:

“...for now I know (Ki Atah Yadati) that you fear God...” [Genesis 22:12]

The Jewish community is somewhat obsessed by continuity. A recent advert in the Jewish Chronicle in favour of Jewish schools displayed a crude paranoia about Jewish children forming too strong relationships with their non-Jewish peers. How much of this concern to perpetuate Judaism is motivated by self-interest or parochial national interest? Jewish continuity may be a good thing for the world, but not if it is motivated by base desires that stem from the evil inclination. Being committed to Jewish continuity is not the same as fearing God.

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

The tension and ultimate destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah stand at the core of Parashat Vayera. God's quality of justice is ironically put on trial. One midrash places the following words in the mouth of Abraham as he encourages God to think twice about the immanent destruction of these towns: "If You seek to have a world, strict justice cannot be exercised; and if You seek strict justice, there will be no world . . . You can have only one of the two. If you do not relent a little, the world will not endure" (Genesis Rabbah 39:6). As moving as Abraham's philosophical discourse is, it is the step before these words that leads the reader to marvel at the extraordinary gumption of our ancestor. How could Abraham, a human being of mere flesh and blood, stand before the Creator of the Universe and challenge the Divine decree? The answer can be found in three simple Hebrew words (or five English words) of the parashah: va'yigash Avraham va'yomar, "And Abraham approached and spoke."

Commenting on the opening phrase, va'yigash, that Abraham approached God, Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator, opens an insightful window into the angst of our prophet. Rashi explains the variant ways in which va'yigash is employed throughout the Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures. He writes, "we find an approaching toward confrontation or war as with Yoav (Chronicles I 19:14); we also find a coming close in order to comfort and appease, as in the case of Yehudah drawing near to Joseph (Genesis 44:18); finally, we discover a coming close to pray as in the case of Eliyahu HaNavi (Kings I 18:36)." Having surveyed all of the possible contexts in which a biblical character draws near, Rashi closes his comment on verse 23 by writing, 'for it was in the spirit of all of these that Abraham drew near to God, to speak harshly, to appease and comfort, and also to pray.' In one sentence, Rashi captures this liminal moment as Abraham challenges God's decree. Emotions were running high in Abraham. He wrestled with a desire to fight a battle for the righteous who were to be punished with the wicked, with a sincere hope of speaking with respect and love to God, and with the need for self-reflection. All of the above come together in a magnificent moment of self-reflection as Abraham courageously places himself in the presence of God. It is only then that he begins to speak and to question, "Will the judge of the earth not act justly?"

Abraham offers us all a lesson in honest, meaningful relationships not only with God but also with our fellow human beings. How often do we suppress strong feelings, emotions, and principles for the sake of avoiding conflict? How often are we guilty of desiring to maintain the deceptive peace of shallow relationships rather than take them a step further – to a place where sincerity may be found? Abraham, in all of his eloquent chutzpah, teaches us the importance of speaking up for the principles we hold dear. He approaches God with a sense of determination, respect, and self-reflection. And out of a moment undoubtedly fraught with intimidation, he transcends himself – leading the way for God. Only then does Abraham speak his heart and mind to God.

May we all find the strength that resides in the well of each of our souls – to hold fast to principles we hold dear and to communicate a passionate commitment to that essence with a sense of pride and derekh ertz.

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## LECH LECHA

13th Cheshvan 5767 ~ 4th November 2006

Alex Stein

Let us think about Lech Lecha in terms of the construction of the Jewish national myth. The immortal opening line of the parsha shows God telling Abraham to Go! to Lech Lecha from his family's country to a new country that God will show him. The whole sequence is curious indeed. In a world obsessed with the concept of 'indigenous people', of people whose roots on the land stretch back to the dawn of

time itself, Bereishit and the commentators are quite open about the fact that Abraham will have to embark on a journey to an unknown destination, and there he will forge a new nation, a process that will necessitate the dispossession of other peoples.

The chosen people concept has got Jews into enough trouble over the years as it is. It seems extraordinary, then, that our national myth begins in Mesopotamia, and not in Canaan. Surely things would have been much simpler had our connection to the land been depicted in more organic terms? Roots are everything. Why rest our claim to Eretz Yisrael on a deity of dubious reliability? Of course, it may be that Lech Lecha is simply giving us a true account of what actually happened, but even if this were so it wouldn't be as interesting as trying to understand Lech Lecha as a crucial building-block in our national mythology.

Here, then, is some tentative speculation for the reasons why our national claims are based on such seemingly shaky grounds, at least from a modern perspective. Firstly, the biblical narrative undermines all the traditional justifications for possession of a land. The fact that people already live in the land of milk and honey in no way prevents us, at various points in our history, from seizing it. But our claim on the land is also not eternally secure. As Ketuvim shows, when we are bad, our grip on the land is weakened, sometimes fatally.

In short, nothing guarantees you the land. The idea that a particular piece of territory will eternally 'belong' to this or that nation is absurd. During Sukkot I crossed the border between Egypt and Israel. With one step, I was supposedly in a totally new space. Of course, in a huge manner of respects, I was. But it doesn't take a particularly broad perspective to understand that the way nations organise themselves are always evolving. The nation-state dominates today, but it hasn't always been this way, and it might not be that way in the future. Values must be more central to us than territory. The land has been here longer than the likes of you and I, our grasp on it is never certain, and nor need it be.

Rabbi Lewis Warshauer

The central prayer of Jewish prayers, the Amidah, begins by identifying to whom one is praying: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. This identification serves not only to say who God is, but also to specify who the Jews are: the descendants of those patriarchs. At the same time, the Jews are also descendants of the matriarchs, and here's the rub: though God's promises are recorded in the Torah as given to the men, they would not have been achieved without the women.

The beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha consists of God's call to Abraham and promise to him: he will be the ancestor of a great nation. (Genesis 12:2) The reader recalls, however, that in the last chapter, his wife Sarah is noted as being barren. Already, a tension arises: is a great nation going to come from a barren woman? The answer to the puzzle lies in Egypt-appropriately, since Egypt is known in the Torah and elsewhere as a fertile land.

Abraham and Sarah journey to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan; Abraham begs Sarah to pose as his sister and not reveal that she is his wife, lest the Egyptians kill him in order to take her. She is then taken into Pharaoh's house and Abraham

receives, in effect a bride-price. Meir of Rothenberg (1215-1293, Germany) imagines an additional statement, unrecorded in the Torah, from Abraham to Sarah:

If you watch yourself, that you remain undefiled from any contact with Pharaoh, then God will certainly grant you a child.

In other words, God will be faithful to the promise in parallel to Sarah's fidelity to Abraham. Yet the Torah itself does not cast Sarah as entirely passive. She returns from Egypt, and seeing that she is still barren, gives Abraham her maid, Hagar - her Egyptian maid - in order that he father a child through her. (Genesis 16) What would be seen in modern times as infidelity on Abraham's part is fidelity on Sarah's part - fidelity to God's promise. A Midrash sees a close connection between Egypt and Sarah's virtuousness there:

Rabi Shimon bar Yohai said: Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When Pharaoh saw what had happened to Sarah in his house, he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah, saying, "It is better that my daughter be a maidservant in that house than a mistress in another. (Genesis Rabbah 45:1)

Sarah eventually receives a conception announcement from God and gives birth to Isaac (Genesis 21.) By that time, it has become clear that she is much more than an inert onlooker to the drama between her husband and God. She intervenes - to her detriment - to ensure a son for Abraham - Ishmael. Is it a stretch to suppose that this intervention was what persuaded God to open her womb? In bringing another woman into her husband's tent, she looked beyond her own needs and set the foundation of the nation that was to come. Sarah was not merely the mother of Isaac; she opened the door to his birth by persuading God, as it were, to fulfil His promise.

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## **NOACH**

6th Cheshvan 5767 ~ 28th October 2006

Rabbi Dr Jeremy Collick

When it comes to religion there are three kinds of people in the world.

Some people are believers in God. Some people are atheists and believe there is no God.

And the third group are people who believe and don't believe, who are tempted to commit themselves to God and yet are not completely certain all the time..

I suspect that most of us fall into the last group and this week's sedra includes two such people – Noah and Haran.

The Torah tells us that Noah and his family went into the ark Mipnay may Hamabul – on account of, in the face of, the waters of the flood.

Rashi asks why does it say Mipnay, in the face of, - Because they didn't enter the Ark until the storm actually came. He says that Noah didn't really believe that there would be a flood so he stayed outside the ark and only when it really began to pour did he and his family actually embark.

In Rashi's words Noah was a man of little faith – not all, not none, but some. He believed and he didn't believe, both at the same time.

And doesn't that phrase fit most of us too.

Noah seems to be the first agnostic in history and the second is Haran who appears at the end of the sedra and is not nearly as famous or loved as Noah.

The Torah tells us that Haran died al pney aviv which Rashi explains (in the same way as mipnay may hamabul) means on account of his father. Rashi tells us a Midrash that Terach, Abram and Haran's father took Abram to court for vandalism in breaking the idols in his father's shop. The court decreed that Abram should be thrown into the fire and if he were to be unhurt then it would show there is a God. According to the Midrash God saved him and he was released from all charges.

His brother Haran stood on the sidelines while this was going on and said to himself – If Abram survives I will be on his side and if he doesn't then I won't believe in God as he does. After Abram survived the court asked Haran where he stood. I'm with Abram, he said so they threw him into the fire and he died 'mipnay aviv' because his father had put him in this position.

Haran sits on the sidelines to see who will win, he doesn't believe and he doesn't not believe and so he ends up destroying himself.

So what is the difference between Noah and Haran?

Haran stood on the sidelines and did nothing; he waited for someone else to pass the test first. But Noah, as unsure as he was, built the ark just in case.

There are moments in our lives when, whether we are sure or not, we have no choice. We have to decide one way or the other. We have to live as if we believe – even if, at times, we're not sure

Haran is barely ever remembered but every time we see a rainbow we think of Noah and smile.

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

What intrigues me most about the parashah is the Torah's extensive attention to the blueprints in the construction of the ark. In particular, it is the ambiguity of one word, tzohar (meaning "roof" or "window") that truly speaks volumes to me in the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma. [Florida October 2005]

At the opening of the parashah, Noah is given a detailed building plan for the ark. Part of these instructions state, "make a tzohar and terminate it within a cubit of the top" (Genesis 6:16). Nahum Sarna describes tzohar as a unique word and explains that the ambiguity arises from the continuation of the verse, "terminate it within a cubit of the top." Does the latter part of the verse suggest that a space of one cubit should be between the window and the top of the ark or perhaps that the roof should extend one cubit beyond the side of the ark (Nahum Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis, 52)? Commentators are unsure. The ambiguity of the text, however, gives rise to two alternate and critical readings. First, if we are to understand tzohar as "roof," I believe God is accentuating the importance of refuge. The roof is that which closes; it is that which protects and separates one wholly from the potential destruction from the skies above. God is, above all, concerned with the protection of life in the ark — and so every precaution is taken in construction. Alternatively, if we are to understand tzohar as "window," then I believe God's primary concern for Noah and his family is about openness and connection. While it is understandable and logical that Noah would desire to construct a hermetically sealed enclosure for his family and all of the life contained therein, the danger that God warns against is precisely such isolation. The ark must have a window so Noah can see both the destruction and the eventual healing of the world. Without a window, we are incapable of being truly human and acting in the divine image.

More than the construction of roofs, it is the building of windows here in South Florida that has been overwhelming. I feel compelled to personally acknowledge "the windows of light" that demonstrated to me and my family the potential for community and hesed (loving kindness). One very dear student of mine sent a crew of workers to board up our home before the hurricane. It is thanks to this very special angel that our family was safe throughout this powerful storm. A special neighbour showed his kindness to us by helping clear a massive tree that fell inches from our home. People in our community came to the immediate aid of a family that was particularly hard hit by the storm — as the owner of the home was seriously injured by broken glass, these neighbours boarded up a whole side of the house that was destroyed by Wilma. And one of my students in Jacksonville graciously opened up her home to our family, granting us a much-needed Shabbat respite from the chaos of South Florida. It is such hesed that reaffirms one's faith in the world and allows one to persevere after the devastation of the flood. May we all learn from these models of humanity and devote our lives not only to the construction of roofs but also the building of "windows of light."

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**BEREISHIT**

29th Tishri 5767 ~ 21st October 2006

Nahum Gordon

An Orthodox mother peered over my shoulder while I was reading Nechama Leibowitz on the Tube and asked: "do you think the story of Adam and Eve is historical?" I should have responded "Is that important?" but replied lamely "I don't know". If she hadn't got off at the next stop, I would have explained that what interested me was to fathom some of the text's underlying message(s). Well, here's my decoding.

Our ancestors' story is aetiological. Cause and effect. It explains why life is hard, why childbirth is so painful for women and why we won't live forever. Adam and Eve seemingly had it all. Non-paying guests in Hotel Paradise. All their physical needs met. Not a care in the world. And they got themselves evicted. They abused the hospitality of their host who set one house rule, just one, and they couldn't keep it. No self-control. They behaved like little children who don't know the difference between right and wrong. That's because they were children, intellectually!

God did not explain to his children why they should not eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. He warned them of the deadly consequences if they disobeyed him but not why. Would God be your idea of a good parent? But now look more carefully. Eve did not even exist when God issued his very first command to man. So who told Eve? Adam. Why didn't God repeat his order to Eve directly? Presumably because he wanted to see if Adam would faithfully convey his wishes.

