

SHEMOT

18th Tevet 5771 ~ 25th December 2010

Shabbat begins in London at 15.40 and ends at 16.50

By Jonathan Wiseman

Parshat Shemot does not begin where the book of Bereishit ended. At the end of Parshat Vayechi, Joseph dies, having prophesied to his brothers that God will bring them out of Egypt to the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet at the opening of Parshat Shemot, the Children of Israel are enslaved to Egypt, and the Torah tells us explicitly that the king who has arisen “knew not Joseph”. Moreover, there is a tradition that the Children of Israel had themselves ceased “to know Joseph”, having abandoned the faith of their ancestors. Shemot Rabbah states (1:8) that on the death of Joseph, the Children of Israel ceased to practise circumcision and that it was this that caused God to turn the hatred of the Egyptians onto them. This would certainly be an explanation for why, towards the end of the Sedrah, Zipporah circumcises Gershom, who is considerably older than eight days, after God seeks to kill Moses, possibly for his having failed to circumcise his son.

It is apparent from the opening of the Sedrah that the Children of Israel lack strong male leadership. Even as Moses emerges as a possible leader, he cuts an unpromising figure: killing the Egyptian overseer before fleeing to Midian and marrying a gentile woman. Even when God appears to him in the burning bush he seeks to eschew his destiny. Notwithstanding that God entrusts Moses with miracles that he can perform to Pharaoh, Aaron is required to be appointed as Moses’ mouthpiece. And so we find ourselves at a hiatus in the biblical narrative, between the strong (albeit not always perfect) leadership of the Patriarchs in Bereishit and the leadership of Moses, Aaron and Joshua for the rest of the Torah.

The Children of Israel are not without heroic leaders in Parshat Shemot. However, those leaders are not the men who will dominate the narrative in the subsequent Parshot. Rather, they are the women. We learn of the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who lie to Pharaoh to save Israelite children. Moreover, the lie that they tell Pharaoh (“Hebrew women are not as Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwife come unto them”) is about the strength of the Israelite women; and it is a lie sufficiently believable to convince Pharaoh. Next comes Moses’ mother. It is no coincidence that the word used for the basket in which she places Moses is “tevah”, an ark. The matriarchal saving of the Jewish people culminates in the scene referred to above when Zipporah, seeing God seeking to kill Moses, circumcises Gershom and angrily throws the foreskin at Moses’ feet. Thus the Children of Israel are saved because a gentile woman performs the mitzvah that Moses had failed to.

There are a number of readings of this reversal of traditional gender roles in Parshat Shemot. One is that it symbolises the emasculation of the Children of Israel caused by Egyptian oppression. More convincing, perhaps, is the tradition that the positive role played by the women of these narratives is the narrative itself. Thus Rabbi Avira expounded: “Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation”.

Jonathan Wiseman is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son.” (Exodus 4:22)

1. An expression of greatness, as in Psalm 89:28: "I will appoint him first-born, highest of the kings of the earth." This is its plain meaning. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. The first-born son is given the distinction of receiving a double share of his father's inheritance, because he was the son who first made him a father. Since the people of Israel is that nation that by proclaiming the belief in God, in His Providence, and in His almighty power, first caused God to be acknowledged as the Father of the Universe, it, too, can lay claim to the title and privileges of a "first-born son." (Meshekh Hokhma (Rabbi Meir Simha Hakohen of Dvinsk), 1843-1926, Latvia)
3. God speaking of Israel as "My first-born son" expresses the idea that with Israel ... is commenced the list in which the names of all the nations should appear as My sons. So that in your own name and in the name of the whole of humanity I come to you. Israel is My first but not My only child, it is only the first nation that I have won as Mine. Not as "My first-born son" but as "My son" do I demand freedom for Israel, as I would for any nation that gave itself to Me as My son. Israel is not the first in rank, but the first in time. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)
4. It becomes obvious that we are not discussing a dogma incapable of verification, but the recognition of sober historical fact. The world owes Israel the idea of the One God of righteousness and holiness... Clearly God used Israel for this great purpose. (Rabbi Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, p. 274.)
5. How odd/Of God/To choose/The Jews. (William Norman Ewer, 1885-1976)
6. It's not/So odd/The Jews/Chose God. (Author unknown, variously attributed)

Sparks for Discussion

What is meant by saying that the Jews are God's "first-born son," God's "chosen people?" Does God like us better than other people or religions? Does it mean that we are first in rank or first in time? What privileges does a first-born child have? What responsibilities? How would you explain the concept of "chosen people" to a non-Jewish friend?