So God was testing Adam's obedience, like he would test Noah's and Abraham's resolve. God was putting his ultimate creation through a series of quality control tests. Did humanity pass? Absolutely. Eve challenged authority. She was fearless, defying the threat of death. She was a leader. She exercised free will. She was curious, thirsty for knowledge. She chose wisdom over immortality. And Adam? The Hebrew text suggests that he was with Eve when she took and ate the fruit. So Adam also had a choice – obey God or his life mate. No contest. That sent a profound message to God. There are limits to humanity's obedience! Where Adam and Eve failed was in not understanding that actions have consequences. They did not admit responsibility for their behaviour. They were yet to understand what being moral means. We're still learning today.

And what of God's warning that they would die on the same day that they ate the forbidden fruit? Something in them did die that day. They ceased to be innocents. They were children no longer. It was time to leave the Garden of Eden. A journey of painful self-discovery beckoned.

Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky

This week's portion, with which we begin again our annual cycle of Torah reading, starts at the very beginning (which, as the song says, is "a very good place to start.")

We need not enter the sorry fray of Darwinists vs. Intelligent Designers to capture the essential truth of the biblical world view that God's creation is magnificent.

Our annual scriptural lectionary or Torah reading cycle reflects the Rabbis' division of the Five Books of Moses into fifty-four segments, parashiyot (singular: parashah). This week, which is week one of the cycle, is called Bereishit, Genesis, after the opening word of the Torah. In addition to being the first word of the Torah, it is more or less descriptive of the content: the story of creation "in the beginning." Next week, we will read the parashah called Noah. That proper name appears as the third word in the reading, and it, too, is reasonably descriptive of the content: the story of Noah's flood. These two parashiyot contain the Bible's primeval history and are the run-up to the story of Abraham, which is found in the third portion of the cycle.

What troubles me is how the Rabbis divided that pre-Abrahamic history. As we read Genesis, we are overwhelmed by the glory of God's creation. That litany of "it was good" tells its positive judgment,

almost wilfully ignoring the vicissitudes of actual history that would subsequently unfold. We know that in week two, God will "regret that God had made humanity upon the earth." We know that God will decide "to blot out humanity from the earth." Except those verses are not found in the second portion of the Torah cycle. No, that's not in Noah's portion at all. Those incredibly depressing words are in this week's Torah reading, Bereishit.

I ask myself, just how much pessimism must the Rabbis embrace for each week's Torah portion? Couldn't they have allowed us just one measly week to revel in the judgment that humanity is "very good?" Must they rub our noses in the fact that God's grand experiment was an utter failure? Would it have been so terrible for us to have seven short days of thinking we aren't so bad after all? Why couldn't they have left that stuff until the parashah on Noah, and reserved Bereishit for a week's worth of unadulterated praise to the Creator for God's greatest creation, humanity?

When the Rabbis divided the weekly Torah portions, they were not being pessimists, they were being realists. We should and must extol the glory of God's creation. But we would be foolish to bury our heads in the sand and not to recognize that humanity is flawed — capable of great things, yet equally capable of sin. And next week, when we read the awful story of the flood, we should wait for that ray of sunlight to peep through in the end. We are not all bad. In fact, we're not too bad at all.

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## **SHEMINI ATZERET**

22nd Tishri 5767 ~ 14th October 2006

Marcus Lange

Shemini Atzeret: After seven days dwelling in the Sukkah, we add an extra day in order to linger a little bit longer. And further, now we begin to pray for rain. But why do we celebrate these two festivals together? Are there any deeper connections other than the fact that we do not want to ask God for rain until we have finished sitting in our Sukkah?

On the Shabbat of Sukkot we read from the Book of Kohelet, which contains the famous passage "Everything has its season..." often read at funerals or memorial services. Reading Kohelet in the context of our celebrations seems to suggest that the time of the Sukkot is also a time at which we reflect upon the nature of life. The time of a joyous harvest is also the time when the leaves change their colours before they fall to the ground and complete the eternal cycle of birth, growth and death.

On Shemini Atzeret we recite the Yizkor service. Surrounded by our community, we vividly remember our loved ones and remind ourselves of our own mortality. We do not say Yizkor the previous day, the actual last day of Sukkot, which means that those two festivals are somehow linked. We still cling to Sukkot; we may still spend some time in the Sukkah. We still want to hold on to the richness and the joy of the fruits of the year in the same way we want to hold on to the fruits of life when the end is near. Shemini Atzeret moves us on with the cycle of life when it introduces the themes of rain and remembrance.

On Shemini Atzeret, we change our daily prayer and begin to recite the line "mashiv ha-ruach u-morid ha-geshem" -- You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall. We insert this line into the second paragraph of the Amidah which affirms our belief in life after death. Not only do we pray for rain, but also for the right conditions which guarantee the provision of that which sustains the lives of humans and animals. At the same time we also feel the need to link this request to the idea of the continuation of life in a much larger sense. By remembering those not with us anymore, we keep their memories alive, and while reflecting upon our own mortality, we state in our prayers that apparent death in this world is not the end of life in the larger context of God's creation.

Thus, by combining -as part of our daily prayer- our request for rain (the immediate source of sustenance and life on earth) and our affirmation that God is a God of life, something of the particular atmosphere of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret will stay with us in the weeks and months to come.

Rabbi Shlomo Tucker

At the end of the Sukkot festival there are two additional festivals, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, which have some unusual aspects to them. First, whereas all of the major festivals described in the Torah have an explanation as to their meaning written in the Torah the festival of Shemini Atzeret, which is usually translated as the Eighth Day of Solemn Assembly, does not have any explanation as to its significance written in the Torah. The fact that it comes at the end of the Sukkot festival encourages us to seek a connection, but none is forthcoming in the Torah itself. Secondly, the day with which it has been joined in Israel – Simchat Torah – is not mentioned in the Torah and seems to have begun in the geonic period built upon Talmudic references. Lastly, Shemini Atzeret has no special Mitzvot of its own – no Shofar, no Matzah, no willow branches, no pouring of water. We therefore have a Biblical festival with no designated reason and meaning and with no clear historical or agricultural connection, joined with a post Biblical festival with a very strong underlying rationale for its existence – to celebrate the completion and immediate recommencement of study of the Torah. After the symbol rich festival of Sukkot, with the four species, the sukkah, the pouring of the water, and the willow branches, this is startling. “All” that Shemini Atzeret (in its combination with Simchat Torah) has to offer as a special symbol is the Torah. However, perhaps this is as it should be if the meaning of Shemini Atzeret is Jewish unity, as suggested by Rabbi Yisrael Rodzin. Torah is the bedrock of Jewishness. Whether individual Jews relate to the Torah as directly transmitted by God to Moses, or as an edited document reflecting different historical periods and perspectives, or as revealed to human beings through divine inspiration, or based on any other philosophical conception, does not matter. In all cases it is the irreducible bedrock on which all Jewish expression and creativity is based. And, in being so, it represents Jewish unity better than any other symbol or idea. This, then, is the meaning of the joining of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah – Jewish unity must be based on Torah. Whereas the four species, the sukkah and the other symbols of Sukkot and of the other festivals are important culturally and (to some people) as Mitzvot, the more sure path to ensure Jewish unity is through love of Torah and Torah study. Study of Torah has universal appeal; celebration of its specialness through song and dance is a natural expression that can attract Jews from all perspectives and streams of thought. That celebration on Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah in which all of the Jewish People can take part, can serve as an antidote to the disease of divisiveness and contention within our ranks. May we all be privileged to celebrate Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah as one united people, recognising the unifying and sanctifying power of the Torah.

From: The Israel Masorti Movement

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## **SUKKOT 15th Tishri 5767 ~ 7th October 2006**

By Rabbi Reuven Hammer

On the first day of Sukkot we read a passage from the Torah that outlines the festivals of the year including the command to “live in booths seven days...in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...” (Vayikra 23:42-43)..

The sections from the prophets reveal another facet of Sukkot. They are strange, mystical prophecies that are difficult to understand in a purely rational fashion that have given rise to apocalyptic literature that flourished in the days of the second temple and have influenced Jewish and non-Jewish mystical thinking.

The reading for Shabbat Chol HaMoed from Ezekiel describes the valley of the dry bones, the chariot of God and the war of Gog and Magog. It depicts the final destruction of Israel's enemies, who are also God's enemies.

The purpose of all of this destruction is to bring about the sanctification of God's name. "Thus will I manifest My greatness and My holiness, and make Myself known in the sight of the many nations." (38:23). This is the source and inspiration for the Kaddish prayer in which God's name is publicly sanctified.

The reading for Sukkot itself from Zechariah concerns a war between Israel and its enemies, between good and evil. Zechariah predicts God's direct involvement, fighting against our enemies, and, after His triumph, becoming "king over all the earth. On that day there shall be one Lord with one name" (14:9) – the verse with which the Aleinu prayer concludes.

Zechariah's prophecy has a direct connection to Sukkot. He predicts that the survivors of the war among the nations "shall make a pilgrimage year by year to bow low to the King Lord of Hosts and to observe the Feast of Booths" (14:16).

Thus the rather prosaic descriptions of Sukkot in the Torah give way to a picture of Sukkot as the apocalyptic festival, reminding us of the events that are yet to come and stressing Judaism's belief that eventually the knowledge of the God of Israel will become the heritage of all humanity

These readings from the prophets do then indeed give us food for thought, but we would do well to remember the caution of Maimonides:

Concerning all these matters and similar ones, no one knows exactly what they will be like when they happen. These matters are impossible to understand in the prophetic writings, nor do the Sages have traditions that explain them...In any case, the details are not basic matters of faith...Nor should one attempt to calculate the date of the final events. The Sages cursed those who do so. At that time, there will be no hunger, no war, no jealousy, no competition, as it is said, "For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Melakhim 12.

Let it be sufficient that we enjoy the festival and that Sukkot remind us of Judaism's universal dream – the time enmity will cease and all will acknowledge the Lord's sovereignty.

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by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Between Motzei Yom Kippur (the evening concluding Yom Kippur) and yesterday sukkot (temporary booths) are built all around the Jewish world. It is an especially memorable event in Israel where cities and villages alike are transformed by the festival greenery. Special markets spring up across the country peddling the four species that are brought together as we celebrate the absolute joy of the holiday. The

fragrance of the etrog embraces all as we enter the sukkah, declaring our faith in God's protection. That said, the sukkah is not only at the essence of sukkot; the sukkah, in all its beauty and symbolism provides a powerful bridge between the most sacred day of the year, Yom Kippur, and the harvest festival of sukkot. The sukkah is mentioned explicitly in the Book of Jonah, read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Then, with the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the rabbis encourage us to immediately begin building a sukkah. What do the juxtaposition of these two sukkot teach us? What lesson can be gleaned from this powerful, yet temporary structure?

The sukkah or booth makes its first and only appearance in the Book of Jonah in the fourth and final chapter. Having preached God's admonition to the inhabitants of Nineveh and having witnessed the full repentance of the Ninevites along with God's forgiveness, Jonah is furious - and retreats to the outskirts of Nineveh to wait and see what will ultimately become of these wayward but repentant Assyrians. We are told that Jonah, "found a place east of the city. He made a booth (sukkah) there and sat under it in the shade, until he should see what happened to the city" (Jonah 4:5). Although a sukkah is typically associated with peace, shelter and God's beneficence, Jonah turns the true image of the sukkah on its head. It is as if Jonah is lying in wait. Dissatisfied and even angry with the mercy God has shown to the Ninevites, Jonah waits patiently in an attempt to prove he is right - that his pessimism will prevail and God will destroy the Ninevites. Jonah's behavior is unbefitting an Israelite prophet. One who should be rejoicing in God's mercy becomes embittered.

How fitting it is then that at the conclusion of Yom Kippur we are commanded to build a different kind of sukkah. The sukkah that we build is one that negates Jonah's pessimism in human nature. It is a sukkah that stands for peace, faith, shelter and ultimately in the eternal Jewish optimism of human behavior. The liturgy itself expresses such an image. In the evening service of Shabbat we read, "Spread over us the shelter (sukkah) of Your peace. Praised are You, Lord, who spreads a shelter (sukkah) of peace over us, over all His people Israel and over Jerusalem." The booth that we build on sukkot mirrors the heavenly sukkah that God spreads over us; it is an expression of hope in our future.

The sukkah then is a powerful bridge between the absolute solemnity of Yom Kippur and absolute joy of sukkot. On Yom Kippur, Isaiah's words propel us toward tikkun olam, repairing a broken world. Building the sukkah - our sukkah - becomes Israel's tikkun (apology) for Jonah's acrimonious desire.

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. More can be found on their web-site [www.jtsa.edu](http://www.jtsa.edu)

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**HA'AZINU Shabbat Shuva ~ 8th Tishri 5767 ~ 30th September 2006**

by Norman Bar

In Ha'azinu, comprising Devarim chapter 32, Moses calls on heaven and earth to witness what he is about to say to the Children of Israel. He reaffirms God's eternal

perfection and paternal goodness, contrasted with Israel's capricious, even wicked, waywardness, imperfection and ingratitude.

“Do you thus requite the Lord, O dull and witless people?” (verse 6).

However, God will, ultimately, deliver Israel.

Finally, God commands Moses to ascend Mount Nevo to view the land he may not enter and reminds him why.

Moses' calling on heaven and earth has attracted much rabbinical interpretation. Commonly, e.g. Rashi, he appeals to them to witness his imminent divinely inspired utterances. After his death they will be able to confirm the utterances and his warning against sin, should these be denied.

This reinforces my own vision of Moses: an elderly man in an overpowering hurry, driven by an unbearable urgency, conscious of mortality and impending death, desperate that God's message should live on after him. He is 120. He has been leading the unreliable Israelites for decades. He feels that they have too often let him down. Despite his willingness to listen to advice and delegate responsibility he has borne the crushing burden of leadership and has suffered the devastating punishment of being forbidden to accompany the Israelites into the Promised Land.