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website <http://www.uscj.org>

VAYECHI

11th Tevet 5771 ~ 18th December 2010

By Georgia Kaufmann

Hatch and Dispatch, Births and Deaths. Vayehi sits at the end of the long lives of the patriarchs, that ends the generative process of Bereishit and plunges us into the chaotic migrations of Moses and the Israelite hordes. Much comment is made on the contrast between the opening words of the parashah "And he lived" and the text which chiefly deals with the impending death of the last patriarch, Jacob. It is neither death nor new nor continuing life, that interests me here but continuity and inheritance from generation to generation – l'dor v'dor. Jacob takes his time, literally waxing lyrical, as he poetically blesses and if not curses, at least prophesizes his sons' sometimes bleak futures. Curiously when Jacob in his death bed names them all (this is after his prior blessing of Ephraim and Mannaseh) he does not list them in order of birth, current status or even future status but with reference to their mothers. First he addresses the sons of Leah, then Bilhah and Zilpah and last of all Rachel. This indicates to me that Jacob, at least, was aware of who his children were and how they belonged. It does not surprise me that none of the great Israelites of the biblical world were descended from the handmaids.

All twelve of his sons fathered tribes. Twelve were apportioned land (the Levites got cities rather than land and the half-tribes got a share each). There was a superficial equality in their inheritance but Jacob it seems was all too aware that children are not alike, that there is difference, indeed great differences within one people. Jacob also favoured the children of his wives over his concubines and those of Rachel over Leah. There is no parity in their inheritance in terms of love, esteem or even the land they gained (except perhaps for Asher who had a comfortable inheritance).

What intrigues me is that despite the obvious parental favouritism, despite the unequal treatment it is from the tribe of Levi castigated for its lawlessness, wrathfulness and scattered throughout Israel that Moses, Aaron and Miriam emerge. The twice blessed and singled out half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh achieve nothing spectacular and probably drifted off across Iran and Afghanistan through to India. It is only with Judah that the praise, blessing and outcome seem to work together leading to David (and for Christians Jesus).

Judaism is a faith, a tradition, a family, a people – all of these in varying degrees. But whatever the mix it has survived because it passed down from generation to generation. However specific Jacob's deathbed blessings and protestations what he could not predict is how things change over the generations, the mutations, the dead ends. Anything that is passed down through the generations evolves; this is why Jacob could not have foreseen that angry, ox-maiming, Shechem slaughtering Levites would spawn Moses and that Judah whose sons died one after another would father through Tamar, of dubious ancestry, the Davidic line. We today continue this evolution, what we follow however traditional is alive and developing, it is not what was foreseen either good or bad but it is what we have inherited and what we will pass on.

Georgia Kaufmann is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: 'So you shall say to Joseph, Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.'" (Genesis 50:15-17)

1. Nowhere do we find in the Torah that Jacob issued such a command. It appears that the brothers found this in Jacob's command to them, "Come together," (49:1) which refers to unity, and a condition for unity is mutual forgiveness. (Sha'ar bat Rabim (Rabbi Chaim Aryeh Leib of Yedvobna), 19th century, Russia)
2. The brothers believed that Joseph had refrained from punishing them while their father was still alive because he had not wanted to cause him grief. They therefore sent word to Joseph as follows: "Your father is dead, but his God is still alive. If you did not want to cause your father grief, you certainly cannot grieve the Master of the Universe, who is grieved by any suffering that comes to a son of Jacob." (Ateret Tzvi (Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Eichenstein of Zidichowe), d. 1831, Poland)
3. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught: Great is peace, for even the tribal ancestors resorted to a fabrication in order to make peace between Joseph and themselves. Thus it says, "Before his death your father left this instruction." Yet when did he command this? We do not find that he did so. (B'reishit Rabbah 100:8)
4. At the school of Rabbi Ishmael it was taught: Great is the cause of peace, seeing that for the sake of peace even the Holy Blessed One deviated from the truth and modified a statement. For at first it is written: [Sarah said] "with my husband so old." And then it is written: [God told Abraham that Sarah said] "old as I

am.” (Talmud Yevamot 65b)

5. Both sources are necessary. If we only had the evidence of Joseph’s brothers, we could not infer that what they did was correct: Perhaps they were wrong to lie. And if we only had the evidence of God’s words to Abraham, we could only infer that a half-truth is permitted, not an actual lie. God does not say anything false – He merely omits some of Sarah’s words. Both together serve to establish the rule. Peace takes precedence over truth. (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*, p. 332)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators teach that lying for the sake of peace is permitted. Do you think this a reasonable stance? Should there be limits for this permission? May you lie to a dying person about his or her chances for recovery? What about lying to a friend, claiming that you don’t have the items or money she asks to borrow? Does it cover lying to your boss about being ill so that you don’t get fired? When does “for the sake of peace” become “to make my life easier?”

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website: <http://www.uscj.org>

VAYIGASH

4th Tevet 5771 ~ 11th December 2010

Shabbat begins in London at 15.37 and ends at 16.45

By Rabbi Elaina Rothman

This Shabbat we come to the dénouement, the final act, of the Joseph story a fitting end to a difficult and sometimes contorted period of his life. Joseph, the dreamer of dreams, a bragger, a victim, sometimes a manipulator but ultimately a victor seeks reconciliation with his brothers. He has listened to Judah's eloquent plea and the proposal that he, Judah, and not Benjamin should remain behind as surety. Joseph may even have registered the repeated use by Judah of the word "father" leading up to the point when Judah says Vamet - "he (Jacob) will die" if Benjamin does not return.

How much have these two men changed over the intervening years? What does Joseph risk, if anything, by revealing himself to them? How difficult is it to bring about rapprochement when the cause of the breakdown is as fundamental as selling your brother into slavery?

We know little of Judah's life as the story belongs to Joseph. Joseph is seen by the Sages as a tzadik, a righteous man: we who read the story of his life with less well attuned skills remember Joseph the tale bearer, Joseph, the braggart, who couldn't resist telling his family dreams in which they bowed down to him. Joseph who, when propositioned by Photipher's wife, seems to hesitate - a hesitation, so subtly suggested by a very rare singing notation (Gen.39:8) that we are left to wonder what was really going on in his mind. What sort of man was he who having saved one man's life by the correct interpretation of his dream, is not remembered by that man until it was expedient for him to do so? Perhaps the lesson is that, like practically all of us he was part saint and part sinner, part mensch and part self-centred man with an imprint of the Divine?

All we know of Judah is what we see and hear in relation to a difficult situation: his impassioned address keeps very little back and he acknowledges their wrongdoing. As Nehama Leibowitz comments in her *Studies in Bereshit*

"Would (the brothers) leave the other brother (Benjamin), a son of Rachel too, in bondage and return to their aged father, once again, a brother-by-Rachel short or would they fight to rescue him even at the cost of their own freedom?" And the answer is that Judah has lived through a change that has brought about genuine remorse for what he and his brothers had done and, in the process, a genuine reformation. And it is perhaps this honesty, this change in Judah that brings about the final change in Joseph that allows both men to begin a process of reconciliation.

Reading the story today we are reminded of the breaks in our own lives. So often we feel that it is too late to stretch out a hand, to make a phone call and we allow opportunities to pass. We fear the risk of rejection or of being hurt yet again. But although it is unlikely that most of us will be involved in as dramatic a reconciliation as Joseph and his brothers it can serve as a model. Reconciliation is not going back for that ignores the need to change: reconciliation is going forward.