He has appointed his successor and publicly acknowledged him before the people. But : this is the last day of his life. It is his final opportunity to summon up his failing strength and make a supreme effort to communicate his great message to his charges, to remind them sternly of what they have been and done and failed to do and of what they should aspire to be and do, to warn them of future hardships while encouraging and inspiring them with God's promise of eventual salvation and triumph over their enemies.

In the final sedra [read on Simchat Torah] Moses will bless the Israelites, tribe by tribe, overall more beneficently and positively than Jacob's mixed deathbed comments to his sons. But here we sense the exigency of the occasion, Moses' almost desperate need to communicate, to impress on the Israelites the absolute urgency and supreme importance of his message, his need intensified by knowledge of past exhortations and failures.

And despite that pressure and understandable disappointment and regret, maybe even despite (unconscious?) feelings that his punishment is due, at least in part, to the actions of these very people, or their immediate ancestors, many years ago, (“rebels” as he once angrily called them) Moses gives his errant charges not only a stern, even harsh, warning but also a message of hope and encouragement and ultimate deliverance.

It's an extraordinary lesson in selflessness.

This week's Shabbat, coming as it does between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, bears the name Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of returning. The name derives from the opening words of the haftarah, The passages from the prophets Hosea, Joel and Micah, which are joined to make up our haftarah, breathe a world view far less deterministic than the one that animates Ha'azinu. Without the possibility of righting our wrongs, who needs prophets? Their very mission is predicated on the promise of a second chance, if merited. In the sagas of the Torah, a recourse to repentance is conspicuously absent. Neither Adam and Eve or Sodom and Gemorrah, or Moses and Aaron, or the Israelites, themselves, are ever given a chance to atone for their misdeeds. Retribution always follows inexorably. The belief in a forgiving God of mercy is on the horizon but not yet evident in the course of human events.

Thus, when the covenant is renewed after the debacle of the Golden Calf because of Moses's intercession rather than Israel's repentance, God reveals the attributes which govern divine behaviour. The revelation opens with resounding affirmation of God's compassion but closes on the equally unequivocal avowal that not all is forgiven. The thirteen attributes became the core of the selihot, prayers for forgiveness, throughout the High Holy Day period, with one striking omission. The liturgy drops the final *lo yenakeh* to change the negative note into a positive one: "He does remit all punishment." In that emendation of the text, the Rabbis adjusted the Torah to accord with the prophetic stance on the efficacy of repentance (BT Yoma 86a).

What would it be like to live in a world bereft of teshuvah? The Rabbis imagined Cain taking his leave of God in good spirits after being sentenced for the murder of Abel. He met Adam, who asked about the disposition of his case. Cain told him that he had repented (literally, done teshuvah), and was pardoned. Dumbstruck, Adam hit himself on the head and exclaimed, "Such is the power of repentance! If only I had known!" (Bereshit Rabbah 22:13). Had teshuvah been available to him, we might still be living in Eden! In truth, so indispensable for human welfare is teshuvah that Resh Lakish insisted it was woven into the very fabric of creation, that is: God conceptualized it before creating the world (Urbach, Hazal [Hebrew], p. 412). Conversely, had we, humans been made without moral imperfections, we could readily dispense with it. Prosperity is corrosive of character. Rabbi Yannai, the teacher of Resh Lakish, and a man of great wealth, imputed some responsibility to God for the sin of Golden Calf. Had God not enabled the Israelites at the time of the Exodus to strip the Egyptians of their wealth (Exodus 12:35-36), they would never have been tempted in the wilderness to build an idol of gold (BT Yoma 86b).

In short, the prophetic and rabbinic concept of repentance is one of Judaism's most ennobling beliefs, wrought visibly and painstakingly over time. By rejecting fatalism of any sort, Judaism gives us a measure of control over our lives.

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## **ROSH HASHANAH 1st Tishri 5767 ~ 23 September 2006**

**by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg**

There's nothing quite like seeing one in the wild. Many times on the hillsides of Scotland I've looked at a sheep and found myself wondering what kind of a shofar its

horns would make. Once or twice I've even found the remains and seen the horns lying there in the grass. But mercifully I've never been tempted to bring them home and fashion them into a usable shofar.

The Shulchan Aruch simply states: 'Regarding the shofar for Rosh Hashanah, the mitzvah is to use that of a ram, and it should be curved' (Orach Hayyim 586:1). The sources for these instructions lie in two statements in the Talmud from tractate Rosh Hashanah. The first is Rabbi Abbahu's rhetorical question: 'Why does one blow the horn of a ram?' which he answers: 'The Holy Blessed One said: Blow before me a shofar made from a ram's horn so that I remember unto you the binding of Isaac son of Abraham and account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before me'. (16a). This explanation, closely echoed in the Mussaf service for Rosh Hashanah, concerns far more than historical memory. It places all of us figuratively in the position of Isaac himself, bound on the altar as if we were offering our very lives for the sake of our Judaism. It's as if we were saying: 'God, how can you not listen to our prayers, when we're prepared to give up everything for the sake of our relationship with you?'

The second source is a statement by Rabbi Abbahu in which, following Rabbi Yehudah's minority opinion in the Mishnah, he says that we should use a curved, rather than a straight, shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud, amplified by Rashi, explains that the curved nature of the shofar represents humility as we stand before God bowed in prayer. Almost all our shofarot today are indeed curved.

However, to make matters slightly more complicated, it appears that a 'ram's horn' needn't necessarily come from a ram. The Mishnah Berurah, the point-by-point analysis of the first section of the Shulchan Aruch by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hachohen, known as the Chafetz Hayyim, comments: 'This includes the horn of a female sheep', 'ram' being a generic term. But, he adds, the mehadrin min hamehadrin, those who seek to perform the mitzvah with the utmost care (a phrase familiar from the labels of Palwin bottles), do indeed try to obtain a shofar which really does come from a ram.

The ram in the story of the binding of Isaac was caught by its horns in a thicket. Told by God neither to kill nor harm his son, Abraham looked up, saw it and sacrificed it instead. Following earlier rabbinic tradition, Rashi explains that the ram was 'readied for its role from the six days of creation' (Bereshit 22:13). This may have been its destiny, yet that sad ram often makes me think of Yehudah Amichai's poem: 'The real hero of the Akedah was the ram...I want to sing a song of remembrance for him'.

Perhaps the ram is what's nowadays called 'collateral damage'. Or perhaps the victims of history constitute a still wider circle than the civilian victims of rockets, land mines, bombs, machetes, and other instruments of human cruelty. Perhaps they include those who felt themselves compelled to fight but didn't want to, maybe even those who imagined themselves to be the protagonists.

I don't know the origins of my own shofar. I'm glad I wasn't there when it was made. But I'll listen to it for the sake of that ram, and for all those caught up in hapless pain and injury, animals, people, everywhere. We'll call out to God together.

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*by Rabbi Melissa Crespy*

Remembrance. Childbirth. Renewed hopes and dreams. All of these are to be found in the Torah reading and haftarah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

We read these portions every year with the hope that we, like Sarah and Hannah, will be remembered by God in the coming year. We hope and we pray that God will take notice of us, and grant us our deepest desires - whether they be for good health, recovery, peace of mind, security, love, success, or peace in the world. Sarah and Hannah's experiences become our metaphor for God taking note of us, and remembering us, and granting us only good things in the year to come.

But for me, for many years, these Scriptural readings have been anything but metaphorical. They have been as concrete as concrete can be. Married for seven years - a "barren woman" - four years ago, I could finally cry out in exultation to God "It was this boy I prayed for" (I Samuel 1:27), because after much pain and sadness, my husband and I adopted our son Avi. And this year again, after much emotional turmoil and much hard work, I can cry out in joy, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children!" (Genesis 21:7), because my husband and I have been blessed with a daughter, Netanya, adopted two days after her birth. No, our physical bodies could not produce these miracles - but miracles they are, because they have made us parents, they are our legacy, and they have brought us tremendous joy. I love the commentary of the Malbim - a late 19th century Russian Jewish commentator - on the passage that states: "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children." He writes: "It was only for the purpose of delighted laughter and rejoicing that God performed this miracle; the whole world should laugh and be joyous at the wonder." And that's what these children have done for us, and for many of the people who know and love us.

And the Sages were wise when they chose these passages for us to read on Rosh Hashanah, because they realized that the birth of children not only affects those who bear (or adopt) them - but everyone who sees them. Children remind us that there is hope in the world - each child starts off innocent and fresh, untarnished by the pains of the world. Each child reminds us that there can be new beginnings; we can renew our minds, our souls, and sometimes even our bodies. Each child reminds us that our dreams don't have to die; we can keep on trying to make ourselves better, more complete human beings. Each child reminds us that there is hope in the world. Just as the child is born innocent, and full of potential - our world can be redeemed, we can make it better, we can make it safer, we can make it more holy, if we really will it, and work for it to happen.

Children are a miracle, and they remind us that miracles still do happen, and our dreams can still be fulfilled. Let us pray this year for inspiration from our children, that we will work to make ourselves more compassionate and complete human beings, and that we will work harder to make our world resound with compassion and peace.

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. More can be found on their website <http://www.jtsa.edu>

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## NITZAVIM/VAYELECH

23 Elul 5766 ~ 16 September 2006

*By Andrew Levy*

Chapter 30 verse 19 in this week's parshah famously says: "I call heaven and earth to witness this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life".

The whole book of Devarim (Deuteronomy) could be described as Moses' swansong and this is the peroration at the end of that swansong. But the phrase "choose life" haunts us.

To whom is Moses addressing this phrase? At the beginning of the parshah he makes it clear (see chapter 29, verse 14) that it is not only to those standing with him on Canaan's edge but also "those who are not here today" – i.e. future generations.

Rashi in his commentary on "choose life" says that this is about instruction "I instruct you that you should choose the portion called life". The word Rashi uses for "instruct" is "Moreh" – the same root as Torah.

Instruction is by example. Yet example comes in different ways. To those there with Moses, they could see their human leader with all his foibles on the journey. At first glance, do they not have a better view of how to "choose life" having seen directly what that entails? After all, to "those who are not here today", all we have is the Sefer Torah, the book in which the life we are to choose was revealed.

We were not there. They had the journey. All we have is the book of the journey.

I want to reject that idea. The dissident Turkish novelist, Orhan Parmuk, puts it perfectly in *The White Castle*:

"You cannot embark on life, that one-off coach ride, once again when it is over, but if you have a book in your hand, no matter how complex or difficult to understand that book may be, when you have finished it, you can, if you wish, go back to the beginning, read it again, and thus understand that which is difficult and, with it, understand life as well"

Most of us treat books and journeys the same way – they happen once and get consigned to our memories. Parmuk suggests that books should be read again and again. As we near the end of this reading of the Torah, we know that this is one book whose reading is never linear for us – its annual reappearance reminds us of the cyclical nature in which we treat this book.

That is choosing life (Moses) and understanding life (Parmuk) through repetition or as *Pirkei Avot* – the Ethics of the Fathers puts it (*Avot* 5,26) "Turn it and turn it as everything is in it

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

Mystical streams within any given religion would have us believe that to be in God's presence, one must separate oneself wholly from the material world. Yet, while meditation and reflection have their place in religious encounters, Judaism places its emphasis and value on the attachment to community. *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of Our Ancestors, teaches, "Do not separate yourself from the community." The locus of moral and ethical strivings must be rooted in the building of life. Prolonged separation from community often leads one to paths of selfishness, zealotry, and destruction. Parashat Nitzavim is timed perfectly before the renewal of our Jewish lives on Rosh Hashanah - reminding us precisely how close a life of holiness is to our everyday lives.

Deuteronomy 30:14 teaches, "The word is indeed very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." This brief and seemingly simple verse describes the essence of Judaism in three ways. First, Rabbi Shmuel Avidor HaCohen asks the question, "What act is done with both heart and the mouth?" To which he responds, "Prayer" (HaCohen, *Likrat Shabbat*, 212). Yet, not only is prayer a sacred act that combines the desires of the heart and the articulation of the mouth, but also Jewish learning. For in the process of learning Torah, one animates the text — by inserting one's heart and verbalizing a new interpretation. Second, Jeffrey Tigay, in his commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy, points out how this verse underscores the oral nature of Torah. Tigay explains, "This manner of speaking reflects a predominantly oral culture in which learning and review are accomplished primarily by oral recitation" (Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 286). And so, the teachings of Torah are literally in the heart and in the mouth. This oral nature of Torah further prevents the ossification of the tradition. Torah is continually living and breathing because we continue the conversation. Third, note well the verse does not conclude by teaching us that the word is both in our hearts and mouths. While this is a necessary step for internalizing Torah, the critical act is in the final word of this verse - la'asoto, "to do it." Torah is meant to be a transformative experience. *Leviticus Rabbah* 35:7 dramatizes this point: "If one studies Torah without the intention to observe it, it is better that he had not been born . . . it would have been better that he had been strangled by the umbilical cord at birth, and had never ventured into the world."

Prayer and learning, active engagement with teachings of Torah, and rigorous observance can lead us to a path of sanctity in our Jewish lives. In his impressive essay entitled *The Nature of Jewish Theology*, Byron Sherwin notes, "In medieval Jewish literature, the consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are compared to a body and the vowels to a soul. Yet, a Torah scroll is written only with consonants. Indeed, a vocalized Torah scroll is unfit for ritual use. The Torah requires a person to supply the vowels, the vocalization, the soul, in order for it to become animate, alive, heard. Without the person, the sacred text remains mute" (Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology*, 14). May we use this precious time in the Jewish calendar to commit or recommit ourselves to be the soul of Torah.