Rabbi Elaina Rothman is a member of NLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

So when Pharaoh summons you and asks, "What is your occupation?" you should answer, "Your servants have been breeders of livestock from the start until now, both we and our fathers" – so that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians. (Genesis 46:33-34)

1. [Goshen] is necessary for you for it is a land of pasture. And when you tell him that you are not skilled in (any) other work, he will send you far from him and settle you there. (Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), 1040-1105, France)
2. He chose for them what is good and upright, and hated, public office. For there is no doubt that if he had wanted he could have appointed them to high positions but he wanted them to say that they had been shepherds from their youth, both they and their fathers, till that vocation had been theirs from time immemorial and they could not leave it. The idea was to segregate them from the Egyptians; the shepherds were an abomination to them. This would lead to their being settled in Goshen. (Akedat Yitzhak (Rabbi Isaac Arama), 1420-1494, Spain)
3. "For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians." He will not therefore want to settle you in the main centres. It was in this way that Joseph contrived matters to achieve the goal that they would dwell apart, though it involved degrading his family in the eyes of Pharaoh. Everything was worth sacrificing in order to ensure the preservation of Israel's sanctity. (Ha'amek Davar (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin), 1817-1893, Lithuania)
4. "In countries where we have lived for centuries," Theodor Herzl wrote, "we are still cried down as strangers." That barrier, as much as Talmud and Torah, maintained the concept of klal Yisrael [the community of Israel]. But as early as 1893, well before the bulk of Jewish immigration and nearly a century ahead of the peak era of assimilation, a Reform rabbi named Maurice Harris delivered a remarkably perceptive prophecy about the mixed blessing of American freedom: "Those Jews are emancipated in America in the fullest sense; we are an integral part of the nation, sharing its duties and its rights, and at times indistinguishable from the Gentiles. In the large cities there are self-imposed ghettos, it is true, but they are created by poverty rather than religion, and their ranks are serried by many agnostic and atheistic exceptions, who, nevertheless, pass uncriticized. The religious freedom for which we have fought 3,000 years is ours at last. But there are two sides to freedom – freedom to observe, freedom to neglect. In the ghetto, it was easier to observe; in the larger world, it is easier to neglect." (Samuel G. Freedman,

“Freedom: The Promise and the Challenge,” reprinted from Hadassah Magazine by MyJewishLearning.com)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators understand Joseph’s instruction to his brothers as his way of insuring their separation from the Egyptians and protecting this tiny group of Jews from assimilation. Samuel Freedman points out that the separation enforced by the ghetto had the undoubtedly unintended consequence of preserving Judaism and the Jewish people. How do you react to the notion that observance – living a thoroughly Jewish life – was easier in the ghetto? The vast majority of diaspora Jews have rejected separation from the larger society. How can these Jews continue to resist assimilation?

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website <http://www.uscj.org>

MIKETZ

Shabbat Chanukah

27th Kislev 5771 ~ 4th December 2010

By Rabbi Lee Wax

The beauty of the story of Joseph is how it works on so many different levels: an action-packed narrative, full of suspense and treachery; an intense psychological drama, full of complex and contradictory characters; a mythical tale of dramatic reversal, complete with the hero’s epic journey and delivery from certain death; a literary masterpiece, filled with leitmotifs, recurrent themes and parallelism; and a story of spiritual enlightenment, of a hero who is at first a vain and vexatious youth, and who comes to play his part faithfully in the divine plan (for this last reading, see Adin Steinsaltz’s chapter on Joseph, in his wonderful ‘Biblical Images’).

But as we read Miketz on Shabbat Chanukah, I want to draw out four thematic parallels between this part of the Joseph story and the story of Chanukah. Common to these four themes is loss and recovery.

First, the theme of loss of identity. Joseph has been removed from his original identity twice over: from wealthy favoured son to slave/servant, and from servant to nameless prisoner. He is known firstly as a na’ar ivri, a Hebrew youth, and subsequently by the Egyptian name Pharaoh gives him, along with Egyptian wife and high Egyptian office. He has totally assimilated, lost the self he once was, as he says when naming his firstborn, Manasseh, “nasani Elohim God has made me forget completely ... my parental home” (41:49). It is only later in the story, that he can say (to his brothers? to himself?): “I am Joseph” (45:1). The Chanukah story, too, is set amongst a Jewish people who are in danger of becoming completely assimilated and have forgotten; who, like Joseph, wear the garb of another people and hide their true identity - from their brothers and from themselves.

Second, loss of place. Joseph’s story stands alone, but we read it with the lens of knowing that it resulted in slavery and enforced exile in Egypt. Delivery from this exile will need strong leadership, faith, courage, and above all God’s miraculous hand. The parallels with the Chanukah story - the loss of the Temple, the enforced exile, and the deliverance - are striking. We make the connection each time we read the Chanukah bracha she’asa nissim, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time”.

Third, the theme of loss of resources/supplies. On a p'shat level, in the Chanukah story it's the empty cruses of oil for the menorah, and in Miketz it's the empty storehouses in the years of famine. But on a symbolic level, it can also be the emptiness where there were once spiritual resources. Both stories contain the need to connect with the divine purpose: for Joseph, to accept his part in God's plan, for the Jews of Hellenized Jerusalem, to reclaim the Bet ha-Mikdash and reclaim their almost-lost Judaism to give them spiritual direction.

And lastly, loss of meaning in our lives. Each story teaches something profound about the process by which meaning can be lost, leading to alienation from our spiritual centre. In each story alienation begins out of a benign context: in the one, the family of Jacob moving to a more fertile land in times of famine, in the other, the meeting with Hellenistic culture. However, each lead in time to assimilation, alienation and the loss of meaning. And in each, miraculously, we recover our freedom and our commitment to the divine purpose.

The miracle in the biblical Joseph story is two-fold: against the odds he is reconciled with his birth family and his own identity; and against the odds the later-enslaved Israelites will regain their freedom. And it is in the miracle of the Chanukah story, bayamim ha-hem u'vazman ha-zeh, in those days and now, that we find our challenge: to live lives inspired by God's light within us.

Rabbi Lee Wax is a member of NNLS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Can a person who has not been circumcised have a Bar Mitzvah?

Answer: There is no doubt that, according to Jewish law, status is automatically conferred from mother to child, and that a child is considered Jewish solely by virtue of his birth. A Brit does not make a child Jewish, and the lack of Brit Milah has no impact on a child's status. Not fulfilling the Mitzvah of Brit is no different from not keeping kosher or not observing Shabbat. There is no inherent Halachic reason why an uncircumcised person should not be called to the Torah or be allowed a Bar Mitzvah or a Jewish wedding or any other Jewish activity. He is the same as anyone else who fails to keep aspects of Jewish law and who is not excluded from being called to the Torah.

However, based on their understanding of the circumstances, Rabbis do have the authority to introduce bans based on the Halachic concept of Lemigdar Milta – literally, 'to erect a fence around the matter'. The Talmud [BT, Yevamot 90b] looks at the story of the prophet Elijah, who built an altar and offered sacrifices on Mount Carmel. This is strictly forbidden in Torah law, but the Talmud concludes that Elijah was allowed to do this in order to prevent the worshipping of idols in the community. This is proof that it is permitted to introduce practices to maintain and strengthen core principles of the Torah.

Following this principle a community may decide to regulate its practice – for example by limiting who can be called to the Torah or have access to other religious services, in order to defend the religious standards of the community. Historically, there have been many communities that have prevented uncircumcised men from reading from the Torah or getting married. This was the practice of many Orthodox communities in Germany in the 19th century following the guidance of S. R. Hirsch and E. Hildesheimer. [See Rashan 67]

Although the Brit is a Mitzvah like all others, historically it has had a particular significance. From Hellenistic times there have been attempts to ban circumcision and Jews have given their lives to preserve their right to maintain the practice. Communities have understood that the neglect of this Mitzvah has more serious implications than the neglect of other Mitzvot. Consequently, the Brit is one of the most widely observed of Jewish practices.