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. More can be found on their website <http://www.jtsa.edu>

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## **KI TAVO 16 Elul 5766 ~ 9 September 2006**

**By Marcus Lange**

This week's Haftarah talks about messianic changes that put everything into a different light:

"Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; the Presence / kavod of the Adonai has shone upon you!" (Isa.60:1)

And toward the end, we read:

"No longer shall you need the sun for light by day, nor the shining of the moon for radiance by night; for Adonai shall be your light everlasting." (Isa.60:19)

Rabbi Hertz comments, "of course we are here in the region of pure ecstasy and mystic symbolism." He reminds us that these words are poetic and express the idea that the world should be radically different from the way it is now. But what will we see in that new divine light? What will be substantially different?

The prophet answers with another image:

"I will appoint Well-being as your government, Prosperity as your officials." (Isa.60:17)

Rabbi Plaut states that we are looking at "a picture of material wealth, drawn in dream-like contrast to the misery of the day." Both Hertz and Plaut agree that Isaiah's vision is far from reality. But how far away are we from Isaiah's dream? And what is our role in respect to his prophetic vision?

Ki Tavo is famous for its long list of blessings and curses, of which the curses are traditionally recited swiftly and in an undertone. Those curses talk about unpleasant things, such as agricultural disaster, exile, illness, abuse, robbery and oppression. The blessings mention well-being, prosperity, sustenance and security.

Those blessings and curses are reflections of reality; they mirror back to us our choices in life. Depending on how we act as a global community, we may cause one or the other.

Looking at those curses in particular, I do not believe that God causes those horrible things. Those "curses" are usually human-made. I find it even immoral to think that God sends disaster, war and oppression. As long as there is oppression, illness, hunger and war in the world, it is our duty to do good deeds, to turn curses into blessings, and to replace darkness with light. It is up to us to shed light onto what is unjust, and only we can bring the oppressed, the abused, the ill and the neglected out of the dark.

In sum, Ki Tavo provides us with the insight that the mentioned blessings and curses are possibilities of reality, and that it is our responsibility to do what is right and just. If we take action and work on creating a new reality, then we may promote the prophet's vision of a world filled with God's light. May our deeds bring more blessings into this world. Then our gates shall always be open, well-being and prosperity may reign and "the cry 'Violence!' shall no more be heard in your land." (Isa.60:18)

#### **by Rabbi Matt Berkowitz**

Parashat Ki Tavo showcases the creativity of the rabbinic sages and offers a unique challenge to enhance our Jewish learning. The Torah reading opens with a declaration that each farmer had to say when he brought the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple, giving gratitude for the fruit, and ultimately recognizing the God who made his livelihood possible. The Israelite would recite a lengthy passage, a synopsis of Jewish history, beginning, "A wandering Aramean was my father" and ending, "He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore now I bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me" (Deuteronomy 26:5–10).

Originally, all who knew how to recite the passage in Hebrew did so, but if someone did not know how to recite it (because he or she did not know Hebrew or could not memorize it), a Kohen (priest) recited it, and he or she repeated it. But people who did not know how to speak Hebrew were embarrassed and stopped making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Therefore, the sages decreed that everyone, whether they knew Hebrew or not, would repeat the passage after the Kohen (Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7).

It was a courageous move of the sages to try to make the observance more accessible, and not to have people feel embarrassed or awkward about participating in ritual life.

Indeed, it takes great knowledge, experience, and practice to become an insider. We all can remember an occasion when we didn't understand a Yiddish joke, sat through an incomprehensible service, or made a faux pas at a Shabbat table, and wished it all were easier. Jewish institutions and educators have made great strides to bring knowledge of our heritage to the people. English translations of the Talmud, transliterations of the Haggadah, books, websites, and introduction to Judaism classes have all provided unprecedented access to the sources of our tradition for a non-Hebrew-speaking audience. At the same time, however, Judaic educational expectations are regrettably low: You can't sit through the service? We'll make it shorter. You don't know Hebrew? We'll make it in English.

Along with the efforts at bringing Judaism to the people, it is vitally important to invest in bringing the people to Judaism — raising the bar of knowledge. Advanced classes in Talmud offered alongside the introductory classes, efforts to learn Hebrew for prayer, interaction with Israelis, and perhaps even

assembling a pledge card for engaging in serious Jewish learning this coming year are all examples of how we can raise educational expectations within the Jewish community.

The Sages did what was necessary in their times; we follow their example, ironically, by doing the opposite in our times.

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## **KI TEZE 9 Elul 5766 ~ 2 September 2006**

by Adele Kitrick

According to Maimonides (or Rambam, if you prefer) there are more mitzvot in this Parsha than in any other. However, I'll spare you the complete list, as there are 72 of them. This is the last batch of laws proclaimed by Moses to the Children of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. They concern mainly the personal behaviour of the individual in daily life - consideration for others and kindness for all. Orphans, widows and strangers must be protected from exploitation and injustice. They must be allowed to glean the sheaves and fruit left behind after the harvest. An employer must not keep his workers waiting for their wages, which must be paid before sunset on the day they are earned. Animals must be fed and cared for before their owners look to their own comfort.

Although the Israelites were a peace-loving nation, they had to accept the certainty of occasional outbreaks of war with neighbouring peoples. So military service was compulsory for men over the age of 20. However, there were many exemptions. For instance, a man who had recently married, or built a house, or planted a vineyard, was exempt for a year.

Among the numerous laws dealing with marriage, we find here those relating to divorce, and the obligation of a divorced husband to grant his wife a "get", permitting her to remarry. This, of course, has had unforeseen and unfortunate consequences.

Moses had a hard time leading the Children of Israel through the wilderness. Obviously, the journey itself was physically very demanding. In addition, their continual complaining and "murmuring" must have been exasperating for him. They even begged him to take them back to Egypt. It has been rightly said that it took only one night to take the Israelites out of Egypt, but 40 years to take Egypt out of the Israelites. In the end, overcome by anger, Moses disobeyed God's instruction to "speak to" the rock in order to bring forth water. His punishment was the loss of his eagerly anticipated joy of leading them into the Promised Land.

In contrast to the qualities of decency expected from the Israelites, Moses recalled the inhuman conduct of the Amalekites, in attacking the Israelites from the rear, where he found those lagging behind during the march from Egypt. The Children of Israel had no land or possessions, so that Amalek could not have gained the least profit from his attack.

Today's Parsha ends with Moses' paradoxical words to the Israelites: "Thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven - thou shalt not forget."

by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

The Hebrew month of Elul offers us an opportunity to repent. It is an auspicious time granted us each year, during which we can shake off the shackles of our spiritual apathy and seek an engaging and loving path back to ourselves, our fellow human beings, and most importantly, God. One of the traditions prescribed to arouse the feeling of teshuvah, repentance, is the recitation of Psalms. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, in his classic guide entitled Days of Awe, writes, "there are many barriers to doing teshuvah. One person may not sufficiently awake and even one who arouses one's self faces many barriers, for the gates of teshuvah are shut in the face of many. There are those who do not know how

to do it... But, even if a person is not awake for teshuvah, he will merit the awakening by the recitation of Psalms, and will open all of the closed gates and come into the gate of teshuvah." Yet, one's reading of the Psalms not only has the potential to open the gates of Heaven but also the gates of our hearts.

The addition of Psalm 27, recited twice daily during the High Holiday season, is an example of this increased presence of Psalms. Known as "the Psalm for the Season of Repentance," Psalm 27 is a composition filled with a sense of overwhelming dread juxtaposed with God's protection, raising an interesting question and a number of compelling answers.

The psalmist declares, "when evildoers draw near to slander me, when foes threaten — they stumble and fall. Though armies be arrayed against me, I have no fear. Though wars threaten, in this do I trust" (Psalm 27:2-3). Not surprisingly, commentators have sought to explain the latter clause — one, by suggesting that the psalmist is referring back to the opening of his song: namely, that "God is my light and help." Many say this means that the psalmist places his trust squarely in the hands of God. Another interpretation comes out of the following verse where the psalmist says he seeks "to dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of his life." Perhaps it is in God's Abode that the psalmist places his trust? Another possible reading is that it is the synagogue, or, as Psalm 27 would have it, the Temple, that is the refuge for our psalmist. Midrash Tehillim 27:4 offers yet another possible interpretation. It has been suggested that our verse actually refers to Yom Kippur. In this respect, perhaps the psalmist is referring not to a national war or battle, but to a battle within himself, "though wars threaten [referring to the perpetual conflict between one's good and bad inclinations], in this [Yom Kippur] do I trust."

The use of ambiguity in Hebrew verse allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. So, in seeking to establish what our psalmist places trust in, the answer is perhaps, all of the above: God, the Temple (or synagogue), and Yom Kippur. All of these come to play vital roles in our atonement. May each of us make an effort to open our souls during this season of Elul, to the words of the Psalms, especially Psalm 27. May we each take a moment to reflect on the true meaning of teshuvah. "We seek to return to God. Return us O Lord to You and we will return; renew our days as of old," (Lamentations 5:21).

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. More can be found on their website <http://www.jtsa.edu>

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## SHOFTIM

**2 Elul 5766 ~ 26 August 2006**

by Clare Hedwat

This morning's radio featured a debate between two scientists over God's existence. The first argued that the complexity of nature could only declare the work of a deity. The other, clearly antagonized by the simplicity of his reasoning, responded ardently: 'Religion is the crack alley of the intellect. We only go so far and then we disappear down a dark street to get some comfort.'

This week's parsha traces in great detail how to establish a just society. It also resonates with an understanding of the fears that blight the human spirit. Shoftim warns us that a king might be tempted to send people back to Egypt. The Torah instructs, "You must not go back that way again." Ramban explains we might learn behaviours from the Egyptians, compromising our emerging judicial norms.

The King must duly keep God's teachings physically by him and learn from it, to safeguard against conceit, or judgment that deviates to 'the right or the left'. Our longevity in the land is secured by our ability to legislate fairly, without the arrogance of misplaced liberalism or zealotry. This demands withstanding the seduction of the past, despite the challenges in creating a viable, just future.

Yet the future holds its own fears. Once we enter the land, we are commanded 'not to consult an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits,

or one who inquires of the dead' like other nations. Rather, we should be 'wholehearted with the Lord your God'. God demands total fidelity. Our relationship with God is compromised by unwarranted trust in fraudsters. Even prophets, supposedly servants of God, might be false. Somehow, we must be able to live with not knowing what our future holds.

We might further interpret the verse within its context: we cannot be wholehearted with God if we are perpetually hearkening to the past or petrified of the future, since this may immunise us from truly experiencing the here and now. God, it would seem, lies in our ability to navigate the present. The central demand of the present, as Shoftim makes resoundingly clear, is the call to create a just society, today.

I am struck by the image of the king who studies the words of Torah to help guide him in conducting fair decisions. As humans, we face the dark streets of the soul. Yet I want to belong to a tradition and have relationship with a God that responds with an uncompromised, resounding call of 'justice, justice shall you pursue'.

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

In Deuteronomy 17, we read, "if, after you have entered the land that the Lord your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, 'I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me,' you shall be free to set a king over yourself . . ." (17:14). The passage then delineates restrictions placed on this human ruler. As we read the text, we cannot help but hear the disappointment in the Divine Voice. God is the one true monarch of Israel. Thus, the installment of a human king, albeit an Israelite king subject to the rule of Torah, seems to raise a hint of competition between the earthly and heavenly realms. Rabbinic midrash is clearly sensitive to the tone of this legislation. In Sifre Deuteronomy (Parashat Shof'tim, piska 13), Rabbi Nehorai teaches: "This [law] is a condemnation of Israel, 'for they have rejected Me, that I should not be king over them (I Samuel 8:7)'. Rabbi Nehorai casts further aspersions on the biblical Israelites, writing, "they demanded a king only so that he might lead them into idolatry" (ibid.). Perhaps Rabbi Nehorai's comment is an overstatement. After all, having lived through the period of the Judges in which chaos was more the norm than the exception, one could easily understand why the Israelites would prefer centralized rule. As the editors of *The Jewish Political Tradition* point out, "the appeal of monarchy lies precisely in... a dynasty, extended across generations, promising strong government, legitimacy and continuity over time" (111). How can the Israelites succeed in avoiding the pitfalls of other nations when they anoint a king?

The Torah's wisdom is reflected in the limits that are imposed on the monarch. Scripture warns, "he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt... and he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess" (Deuteronomy 17:16). Most importantly, "when he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Torah... so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God..." (ibid. 17:18,19). The ruler's primary concern should be defending the Israelites; limits on the number of horses constrain offensive power and focus the ruler on internal governance. The ruler's family should live in harmony and not occupy all his attentions, so he must limit his passions, not only in the public domain, but also in the private domain. Excess wealth may lead to pride, selfishness and waste, thus the ruler must practice moderation in the acquisition of riches. Finally, the learning of Torah, will cultivate and sharpen an attitude of respect for all subjects as creations in the Divine Image. A monarch who sets the Torah above personal whim will protect his subjects fairly. Taken together, the restrictions create a humble leader, not a ruthless dictator.

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**RE'EH 25 Av 5766 ~ 19 August 2006**

*By Rabbi Marc Soloway*

Sometimes the Torah seems like such an ancient text that is far from our lives and does not always speak to us in this moment. In order to have a relationship with Torah we need to be able to feel its penetrating immediacy and its call on our lives here and now.

This week's parsha begins with a verse that wakes us up to that call.