Erecting a communal fence only makes sense if it is likely to achieve its purpose. Rabbis and community leaders need to judge whether introducing such a ban is worthwhile. To be effective, synagogues need to work together so that they do not undermine each other.

In an open society, where people have a choice of which community (if any) they choose to join, it is unlikely that coercive tactics will lead to an increase in observance. In most cases, communal bans only push people away from the Jewish community. Therefore, today most communities follow the basic letter of the law – and allow Bar Mitzvahs and weddings to all.

Based on R. DZ Hoffman, Melamed Leho'il, YD (Section 2) 79

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

VAYESHEV

20th Kislev 5771 ~ 27th November 2010

By Rabbi Deborah Silver

My sister Judith is a musician, and quite a few years ago now, she wrote a song. It's called 'Judging the Book by the Cover' and in the middle she sings:

It would be so easy

If the outside matched the inside

If the words went with the actions

If the beautiful were truly good

If the surface were a mirror for our hearts...

And this song comes to mind when considering Joseph.

Because there's a tension between the outside Joseph and the inside Joseph. At the start of the story, Joseph has a gorgeous outside – the multicolored coat – but he's entirely dominated by his inside. He has no editing mechanism, he can't empathise with how others might feel. Blurt, blurt – out come the rumours, out come the dreams.

Of course, it gets him into trouble, and what's interesting is the way that Joseph is systematically stripped over the course of the story. First his brothers take his coat and throw him in a pit. Then, during the incident with Mrs Potiphar, he loses his clothes again because she grabs them and he runs away (indeed, one wonders what he was left with, given that he was a house slave at the time).

So off he goes – probably naked - to jail. All we know about jail is that God was with Joseph, because the Torah takes care to tell us so. And we notice a change, of sorts – when the butler and the baker have their dreams, Joseph

says, ‘Aren’t the interpretations of dreams a matter for God?’ Ah, we think, maybe he is learning a little humility? But no – the next thing he says is, ‘Why don’t you tell me what you dreamed?’ Blurt!

He’s a lot wiser when he gets to be in front of Pharaoh. First, his outside changes - we are going to read that he is shaved and given a new set of clothes. And then, he gives credit where it’s due – ‘It is not in me. God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.’

And then he shifts again. Pharaoh promotes him, gives him the king’s signet ring and – guess what? – a change of clothes. And it is this new Joseph, under the name of Zaphenath-Paneah (‘the one who furnishes the nourishment of life’), who goes about seeing Egypt through the famine –and we don’t hear him taking any personal credit for it, either.

No more blurting. Joseph’s outside and inside are beginning to line up.

And when he finally does see his brothers, he can’t restrain himself from weeping. These are the tears which wash away the last of Joseph’s artifice. ‘I am Joseph your brother’ he will cry, ‘is my father still alive?’

At last, here is a person who is putting other people’s feelings first, whose fine clothes are an appropriate mirror for the new qualities of his soul. The beautiful has become truly good.

Deborah Silver was ordained by the Ziegler School, Los Angeles, in 2010 and is Assistant Rabbi at Adat Ari El, Valley Village, California

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt. (Genesis 40:1)

1. A fly was found in the cupbearer’s aromatic wine (Rashi). Sometimes, one of the smallest things imaginable can bring about great events. It was because of this fly that Joseph came to Pharaoh’s attention and eventually became the governor. As a result, our forefathers went down to Egypt. And who knows what our history would have been without that little fly. (Hillel Zeitlin, quoting Kerem HaTzvi (Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Ferber), 1879-1966, Lithuania and England)
2. Actually, according to the law of Egypt, the cupbearer had not committed a punishable crime. The chief baker, who had been put into prison because a pebble had been found in the pastry he had baked for Pharaoh, was guilty of a misdemeanour because he had been negligent in sifting the flour. But the circumstance that a fly happened to fall into the wine the chief cupbearer had poured for Pharaoh could not be construed as caused by any negligence on the part of the cupbearer. However, that Pharaoh should become angry with his chief cupbearer and put him into prison was all part of God’s plan to deliver Joseph. As the midrash put it: “The Holy Blessed One caused the master to be angry with his servants in order to bring about the deliverance of Joseph” so that Pharaoh had his chief cupbearer imprisoned falsely. (Ma’ayanah shel Torah, Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friendman, 1897-1943, Poland)
3. We have to learn from this whole story that when a person suffers a setback in life, one that appears to him undeserved, he must remember how all these setbacks worked in Joseph’s favour at the time although he was not yet aware of it. We must therefore trust that God has our best interests at heart at all times even though we cannot always appreciate this at the time when we are being tested. (Radak (Rabbi David

Kimchi), 1160-1235, France)

4. Rabbi Hanina said: No man bruises a finger here below unless it was proclaimed for him above. (Talmud Hullin 7b)
5. Rabbi Akiva said, Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted. (Pirkei Avot 3:19)

Sparks for Discussion

Let's assume there really was a fly. Just where did that fly come from? Divine intervention? Random chance? Our commentators see it as evidence of hashgacha pratit (individual divine providence). To what extent do you believe God oversees the lives of individual human beings? Is that active or passive oversight? To what extent do you believe that what happens to us is the result of random luck (good or bad)? Where does free will fit in? How do you understand Rabbi Akiva's paradoxical teaching?

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website www.uscj.org

VAYISHLACH

13th Kislev 5771 ~ 20th November 2010

By Alan Orchover

Vayishlach contains probably more incidents than virtually any other Sedra in Bereshit. It finds Jacob ("the supplanter") and the most controversial of all the patriarchs in the prime of his life and career. It also is about half way through the Sidrot that deal with Jacob's life. There is certainly more about him than the other patriarchs, even Abraham.

He has left his father-in-law, Laban, with his two wives and 12 children to return to his family home. He is wealthy and powerful and yet strangely insecure, both spiritually and physically. He is now apparently ready with some misgivings to meet his brother, Esau, for the first time for 20 years since fleeing his brother's wrath after taking his birthright.

Jacob divides up his family into two camps so that if one were attacked the other might escape. He does, however, also send gifts to his brother to appease him and he also prays fervently that his life be spared. These three separate steps taken by Jacob show that he tries to cover every eventuality. The "supplanter" is clearly a pragmatist. He is left alone at night on the banks of the River Jabbok having sent his wives, handmaids and all his children across the river. There at night he encounters someone and "there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." (Literally: the rising of the dawn).

Who was this stranger who fought Jacob throughout the night? The opponent asked Jacob to release him before dawn breaks, but Jacob refused until the adversary blessed him.

Only Maimonides sees this unique encounter as a dream or "prophetic vision" with psychological overtones; Jacob is struggling with his own alter ego and until he prevails he

will not change. Once he has overcome his assailant he becomes Israel and is assured of survival, albeit at the price of permanent physical disablement. The wrestler has damaged Jacob's thigh and strained the sinew so that Jacob becomes permanently lame thereafter. The opponent asks Jacob's name and tells him that it is now Israel and he is no longer Jacob "For you have striven with God and man and have prevailed."

He disappears in the early morning, and Jacob goes forth to meet his brother, Esau, where all is well, courteous and loving and they embrace each other, exchange pleasantries and depart peacefully.

What on earth does all this mean? Many different commentators give various explanations, including having Jacob wrestle with "Esau's evil messenger".

However, the general view is that it is symbolic and represents Jacob fighting his own base instincts and overcoming them. The language of the text certainly supports an allegorical interpretation. It is also seen as a metaphor for the people of Israel who have to contend with enemies in every generation and manage to survive, albeit at the cost of suffering physical and/or emotional damage which leaves a severely wounded remnant to continue its onward journey through life.

Alan Orchover is a member of EMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Marriage by Default

Question: *A couple were married in a civil ceremony without a religious wedding. Do they require a GET if they divorce?*

Answer: The Mishna [Kiddushin 1:1] states that A woman is acquired in marriage in three ways ... by money, by deed, or by intercourse. There are three different ways that a marriage can be contracted in Jewish law. The traditional Jewish wedding has all three of these elements – a ring (money), a Ketuba (contract) and Yichud (time the couple is alone together). Any one of the three is enough to create a Jewish marriage. Therefore, whether there was a Jewish wedding or not, if a couple lives together with the intention of living as man and wife, this is a binding marriage in Jewish law and a GET is required.