Re'eh anochi noten lifnaychem hayom brachah u'klalah. See! I place before you today a blessing and a curse. (Deuteronomy 11:26)

The Hassidic teacher Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev comments specifically on this word hayom – today, saying that it can only be understood if we connect it to a phrase we say every morning in the shacharit service, “ham'chadesh b'tuvo b'chol yom tamid ma'asseh bereshit – in God's goodness, God renews the works of creation every single day.” This, says Rebbe Levi Yitzhak, is a clue for us that every time the Torah uses the word hayom, it is speaking to us right now. “See!” that right now, every moment, there is a choice in front of eyes offering us a path of blessing or a path of curse. The blessing comes when we tune in to the vibration of our soul, doing what is right and good not just in our own eyes, but in God's eyes, a path of mitzvah, of bringing positivity into the world through our own positive thought and action. The path of curses is not to hear the subtle call of that voice and choose instead to follow the temptation of idolatry, of false Gods that lure us off our course. That's all well and good, but we live in a complex, confusing world, so how can we really determine what is real and what is false, how what is illusion and what is fantasy?

This parsha warns us to make the distinction between the world we live in now where, “col hayashar b'ainav – each person does what is right in their own eyes” (Ibid 12:8) and the world we could live in where, through keeping the mitzvot, we do “Hayashar b'ainei Hashem elochecha – that which is right in God's eyes.” (Ibid 12:28) We are being invited today to see the world as God sees the world, to dream the same dreams for the world as God dreams. Sometimes it is that very notion that seems like fantasy in the hopeless mess that we call reality. What if we allowed ourselves to believe that it was the other way around? To have a vision of the world that is God's vision, constantly striving to be the best that we can, to see the best in others, to see the blessing and not the curse? This does not mean that we deny all the pain and suffering in the world, nor that we remove ourselves from our responsibility to act on it. It means that the “Re'eh – See!” at the beginning of the parsha is offering us the opportunity to see the world not as it is, but as it could be and not in the future, but right now – hayom!

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

At the beginning of Deuteronomy 14, we read, "You are children (banim) of the Lord your God. You shall not gash yourselves (lo titgodedu) or shave the front of your heads because of the dead." (Deuteronomy 14: 1) What is the literal meaning of (p'shat) in this verse? How do the Rabbis reread this verse? And, what does this seemingly archaic prohibition teach us today?

To begin, Rashi (1040-1105), the great medieval exegete, explains, "you shall not make cuts and incisions in your flesh for the dead in the way the Amorites did, because you are children of the Lord." The prophets of Ba'al engaged in such a practice in their confrontation with the prophet Elijah as "they shouted louder, and gashed themselves with knives and spears, according to their practice, until the blood streamed over them (I Kings 18:28)."

Although the Torah's literal prohibition is clearly in line with Rashi's explanation, the Rabbis of the Talmud reinterpret the verse. Claiming that the Hebrew word, titgodedu, is related to agudah, which means group, they connected Deuteronomy 14:1 to Psalm 94:21, which states, "they group together (yagodu) against the soul of the righteous." Out of this intratextual comparison, the Rabbis teach "lo titgodedu, which means "you shall not form factions (B. Yevamot 13b)." Undoubtedly, the rabbinic reading is a radical departure from p'shat, the literal interpretation of Torah.

Professor Ze'ev Falk z"l, one of the most eloquent voices of Israel, sheds light on the rabbinic methodology that comes to illumine this verse. He explains, "the explanation of lo titgodedu shows that Scripture is not simply monolithic Law but rather it is teaching (Torah), and that is forbidden to be satisfied with pan-halakhism or religious behaviourism, as defined by A.J. Heschel. The prohibition taught here is part of the obligation of always being close to God, and so that means that the individual must control feelings of sorrow. Also, the explanation of the Sages: 'not to make factions,' dovetails well with this commentary. Out of a closeness to God follows the need to be a role model [and to act in God's Image], and so, one must emphasize unity rather than division. This is Solomon Schechter's

notion of 'Catholic Israel.' From here, it can also be explained that banim (literally 'sons' but also potentially 'children') includes daughters . . . and it is forbidden to divide the people Israel by diminishing women."

The Talmud teaches that interpretation of Torah is like "a hammer that smashes a rock" into infinite pieces. Truly, there are "seventy faces of Torah." Perhaps the connection here between pshat and drash (homiletical interpretation) lies in the act of self-infliction, individually and collectively. Torah prohibits the literal wounding of oneself as a sign of mourning; the Rabbis, in their wisdom, prohibit wounding the nation through baseless disunity. More important, just as mourning taken to the extreme, expels us from the presence of God, divisions within the people of Israel do likewise. Professor Falk invites each of us to once again live in the presence of God - affirming the need for a creative interpretation of Torah and of the importance of looking upon women as equals in the covenant. Only then can we truly be "children of God."

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**EKEV** 18 Av 5766 ~ 12 August 2006

*By Abigail Wood*

As part of his final speech to the Israelite people in our parsha, Moshe makes a passionate plea that the people should continue in the path in which he has led them:

“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask [sha’al] of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul; to keep the commandments of the Lord and his laws which I [Moses] command you today, for your good” [Deuteronomy 10:12-13]

As a command to the Israelite community, Moshe’s statement is easy to understand (if, in practice, sometimes difficult to follow). Nevertheless, our rabbis chose to read Moshe’s words as a theological statement, daring to ask why God should require these things of the Jewish people.

The first answer, given by the 16th century commentator R. Ovadia Sforno, asserts that everything God asks is for the benefit of the Jewish people. He connects the ‘what does the Lord your God ask’ of verse 12 to ‘for your good’ in verse 13, explaining that “All this He asks for your good, so that you will merit eternal life.”

The second approach, that of Rabbi Hanina in the Talmud, gives the opposite answer: fear of God is an act of piety done for God alone, as this is the only thing He cannot Himself exert from human beings. “Everything is in the hands of Heaven apart from the fear of God.” (Berachot 33b).

To me, however, neither answer seems sufficient. Is our love and fear of God ultimately a selfish act, undertaken only for our own benefit? If not, must it be solely pietistic, with no connection to our own worldly lives? Where is the sense of reciprocal covenant so fundamental to our Jewish thought?

The Hasidic Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk offers another perspective. Reading the word sha’al (ask) in its alternative meaning – to borrow – he offers the following parable:

Someone who wishes to send wine or honey to a friend but doesn’t have an appropriate vessel in which to send it, borrows a fine silver vessel from his friend, fills it with wine or honey and sends it to the vessel’s owner . . . Of course, in this parable, Man is the vessel to receive, and Moshe’s words show how to prepare and fix this vessel, so that Man should be ready to receive the goodness and the abundance of the Creator. The Holy One borrows your vessel for your benefit, in order to do good to you. And in turn, by your doing, goodness and abundance will come to all Israel.

Perhaps, then, following Moshe's path enables the Jewish people to work in partnership with God, ultimately bringing benefit both to ourselves and to others.

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

Last summer, I walked through a dream. I had the blessing, along with Rabbi David Hoffman, of leading a very special group through the length and breadth of the Land of Israel. As part of it we embarked on an expansive and emotional ten-day trek, in which we encountered the biblical, Rabbinic, medieval, and modern periods. More than a mission, this experience was a pilgrimage that animated Torah. And nowhere did this encounter come alive more than at Neot Kedumim, the Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel.

I turn back to our time at Neot Kedumim specifically for its connection to this week's Torah reading, Parashat Ekev. In Deuteronomy 8:7–8, we read of the "seven species" of the Land of Israel: "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of [grape] vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and [date] honey." With passion, knowledge, and poise, our guide, Beth Uval, led us through the agricultural and festival cycle of the Jewish year, weaving the seven species of Israel into our understanding of the rhythm of the land. Among the important questions raised by Nogah Hareuveni, the founder of Neot Kedumim, in his book *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage*, are: What do these seven species have in common? Why do these fruits come to characterize Israel? Quite masterfully, he points to the delicate balance between nature and man that is needed in cultivating each of these plants. Notably, Hareuveni points to tractate Bava Batra 147a as a critical proof text: "The northern wind is beneficial to wheat when it has reached a third of its ripening and is damaging to olive trees when they have blossomed. The southern wind is damaging to wheat when it has reached a third of its ripening and is beneficial to olives when they have blossomed." Israelites, and modern-day Israelis, are wholly dependent on the winds and rains coming at their proper times. While the ancient Israelites, influenced by their Canaanite neighbours, often saw their agricultural condition as a result of the battles between Canaanite deities, the Torah is categorical in its opposing view.

Successful crops are the function of balance not only in the natural world, but also in the spiritual world. Truly, as Emil Fackenheim writes, "the response from below calls forth a response from above." Torah makes our crops dependent on our observance of the mitzvot (see the second paragraph of the Shema). And while many of us wrestle with the theological tension expressed therein, all of us can respect the Torah's desire to make the work of our hands dependent on God and a direct reflection of the lives we live. The seven species — wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates — all require delicate care; so too do our spiritual lives require such attentiveness. Only with proper attention can we enjoy the fruits of our lives. May the Land of Israel serve as a model to the People of Israel.

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**VAETCHANAN Shabbat Nachamu** 11 Av 5766 ~ 5 August 2006

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

On Tishah b'Av, commemorated last Thursday, the Jewish community focused on the many tragedies which have befallen the Jewish people throughout the ages. This day is of central importance to the Jewish calendar. The Mishnah of tractate Taanit 26a-b lists four events that occurred on the Ninth of Av: the decree that the generation of Israelites that left Egypt could not enter the Land of Israel; the destruction of the First and Second Temples (586 BCE and 70 CE, respectively); the capture and fall of Betar under the Romans (135 CE); and the ploughing over of Jerusalem (136 CE). Numerous other tragic events are said to have also occurred on this fateful date, including the beginning of the Spanish Inquisition in 1492. This litany of national disasters led the sages to proclaim "merit occurs on a day of merit while tragedy occurs on a day of tragedy" (Ta'anit 29b). They enjoined us to recall the events of Tishah b'Av every year.

Indeed, commemoration and memory are sacred to the collective consciousness of the Jewish people. Yet, as we find ourselves commemorating tragedy, we must also ask, "how is it that we affirm life?" How do we make sure that we always take note of the small blessings of everyday life? How do we focus on the good?

Rabbi Menahem Mendl of Kotzk (1787-1859), gives us insight into the extent to which we are commanded to find beauty and good in life. Sparked by Moses' request, "I will pass, I pray thee, and I will see the good land" (Deuteronomy 3: 25), Rabbi Mendl of Kotzk asks "Why does the verse state 'I will see?'" This is obvious! By virtue of passing into the land, he would surely see it! Rather, Rabbi Mendl explains, "Moses prayed that in his coming to the Land of Israel he would merit seeing the goodness which rests in the Land - that he would see the land as good, and not as the spies had perceived it, a land of many faults."

Moses' prayer to see the good is a prayer from the depth of his heart. To view the good in a situation is far more difficult than to dwell on the bad. Perhaps that is why it is so difficult for us to avoid lashon hara, evil language and gossip. Yet, the time has come to make lashon tov, good language, a part of our vocabulary.

Let us always strive to see the good in others: - their thoughts and deeds. And, may we all, like Moses, even in this week of negative memories, merit seeing the goodness of the Land of Israel shining through

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**DEVARIM Shabbat Chazon** 4 Av 5766 ~ 29 July 2006

*By Daniel Oppenheimer*

In this week's parashah, Moses retells the history of the last forty years to the Israelites camped on the plains of Moab. He begins the story with the people leaving the area of Mount Sinai, but does so in a striking way. "God spoke to us at Chorev (Sinai), saying 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Set out.'" The expression used – "rav lakhem shevet" – has a somewhat critical ring to it: it literally means "You've done a lot of staying here".

Rashi is certainly puzzled by this verse – he offers two comments on it, a sure sign that he is happy with neither of them! First he suggests that we should understand the verse in its obvious meaning: that God really is saying they should stop sitting around at Mount Sinai. But this prompts the question: why be so critical of the time spent at Mount Sinai, the place where the people had the unique and destiny-changing experience of a revelation of God and, more importantly, God's Torah? So Rashi offers an alternative, midrashic explanation that turns the meaning of the phrase "rav lakhem" on its head, by punning on the word "rav", great. The Midrash reads it as "You have had great rewards and glory for your staying here – constructing the Mishkan, receiving Torah". This is more what one would expect. Wasn't the time at Mount Sinai a time of great, never-to-be-repeated spiritual highs? Maybe, but then in that case we have created a new problem. If Mount Sinai was a place of great reward, then that hardly explains the next instruction "Set out".

One obvious solution is to say that this is an instance of Judaism and the Torah taking a pragmatic and practical attitude to what a good life is. A good life is not sitting up a mountain, whether literally or metaphorically, on a spiritual high. The spiritual high is very important – rav – but the story cannot end there. The insights from that time have to be brought down into the world below. Therefore the message to the Israelites is: enough sitting; it was good in its place, but now enough.

Alternatively, we may see this as simply an instance of one of the enduring features of Jewish destiny: we are not to be allowed to sit at ease; we have to wander. This is not just a feature of the time spent in enforced exile from the Land of Israel. Our two founding fathers, Abraham and Jacob were wanderers

too. However great – rav – our experiences are in a particular place, the time will inevitably come when we have to move on.

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

The Ninth of Av or Tish'ah Be'av occurs this coming Thursday. We remember not only the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, but also many tragedies which befell the Jewish people over the course of our history. In addition to fasting, mournful liturgy is interwoven into the observance of the day. Most importantly, we read the Book of Lamentations. The opening word of this scroll captures its essence — aikha — how. The word connotes a sense of radical consternation and disorientation. Just how could God obliterate the city that stands at the heart and soul of the Israelite nation? Even with the severity of Israelite transgression, isn't God full of compassion and mercy? How could such destruction and suffering befall a people?

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hacohen (z"l), one of Israel's greatest rabbis, who was a member of the Israeli rabbinate, became popular for a Parashat Hashavua' program on Israeli television, and taught at Machon Schechter, sheds light on our leitwort (key word), aikha. In his commentary in Hebrew, *Likrat Shabbat, Toward Shabbat*, Avidor Hacohen points out how the Shabbat preceding Tish'ah Be'av, we read Parashat D'varim containing the verse, "how (aikha) can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering?" (Deuteronomy 1:12). Aikha similarly appears in the haftarah for this Shabbat known as Hazon Yeshayahu, the Vision of Isaiah, "how (aikha) she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice" (Isaiah 1:21) as well as at the beginning of Jeremiah's Lamentations, "How (aikha) lonely sits the city." (Lamentations 1:1). These three verses are brilliantly woven together in a rabbinic midrash: "it is similar to a matron who had three suitors. One who saw her in her calm; another who saw her in her recklessness; and another who witnessed her degradation. So too were the Israelites. Moses saw them in a period of calm and they were still intransigent. Isaiah witnessed their untoward behaviour. And Jeremiah witnessed their destruction."

Avidor Hacohen argues that destruction and degradation do not simply happen in one day — as devastating as Tish'ah Be'av is to the Jewish people. The seeds of such destruction are planted long before the ultimate punishment. Even in the desert, when all of their needs were attended to, the Israelites strayed from Torah. Perhaps, it was precisely the fact that they were cared for that led them to take this state of affairs for granted. Abundance of blessings led them to ethical and spiritual decline. Isaiah sees the further downfall of the people as they pursue idolatry and licentiousness. Finally, Jeremiah witnesses the destruction and subsequent expulsion (*Likrat Shabbat*, 179-180).

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hacohen sensitively reminds us of our responsibility to ourselves, to our communities, and to our collective future. Calm and abundance often prove fertile ground for moral and ethical depravity. One must be continually vigilant against the seeds of spiritual descent. Tish'ah Be'av offers us a time to be reflective on the role each of us plays in creating sacred community. *Carpe Diem!*

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**MATTOT/MASSEI** 26 Tammuz 5766 ~ 22 July 2006

This week's double-parshah, *Matot* and *Ma'asei*, opens with a discussion about vows, and we quickly discover that men's vows consist of a different quality than those of women. For instance, when a man issues a vow, that man—inadvertently or not—has sworn on the name of God and cannot get out of his obligation to fulfil his oath. If, however, a woman were to make a similar vow, circumstances exist where her vow could be annulled by her father, husband, or fiancé. At first glance this seems unfair, but the Torah is actually trying to protect women from entering into vows with God. Though the Torah seems to argue that men exhibit less haste than women when entering a vow—an ancient belief that I am not endorsing—the law is nevertheless designed to protect rather than to hinder women.

Similarly, every Yom Kippur, we recite “Kol Nidrei,” which absolves us of vows for the upcoming year, stating that “all vows, bonds, oaths, promises, and obligations” that we make with God from “this Yom Kippur until the following Yom Kippur...are not vows.” Why would someone want to get out of a vow? Or better, why would a person not want to enter into a vow in the first place? When we take upon a vow or an oath, we enter God into the deal. For instance, when a person says, “I swear that I will pay you back next Tuesday,” they really mean, “I swear to God that I will pay you back.” If the vow-maker fails to fulfil his or her obligation, then they have sinned against God by taking the Holy One’s Name in vain. Rashi adds that even those whose vows have been nullified have taken God’s name in vain:

To whom does Scripture (Numbers 30:6) refer? To a woman who took the Nazirite vow. Her husband heard and nullified it, but she was not aware. She then violated her vow by drinking wine and defiling herself by contact with a corpse. She is in need of forgiveness, although it was nullified. Now, if those who[se vows] have been nullified require forgiveness, certainly those who[se vows] have not been nullified do.

Though this is not the pshat (the literal interpretation of the scripture), Rashi attempts to demonstrate the danger of issuing oaths by claiming that cancelled vows that had been issued in God’s name still require God’s forgiveness. Using God’s Name is always precarious business, and its misuse remains one of the worst offences in Judaism. Human beings issue bogus claims and make false promises, and we understand that God our Creator knows our nature. This halacha (Jewish law); therefore, represents God’s Will to protect us from harming ourselves with the consequences of unfulfilled vows.

***By Rabbi Matt Berkowitz***

In these concluding parshiyot of Sefer B'midbar (Numbers), the Israelites are full of anticipation. They camp near Jericho on the plains of Moab looking forward to their entry into the Promised Land. Yet, even at this future-oriented juncture, as it does so often, the Torah takes stock of the past: "These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron" (Numbers 33:1). We are reminded explicitly of the Exodus from Egypt. We hear of every stop the Israelites made on their journey. Only then can God give Moses instructions about moving on to Israel (33:50).

Nahum Sarna lists seven ways in which the Exodus theme is used in the Torah: affirming God's sovereignty over nature, demonstrating that humans cannot successfully defy God's will, teaching that history has meaning and purpose, foreshadowing future redemption, identifying God as redeemer from oppression, grounding the festivals, and demanding compassion to others from a people who were themselves, slaves (Sarna, Exploring Exodus, 2-5).

To this list, I would add: revisiting our past, acknowledging its formative impact on us and learning what we wish to pass on and what we wish to leave behind. Only then can we exit our periods of dependency and enslavement, as mature people and prepare to engage our dreams — our own lands of milk and honey. And so the commentary of the Sfat Emet is instructive. Commenting on Numbers 33:1-2 ("These are the journeys of the children of Israel who came out of Egypt.") Moses wrote down their comings forth and their goings forward according to the word of the Lord; "These are their goings forward and their comings forth," he writes. Notice that the order is reversed from the beginning to the end of the verse. Scripture is telling us that all this going forward depends upon coming forth from Egypt. Only after all those journeys is the Exodus from Egypt complete; with each 'going forward' they got farther from Egypt, until they reached the Land of Israel."

In changing and expanding our interests, skills, and creative selves, we must also leave some aspects behind. Old friends, homes, loves, and habits cede their places to new adventures. This parashah teaches us not to ignore the past — even when it is as painful as slavery in Egypt. Instead, we learn to take stock of the past, indeed of every station along the way, every town, every encounter, every experience. Only then, after reliving and re-evaluating our personal and collective past, can we turn our sights with courage and clarity toward the future.

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. More can be found on their website:  
<http://www.jtsa.edu>

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**PINCHAS** 18 Tammuz 5766 ~ 15 July 2006

*By Allan Myers*

Where was Pinchas when we read sedra Kedoshim at the beginning of May? Was he still celebrating Yom Ha'Atzma'ut, which fell during that week? If not, how is it that he didn't hear verse 18 of Vayikra Chapter 19, "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against your people – I am the Lord"? For that is just what Pinchas did at the end of last week's sedra. He took it upon himself to bring God's vengeance on Zimri (the Israelite who broke God's law) exactly as commanded by God not to do.

As if defying God's word wasn't bad enough, Pinchas then gets rewarded for carrying out a summary execution of Zimri. God says, "I give him 'brit shalom'", a covenant of peace (or a pact of friendship) (Chapter 25, verse 12) and goes on to confer on him the hereditary high priesthood.

Nechama Liebowitz compares the vengeance of Pinchas with the twelfth bracha of the weekday Amidah, bircat ha-minim, in which we pray that there should be no hope for those who are traitors to the Jewish people.

The twentieth century Russian commentator Rabbi Baruch Epstein explains that Pinchas' deed was prompted by "a genuine spirit of zeal to advance the glory of God" and not by any selfish motive. That is why God rewarded him.

The author of the bircat ha-minim was Samuel Ha-katan, a man distinguished for the love of his fellow creatures. Rav Kook, chief rabbi of Israel in 1917, believed that a prayer full of mercy and love could be written by any sage but someone composing a prayer fomenting hatred and condemnation must take pains to avoid feelings of animosity or spite against his people's enemies. Rav Kook deduces, therefore, that the prayer must have originated with "one noted for the holiness and purity of character and entire lack of the passion of hatred" - one such as Samuel Ha-katan.

The nineteenth century commentator Ha'Emek Davar, from the Volozhin yeshiva, thinks that one who carries out or promulgates vengeance needs extra protection because of the "intense emotional unrest" which he experiences after the event. Therefore God blesses Pinchas with a covenant of peace.

These commentators are saying that, in order to exact vengeance, you need to be a person with holiness and purity of character or have a genuine spirit of zeal to advance the glory of God. Moreover, you must be without the passion of hatred or any selfish motive. Does any one of us today have those qualities?

*By Rabbi Lewis Warshauer*

The Five Books of Moses bears this title because of the prominence of the man, Moses. Those who accept the traditional view of the origin of the Torah, also accept this nomenclature as a matter of course. Moses transmitted the Torah to his people and taught it to them. However, not accepting this view of the Torah's origin does not in any way diminish the role of Moses in telling the narrative of the Torah. He is the central human character in every book, starting with Exodus.

At this week's Torah reading, the story of Moses and his people comes to a key juncture. Moses, until now, has led the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the edge of the Promised Land. He has exercised every leadership role simultaneously - prophet, general, judge and teacher. The only exception to this vast portfolio of responsibilities is the role of kehunah, or priest. Yet, even so, the fact

that Aaron holds this office, can be seen as Aaron acting in place of Moses, just as Aaron served as his spokesman to Pharaoh.

At this point in the story, which is near the end of the Book of Numbers, the Israelites are not the same people as the Israelites who left Egypt forty years prior. The Exodus generation has passed on. So have Miriam and Aaron. God now designates a person to lead the people as they go forward. God also designates successors, specifically for Moses and Aaron. Pinhas, Aaron's grandson, is named as the next to be appointed to the priesthood, a position that will become hereditary, subject to a covenant between the family to which the current priest belongs, and God. ( 25:13). Joshua is to be the successor to Moses, designated to lead the people into the Promised Land. Yet, Joshua is not permitted to be a new Moses. Moses is to invest him with some of his own authority (27:20), and Joshua's decisions will be subject to divine intervention through the oracular powers exercised by the High Priest (27:21).

Moses set an example for future generations of leaders by the qualities he embodied. But, he did not set an example by the roles he filled, which were separated out into distinct jobs. For most of Jewish history, the division of labor between Joshua and Pinhas, has persisted. No one man (or woman, as in the case of Deborah, or Queen, as in the case of Shlomzion in the Hasmonean period) was both priest and chief executive. The unfolding of the succession to Moses illustrates a key lesson: there are some leaders who are exemplary, but their examples should not be completely followed. The totality of their lives and actions should not, and cannot, be the model for future generations. The individual who can be like Moses in all manifestations is rare to the point of non-existent. To accord a person, even someone outstanding, with all the powers of Moses, is to risk the abuse of that power.

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## **CHUKAT/BALAK** 12 Tammuz 5766 ~ 8 July 2006

*By David Kosky*

The story of Balak, King of Moab and Balaam the magician poses many problems to the Jewish reader. How did Balaam a non-Jewish soothsayer (moreover one termed by the Rabbis as “the wicked”) come to have a direct line to God? Why should God want to grant (at least temporarily) the power of speech to an ass, not usually considered the most noble of creatures?

Parshat Balak addresses the issues of magic, divination, the occult and superstition head on and demonstrates their impotence in the face of the power of the Almighty. Abravanel asks pertinently why God prevented Balaam from cursing the Israelites and further why they should have cared about his curse at all as long as they were blessed by God? What significance could be attached to Balaam's curse and why should it have been necessary to turn it into a blessing?

The commentators suggest three possible answers. Firstly, it is said that the curse was turned into a blessing to demonstrate the weakness of Balaam's power and that whilst he might be a mighty magician he was ultimately subservient to God. He who claimed to be capable of cursing an entire nation could not even see what his ass viewed clearly. However many altars he might build to invoke his magic rites he could not prevail against God and had no choice but to speak the words put into his mouth by God even if they were the opposite of what he intended.

Secondly, some commentators suggest that the curses were turned into blessings for Israel's benefit. The Israelites had absorbed in Egypt its culture of magic and superstition. Viewed in this way God prevented Balaam from cursing Israel not because of the effect such curses might have but because of the pain hearing them might cause. Thus we read in Parshat Ki Teze, “The Lord your God refused to listen to Balaam and turned his blessing to a curse because the Lord your God loves you.”

Finally, we learn from Luzzatto that God was concerned not just with teaching Balaam a lesson or bolstering the confidence of Israel but with teaching all mankind a lesson – the impotence of

superstition. The Israelites had been forbidden to attack Moab, "You shall not distress Moab and you shall not provoke war with them for I shall not give you an inheritance from their land." (Devarim 2:9)

Had Balaam cursed Israel, Balak would no doubt have boasted that their failure to attack was the result of Balaam's curses. Viewed in this way God turned the curses into blessings not to save Israel from harm but to save all people from superstition. That is a lesson we must continue to learn today. I pen these lines some weeks before the World Cup and have never subscribed to the views put forward by those promoting the Bible Codes. And yet can it be entirely coincidental that:

Patrick Viera made his debut for Arsenal on Shabbat Vayera? Ronny Rosenthal made his debut for Watford on Shabbat Mishpatim when we read "I shall send the hornet among you"?

On this weekend of the World Cup Final Balak (Michael) may play for Germany? One hopes that these are indeed coincidental!

*By Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun*

We are challenged to reflect upon death when we read parashat Chukat/Balak. Our double parashah begins with the elaborate purification ritual for one who has come into contact with a corpse; it ends with Pinchas' zealous killing of an Israelite man and Midianite woman; and in the middle we learn about the deaths of both Miriam and Aaron. As we confront mortality throughout our Torah reading, it is natural to question Jewish views of the afterlife - a topic which has been the subject of many books of late.

What happens to us after we die? The great spectrum of Jewish answers to this question testifies to the evolution of ideas and the creativity of Jewish thought throughout the ages. Our parashah provides a powerful clue for understanding the biblical perspective on death. The intricate ritual of the red heifer underscores the biblical view that death marks not only the final end of life, but also the end of our relationship with God. As Psalm 115 proclaims: The dead cannot praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence (v. 17). Death was considered to be the antithesis of the God of Life. Thus, the purity laws separated the symbolic forces of death from God's holy residence. When we confront our own mortality by coming into contact with a corpse, we must fulfill a process of reclaiming life and re-entering a relationship with the ultimate Source of Life.

Death as the final descent into a dark silence apart from God is but one of the Jewish views of the afterlife. In the Second Temple, rabbinic, medieval, mystical and modern periods, Jews have celebrated the notion of life after death in many ways - including the concepts of bodily resurrection, the immortality of the soul and reincarnation. In fact, rabbis have often sought roots within the biblical text itself for their views of the afterlife. An example from this week's parashah is found in the expression for Aaron's impending death - ye'asef el amav -- to be "gathered to his kin" (Num. 20:24). Variations of this expression are used to describe the deaths of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. Medieval Torah commentators understood this expression to refer to the journey of the immortal soul. The interpretation of the Ralbag (Provence, 1288-1344) is a good example:

The expression ["to be gathered to his kin"] is connected with the soul, for while it is in the body it is, as it were, in isolation; when the soul leaves the body, it rejoins its Source and is gathered back to its glory (comment on Gen. 25:8).

The survival of the soul is an important aspect of Jewish theology from the rabbinic period to the present. Exactly what happens to us after we die is a mystery. However, as Rabbi Neil Gillman argues in his profound work, *The Death of Death*, what we believe about the afterlife affects the way that we live in the here-and-now. May the focus on death in this week's parashah inspire our own explorations of this central issue in Jewish theology.

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**ACHAREI MOT/KEDOSHIM** 8 Iyar 5766 ~ 6 May 2006

*By Assael Romanelli*

Vayikra is the central book of the Torah, and at the centre of Vayikra is Kedoshim, the holiness code. This code could be seen as a core part of morality and holiness in the Torah. This year, read in conjunction with Acharei Mot, these two Sidrot teach about the most meaningful and basic values of our religion. But precisely in the midst of all that, what interested me most was also one of the most difficult things for me to read; the sacrifice of innocent animals and the description of the ritual.

Aharon randomly chooses between two goats: one is to be sacrificed to God as a purifying offering for the people of Israel, and the other to be sent to wilderness, to Azazel (some say an ancient god, or some power). Aharon ascribes to this second goat all the sins and transgressions of the Israelites, and that goat carries away these moral burdens. In both instances, innocent animals suffer, one totally and the other symbolically and physically. This seemed to me so cruel and unreasonable that I knew that I must dig deeper and see why exactly it is so difficult to read.

Rabbi Bradley Artson compares animal sacrifices to our life: both are violent, uncontrolled, and primitive. He writes: “in our age, a period of sanitized religion and everyday violence, escalating drug abuse and rising poverty, the practice (of sacrifices) of our ancestors has something yet to teach”. By this he might mean that sacrifices represent our deeper, more animal-like, aspects.

Let us consider the goat that is sent to the wilderness. Today the term “scapegoat” means someone who, though none of his fault, is found to symbolize the sins or faults of others, and usually is punished/bound/killed/judged/hurt.

Perhaps even today that goat could represent something – let us say our psychological “luggage.” We all carry emotional baggage: past experiences, loves, losses, sins, mistakes, pride, jealousy, hurt. Maybe what we should learn from this Sidrah, is that we ought not to carry all this baggage. We should be letting part of this luggage go into the wilderness. Only by letting go are we able to elevate ourselves to the next level of holiness.

So what am I trying to say? First of all, in those days animal sacrifices were acceptable and a great improvement over human sacrifices. They were a ritual, which symbolized the purification of the individual and the community, and thus helped build our people. Today we no longer have this ritual and our society has developed, accenting the individual over the group. Modern life has increased stress on the individual and we all hear about the importance of "letting go" in order to cope.

Perhaps we need some sort of "goat" to help us out?

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

This week saw the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora, mark the commemorations of Yom HaZikaron, Israeli Memorial Day and Yom Ha-Atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day — two days that indelibly mark the poles of Jewish history — tragedy and celebration. We remember all those who lost their lives in defence of the State of Israel and celebrate the treasure of being a free people in our own land. Today, however, we still find the Jewish people and the Jewish State under siege. We are reminded of the fragility of both Israel and our own lives.

It is fitting that this week, we read Parashat Aharei Mot, which opens up after the mysterious deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu. We, the readers of Torah, and Aaron are left speechless by this tragic act. We are challenged to put the sacred fragments of this tragedy together in a way that makes some order out of the perceived chaos. God prescribes that order in the form of the Yom Kippur ritual which is detailed at the beginning of the parashah. We are told: "only Aaron shall enter the Shrine: with a bull of the herd for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall be dressed in a sacral linen tunic, with linen breeches next to his flesh, and be girt with a linen sash, and he shall wear a linen turban." (Leviticus 16: 3-4). Quoting Leviticus Rabbah, the Etz Hayim Humash explains the meaning underlying this ritual: "the bull recalls the merit of Abraham's offering in Genesis 18:7, the ram is a reminder of Isaac's readiness to be sacrificed in Genesis 22:13, and the two goats (later in verse 5) symbolize the meal Jacob prepared for his father to receive his father's blessing (Gen. 27:9). The four linen garments (v.4) represent Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. On Yom Kippur, we come before God armed not only with our own merit but also with that of our ancestors, extending through the generations" (679-680). Given the juxtaposition of the deaths of Aaron's sons and the narration of this

ritual, I read this sacrificial act as a prayer in the shadow of tragedy and as a response to radical uncertainty.

May we, as the words of this very poignant midrash, utter our own prayer in the shadow of tragedy.

May we call upon the merit of our ancestors in a wholehearted prayer for peace? And may our cries of support for Israel penetrate the darkness and declare that we are indeed our brother's keeper.

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## **BEHAR/BECHUKOTAI 22 Iyar 5766 ~ 20 May 2006**

*By Michael Gluckman*

Pesach is beginning to be a distant memory as Shavuot rapidly approaches. We commemorated our freedom from slavery and were enjoined to regard ourselves as if we had been slaves. Living in maybe the era of greatest freedom for the Jewish people it is interesting to ponder what that concept means.

What does it mean to have freedom? On a pure basic level it can mean the ability to come and go as we please. But beyond this simple physicality we are often not free because we are bound by responsibilities. As children/teenagers we may feel responsible to fulfil the potential that is expected by our parents and teachers. As we mature we are responsible to friends, partners and children as well as work colleagues. Therefore freedom cannot imply that you should do whatever you want. That would destroy society. People, even in a so-called free society, have responsibilities. This is different from authority, which implies a one-way process. Responsibility in society is a two way process.

In Sidrah Behar we read the phrase immortalised on the liberty Bell in Independence Hall in Philadelphia USA - "You shall proclaim freedom [Dror] throughout the land for all the inhabitants". [Lev 25:10] Rashi quotes Rabbi Yehuda's question "What is meant by Dror" [as it is the only such usage in Torah] in effect asking how does it imply freedom. The explanation given is that it means, "One who lives wherever they pleases and is not under the authority of others"

So the question is still on the table – what does it mean to have freedom. Many of us would cite the need to be free of injustice, ill health and financial worries as important facets of feeling free. Indeed seminal research on work satisfaction levels cite these as minimum requirements for workers but has also demonstrated that responsibility for our work is also key to being happy at work. Thus back to Rashi's comment that freedom is a combination of living where you want and not being under authority. It doesn't say that freedom is absence of responsibility. What it does underline is freedom from authority of people.

At Shavuot we celebrate the completion of the Exodus begun at Pesach. That is why we link the two by counting the Omer. Physical freedom without responsibility is not freedom. But there is only one authority to Whom we are subject and that is God. Authority of individuals will always be flawed, as it is purely subjective. Only through the authority of the Mitzvot, which construct a just society where all are respected and valued, are we truly free. That is the type of freedom that is referred to here and proclaimed by our prophets and teachers throughout the generations.

*By Rabbi Lewis Warshauer*

Which of the mitzvot of the Torah is the most difficult to observe? The prohibition on coveting? Or, perhaps, being forbidden to gossip? Each of those choices represents a never-ending challenge. One is supposed to avoid ever coveting or gossiping. When viewed in terms of frequency, the mitzvah that begins this week's parashah could be seen as easier to perform. The sabbatical year, or shmittah, falls only once every seven years. Yet it could be the most difficult. During that year, farmers must not plant or harvest. Refraining from planting or harvesting for an entire year seems highly risky. If there is not enough reserve food from prior years, people will starve; surely the Torah does not want people to endanger their lives. Anticipating this concern, the Torah addresses it:

You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep my rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and in security you shall live upon it. And should you ask, "What are we to eat in the seventh year, if may neither sow nor gather in our crops?" I will ordain My blessings for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. (Leviticus 25:18-21)

These verses twice mention living on the land in security. However, the notion of being secure seems directly contradicted by the very nature of the shmittah system that the Torah sets up. The people are responsible for observing not just this particular agricultural matter, but all of the mitzvot. It would take a nation of extraordinarily pious people to achieve a secure result. Saadiah Gaon (882-942; Egypt, Babylon) suggests a solution to this problem. He re-reads "that you may live upon the land in security" as "on the land, you are secure in Me." The people's goal is not to be secure on the land; it is to be secure in God; that is, depending on God to provide security.

In a sense, much of the discussion above is moot. The laws of shmittah apply only in the land of Israel, and a number of authoritative opinions have declared the system inoperable in the modern State. Yet the lesson remains current. Uncertainty is a constant. Individuals and nations receive no guarantees of security. Most of the residents are not farmers, and so do not even have the ability to refrain from cultivating crops in certain years. What we can do is to cultivate ourselves. We can cultivate a sense of security in God's presence. An intense cultivation is required, because for most people God's hand in the world is not manifest. That cultivation consists of, to quote the above passage in the Torah, the observance and keeping of God's laws and rules. It is a classic mode in Judaism not to wait for a feeling of God's presence before following God's ways, but to follow in those ways in order to create that presence.

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## **SHAVUOT II 7 Sivan 5766 ~ 3 June 2006**

*By Harriet Oppenheimer*

This parasha shows us two examples of the difference between what we as Jewish people can achieve – the potential that is there for us to strive for – and the reality that can fall far short of that potential.

The first instance is about poverty. The ideal that we should strive for is clear: 'there shall be no needy among you...if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this instruction'. However, God goes on not only to instruct us how we should deal with poor people - 'give to him readily' – but also to say that such laws are particularly important 'because there will never cease to be needy ones in your land'. The clear implication that we collectively have within our gift the utopian ideal of ensuring that poverty is eradicated – at least amongst our own community – but it is inevitable that we will always fail to reach this ideal.

The second instance is about freedom – that human right so prominent amongst Jewish values. We are told that Jewish slaves must be offered their freedom every seventh year. But there's a sting in the tail of this offering, rather like the modern mantra that with rights come responsibilities: should a slave not rise to the occasion and accept their freedom, they will be enslaved 'in perpetuity' (interpreted by

halachah as until either the end of the master's life, or until the Jubilee year). They do not get a second chance to take their freedom a little later if they need more time to feel strong enough to face its challenges. Perhaps we are to interpret that this is their punishment for not seizing such a precious opportunity when it is offered.

But the message that comes from today's parashah is not about regret for the dreams not realised. On the contrary, it is more pragmatically about the rules that keep a community socially and economically stable, given the inevitable existence of both poverty and slavery. We must support the needy and 'lend him sufficient for whatever he needs' – one of the proof texts for the talmudic idea that tzedakah involves returning a person who has fallen on hard times to their former lifestyle, rather than providing enough support to ensure only survival. We must also lend to the needy regardless of when the remission year is 'and have no regrets when you do so'. This means that if a Jew asks us for a loan near the remittance year when all debts are cancelled, the loan may well become a gift by default. (My husband was brought up with an old family principle never to lend more than he is prepared to give as a gift.) By such measures we are instructed to maintain social and economic order amongst the Jewish people.

***By Michael Gluckman***

It is strange that the greatest formative experience of our people is commemorated on the least observed of the major festivals. This enigma has often puzzled me. As Masorti Jews our relationship with Shavuot must surely be even more complicated. What is it that we are actually trying to commemorate? Is it the beginning of God's revelation and if so when did it end?

The revelation at Sinai must rank as the seminal moment of the Jewish people yet even the date of Shavuot is uncertain. It is the only festival in our calendar not to have its date specifically defined in Torah. Instead it is merely described as occurring 50 days after Pesach. It is also the only one of the Shalosh Regalim not to have commenced the transition from marking an agricultural event to a historical one within biblical writings. It seems that it was only much later that this purely agricultural festival, firmly connected to Pesach, became linked to the revelation at Sinai and became *Z'man Matan Torateinu*

Much is made of the fact that Pesach and Shavuot are connected because true freedom was only achieved once we had received Torah. The "do what you want when you want" type of freedom is not what shaped us as a people. It is the solid framework of mitzvot binding us to GOD that is true freedom.

However we know from the images of Midrash that this wasn't a willing acceptance. The image of GOD holding Mount Sinai over us (tradition has it that we were all present) threatening to drop it hardly gives an image of willing acceptance. There seems to be an element of GOD acting as a good parent knowing what is good for us. After all, which child would opt for a life of rules in comparison to unbridled freedom. The complication comes from truly trying to understand our relationship with GOD. The parental metaphor does not work for us any more. No longer do we sit in the comforting vision described in the second paragraph of the Shema with a simple reward and punishment approach to the mitzvot.

It might be easy to say that the reason that Shavuot is relatively less known is that there are not the depth of customs associated with it. A slice of cheese cake cannot compete with building a Sukkah! But surely the answer is deeper than that. We are dealing with issues that underpin our basis for belief. Our relationship with God and the idea of revelation is extremely complex. Perhaps this is why the Kabbalists took as their metaphor a marriage between the people of Israel and God. We know that the relationship between two people is complex beyond imagining and thus similarly our relationship with God. Maybe it is easier to understand in silence. The opening of word of the Ten Commandments is *Anochi* which starts with the letter alef, a silent letter. Than in itself can be a lesson in trying to understand the revelation. We start with silence and only then can we hear, as did the prophet Elijah the "*Kol Dammah Daka*" - "the still small voice."

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**NASO 14 Sivan 5766 ~ 10 June 2006**

***By Alex Stein***

When I studied at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, one of my favourite parts of the Shacharit service was the Birkat Kohanim (priestly blessing), a practice long since abandoned (apart from on haggim) in most Diaspora communities: "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee/The Lord make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee/The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace." I loved its lilting melodies and serenity, its antiquity and its aspirations. One morning, having just begun the Amidah, there was the sound of an explosion nearby. By the time the shaliach tzibur had begun the repetition, the sound of ambulances made it clear that there had been a pigua, a suicide-bombing. Naturally, everyone wanted to finish davening as quickly as possible, so they could go and ring loved ones. Despite this, the Amidah was completed as normal, with the Birkat Kohanim providing an intense contrast with the events which were unfolding up the road on Derech Aza. This encapsulated the potential conflict between the need for reflection, or spirituality, and the need to do something in the world. I was reminded of this again recently when I went to see *Shooting Dogs*, the new British film about the Rwandan genocide. In one of the most striking scenes, hundreds of refugees arrive at the UN compound/Catholic school. The idealistic gap year student sees that they have not eaten for a while, and is desperate to find wood for the fire. The priest sees the task of doing Mass as of more urgent necessity, which leads to a nice montage of the contrast between the Mass and the gap year student's search for wood, which leads him to take down his own cupboards.

The perceived conflict between reflection and action is a central element of discourse surrounding the value of religion in the modern world. Many people perceive religious movements as spending too much time on prayer and introspection, and not enough time on action. In response, religious communities portray their services and rituals as a necessary prelude and inspiration to action. While it would be convenient to say that the truth lies somewhere in between, I believe this would be a gross simplification. In reality, everything depends on the individual. Some people need the inspiration of religious rite, others don't. The lie is the imposition by either the religious or secular communities that their way is the only one. As Masorti synagogues, we have long been committed to religious pluralism: we rightly acknowledge the validity of the various paths offered by the different denominations. But are we yet ready to acknowledge the validity of the paths offered by the non-religious Jewish movements? Can we recognise that their approach appeals to some people as much as ours does? Are we ready to acknowledge that these judgements can only be made on an individual basis? Just some questions to ponder...

***By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz***

While our images connected to the Priestly Blessing may abound, rarely do we think about the profound meaning behind these words that play such a central role in our tradition. Numbers 6:22-26 teach, "God spoke to Moses saying, 'speak to Aaron and his sons saying, thus shall you bless the children of Israel: say (ahmor) to them, 'may the Lord bless you and guard you; may God cause God's face to shine on you grant you grace; may God lift up God's Face toward you and grant you peace.'"

The medieval commentator Rashi identifies four compelling aspects connected to this Priestly Blessing. To begin, Rashi focuses on God's command ahmor, which means say. Typically, this word is written in shorthand, aleph-mem-reish; in this instance, the Torah spells out the word in its entirety, aleph-mem-vav-reish. Regarding this spelling, Rashi comments that this is a warning to the Priests, "you shall not bless the people hurriedly but rather you shall bless them with the utmost of intent and with a full heart." Second, Rashi turns to the opening of the Priestly Blessing, "may God bless you and guard you." Based on a Midrash, Rashi explains that this opening third is a blessing for material prosperity. "While humans typically give gifts but are unconcerned about their protection (guarding those same gifts), God gives and protects." We pray then, that God will increase our material wealth and protect that wealth from thieves. Third, with respect to the second part of the blessing, "may God cause God's face to shine on you grant you grace," Rashi explains that we desire God's happiness and favour - that which comes as a result of being attentive to our spiritual needs. Fourth, Rashi concludes by commenting on the final portion of the blessing, "may God lift up God's Face toward you and grant you peace." Here, we pray for God to overwhelm God's anger with mercy.

Rashi's commentary is profound in distilling the many dimensions of blessing. When blessing others, either explicitly or implicitly, we must bless with genuine intent and a full heart. Blessing is meaningless if done in a hurried fashion. Similarly, Rashi teaches us the importance of balance in our lives. We must be attentive to both material and spiritual needs. Offering a prayer for one's material health is just as important as praying for one's spiritual self. Finally, to be a source of blessing, one must be able to control one's emotions and give others the benefit of the doubt. Optimism and self-discipline lead to blessing - for one's self and for others.

From: The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. More can be found on their website:  
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## **BEHA'ALOTACHA 21 Sivan 5766 ~ 17 June 2006**

*By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz*

A central image of this week's parashah is the seven-branched menorah, which was lit in the Israelites' journey in the desert and later in the Temple. This ancient symbol turns our thoughts to Shabbat, and also toward the land of Israel.

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and say to him: when you kindle the lamps, the seven lamps shall cast light toward the center of the menorah,' " (Numbers 8:1-2).

A metaphoric explanation correlates the central light with Shabbat and the six branches with the six days of creation. According to this view, Shabbat should always be at the center of our thoughts. For the three days after Shabbat, we are sustained by the holiness of the past Shabbat, and for the next three days, we receive strength from the holiness of the Shabbat to-come (Hasidic interpretation). Whereas Hillel the Elder celebrated God's bounty each day, Shammai the Elder (first century BCE) used to set aside the best food and clothing for Shabbat (Betzah 16a). Although the law follows Hillel, we can incorporate the spirit of Shammai's intention by reading next week's parashah inviting Shabbat guests and planning the menu as soon as the week begins.

The menorah also focuses our thoughts on the land of Israel.

The description of the menorah is unusually botanical: There were six branches stemming from its sides, each with three almond shaped calyxes with knob and flower. On the main central stem, were four almond shaped calyxes, its knobs and flowers, all made of a single piece of beaten gold (Exodus 25: 31-38 and 37: 17-24).

Dr. Ephraim and Hannah Hareuveni, pioneers in the scientific study of nature in biblical sources, found a native plant which resembles the description of the menorah. Their son, Nogah Hareuveni, founder of Neot Kedumim, Israel's Biblical Gardens, and the first station on this summer's JTS Israel mission, writes that Moriah (*Salvia Palestina*), when pressed on one plane mirrors the menorah with three stems emerging from each side of a central stem. The *Salvia* also has knobs (gallnuts) which grow right from the stem, precisely like the knobs (*kaftorim*) of the menorah. Thus, the instructions to build the golden menorah were not created from imagination, but based on a real plant that grows in the Land of Israel.

The menorah was stamped on the coins of the ancient Israeli state and is a powerful symbol of the state's modern revival. However, the botanical association of the very first menorah with the land is little-known and provides an even older grounding of the symbol.

May we read the parashah on many levels: literal, metaphoric, historic, botanical, and symbolic, and may we turn our thoughts constantly to Shabbat and to the Land of Israel.

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*By Rabbi Lewis Warshauer*

Jews have a reputation for being dramatically argumentative. Opinions are pronounced vociferously. Everyone interrupts everyone else. It is perhaps not widely known that interrupting an elder is not only rude but is prohibited by Jewish law. As a religious system, Jewish law legislates about matters outside the bounds of secular law. Matters that secular society sees as ethical, but voluntary, are seen by Judaism as mandatory.

This week's parasha provides a section of the framework of laws governing the treatment of elders. It contains the first instance of what is to become a sadly familiar and repeated theme: the complaints of the Israelites as they wander in the wilderness. Moses, in turn, complains to God:

Why have I not enjoyed your favour, that you have laid the burden of all this people upon me? I cannot carry all this people alone. (Numbers 11:11; 14)

God responds by instructing Moses to gather seventy elders to help him with that burden. (Numbers 11:16-17) A midrash quotes this verse as a basis for discussing responsibilities toward an elder. Besides not interrupting him, it is forbidden to sit or stand in his place or to contradict him, and it is required to rise in his presence. (Numbers Rabbah 15:17; see also Kiddushin 32b and following) These regulations protected the honour of elders; at the same time, elders had responsibilities toward the public. Thus, the midrash also relates a story told by the sage Abba ha-kohen bar Papa. When he would be walking on a road and see a group of people ahead of him, he would take another road so as not to trouble them to rise in his presence. Another sage, Rabi Yosei criticized the behaviour of Abba ha-kohen. he tells him he should have passed in front of those people and afforded them the opportunity to rise in his presence and thus express awe for God. In other words, giving honour to an elder or a sage is akin to honouring God.

When read together, Torah and Midrash provide a description of what the relationship between the Jewish public and its elders should be. Elders exercise authority not for their own glorification, but for that of God. Although the concept of the honour due to elders might seem to lead to authoritarianism, it actually promotes democracy. Moses's sharing of power with the elders of his day provided a way to safeguard against dictatorship. Even today, the honouring of elders by the wider public — and the recognition of elders that such honour not be abused, can help educate people of all ages that mutual obligations benefit all members of society.

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**KORACH** 5 Tammuz 5766 ~ 1 July 2006

*By Rabbi Matt Berkowitz*

Korah, the great grandson of Levi, and his cohorts challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron declaring, "For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" Moses falls on his face in despair and puts these rebels to the test commanding, "You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans, and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord. Then the man whom the Lord chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far sons of Levi!" (Numbers 16:6-7) After Korah's allies, Dathan and Aviram refuse to appear before Moses, the trial goes forward and ultimately, the earth swallows these evildoers, a fire goes forth from God and consumes the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense. What is so surprising to us as readers is not the substance of the story but the footnote which follows this dramatic narrative. God commands Moses: "remove the fire pans of those who have sinned . . . and let them be made as hammered sheets as plating for the altar – for once they have been used for offering to the Lord, they have become sacred – and let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel" (Numbers 17:3). Why would objects used for such dubious purposes be incorporated into the sacred altar which brings one closer to God?

Ramban, Rabbi Moshe Ben Nahman (1194-1270), a prolific Spanish bible commentator sheds light on this question. Specifically, Ramban provides two compelling answers. First, he argues that these fire pans were holy by virtue of Moses. It was a human act, that is to say, Moses' command to use these fire pans for holy ends (seeking a divine response) that sanctifies these objects and makes them worthy for incorporation into the altar. Because Moses sought a sign from God, the pans were sanctified and so, needed to be used for another holy purpose. Ramban's second interpretation is just as fascinating. The fire pans are holy, not because of Moses' human act but rather because God sanctified them. God desired that the pans be employed as a sign to the Israelites – lest they rebel against God's chosen leader. At once, Ramban's two interpretations conflict and dovetail with each other. Whereas his first understanding demonstrates humans (i.e. Moses) wanting a distinct sign from God, the second interpretation argues that God desires to give humans a clear sign – one that will be remembered and learned from throughout the generations.

Korah and his cohorts teach us a powerful lesson. While we seek signs from God, God also gives us tangible signs in our world – signs that challenge us to learn and grow. And more significantly, we are given a lesson in the ability of transforming stumbling blocks into sacred moments. That which was used to distance the Israelites from God becomes the means to bring the Israelites closer – closer to God by learning from their past and moving ahead toward a hopeful future. May we have the capacity to take this Torah teaching to heart – looking for signs of God and elevating troubling moments in our personal lives to profound learning experiences.

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### *From the Midrash*

“And he spoke to Korach and to all his company saying, ‘in the morning the Lord will make known who is his, and who is the Holy, and will bring him near to him’” (Numbers 16,5). Moses said, “Perhaps they spoke their words of rebellion because they had been eating and drinking. Perhaps between now and tomorrow they will repent. Therefore he said, “in the morning the Lord will make known..”.

Moses therefore said to Korach ‘I am not allowed to appear before God right now. For even though God does not eat and drink, we have eaten and drunk’ (we are therefore not worthy to appear before Him).

Another interpretation: Moses said ‘God has established boundaries in His world. Are you able to turn day into night? Surely the Bible said “and it was evening and it was morning” (Genesis 1,5). Furthermore, we read, “And God divided between the lightness and the darkness” (Genesis 1,4) for the sake of the natural progress of the world.

Just as God divided between light and darkness because of the world so He has divided Israel from the nations as it is said “and I have divided you from the people to be mine” (Leviticus 20,26) Similarly he divided Aaron from the rest of the people as it is said “and Aaron was separated that he should be sanctified as most holy” (1 Chronicles 23,13). Just as you are not able to tear down the distinction which He made between light and dark so you are unable to cancel this. Therefore he said to them in the morning ‘and God will make known’ as if to say this has already been ordained (just as the morning has).

“And they fell upon their faces and said” (16,22) ‘Master of the Universe! If a colony rebelled against an earthly king and ten or twenty of them arose and cursed the King or his messengers he would send his army and massacre them. He would slay the good along with the bad because they would not know who rebelled and who had not rebelled, who had honoured the King and who had cursed him. But You who know the thoughts of people and their counsel, You know the will of your creatures and you know who has sinned and who has not sinned, who has rebelled and who has not rebelled. You know the spirit of each and every one of them. Therefore the Torah says “God of the spirits of all flesh. Should one person sin and You will be angry with all the congregation?” (16,22). God said to them, ‘You have

spoken well. I shall make known who has sinned and who has not sinned.' (By decreeing which of them were to be punished).

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