This highlights a basic difference between the concept of marriage in Jewish law and civil law. In civil law, marriage is considered an act of the State. Therefore, for a marriage to be valid it needs to be registered with the authorities and it can be dissolved by a court of law. In Jewish law, marriage is a private agreement between two individuals. Therefore it can be contracted by mutual agreement, and can only be dissolved with the consent of both parties.

The complicated part is determining the intention of the couple. While it is likely that a couple choosing a civil marriage wish to be considered man and wife, it is also possible that the fact that they specifically chose not to have a religious wedding indicates that they did

not intend to be married under Jewish law. Different halachic authorities have taken different approaches to this. R. Abraham Shag [19th century, Hungary] [Ohel Avraham, 103] writes that we rely on a Talmudic principle that we always assume that a person had proper intentions when cohabiting. Therefore, lacking any other information, we assume that there was a valid marriage and a GET is required. On the other hand, R. Shlomo Schik [19th century, Hungary] (Maharam Schik, EH 96) writes that even if in theory such a marriage may be valid, granting validity to such a marriage would undermine the institution of marriage in Jewish law. He therefore rules that such a marriage is automatically void and a GET is not required.

Therefore, there is a doubt as to whether or not a GET is required and we apply the principle that 'when there is a doubt about a Torah Law we follow the strict position' and therefore a GET is required. However, since this was a case of doubt, after the fact – if the couple did not have a GET and subsequently remarried, the children of the second union would not be considered illegitimate and in this case no GET would subsequently be required.

Based on R. David Hoffmann Shut Melamed Lehoil. EH 20.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

"A Question of Jewish Law" is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to: chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

VAYETZE

6th Kislev 5771 ~ 13th November 2010

By Andrew Levy

Current neurological thinking says that our most difficult dreams to interpret derive from the very earliest and latest stages of sleep, known as rapid eye movement (REM).

If you analyse Jacob's dream as he sleeps on the way to Padan Aram, you will notice that the text tells you exactly what he was dreaming as he fell asleep, as he entered deep sleep and when he woke up. Here is the description of the ending which has provided a welter of interpretation, especially for the Chasidim:-

"And he ended his sleep and exclaimed 'Wow, God is in this place and I did not know' "
(Genesis 28:16)

A fair ending but there is something odd about this piece of REM interpretation. The Rabbis spotted it. At the end, Jacob says in the Hebrew "anochi lo yadati" – "I did not know". Yet there is a problem; if Jacob had wanted to say "I did not know", all he had to say was "lo yadati", why therefore add the emphatic "anochi" ("I")?

For the Chasidim, that extra "I" became a great discussion on the nature of the self, the ego and consciousness in general. Literally, the sentence now read for them "I did not know I" with the extra "I" becoming the object rather than the subject of the sentence. What could that mean?

Chasidic interpretations are beautiful and largely relate to the loss of sense of self in prayer; yet they leave a modern Jew like me asking – "how can I relate to that?"

I realised that this is based on a misunderstanding when reading a beautiful vignette from Stefan Zweig's autobiographical work "The World of Yesterday". Zweig as a young student was invited to the elderly, world-renowned sculptor Rodin. After dinner, they entered Rodin's work studio; suddenly Rodin appeared bothered by the state of one of his sculptures. He chiselled away at his work, muttered to himself and shouted words which were meaningless – clearly completely oblivious to Zweig's presence. After half an hour, Rodin stepped back to examine what he had done and made to leave. Only then did he notice Zweig. He apologised profusely for having forgotten about his guest for that period of time. Zweig's reaction would have been ours had we been there. No apology necessary - we would have felt rather a sense of awe and gratitude at experiencing this magic period of beholding a genius' creative inspiration.

I am no genius like Rodin. But I know, and so do you, that experience of losing yourself in what you are doing and the enthusiasm which overcomes you. When you lose yourself in some enthusiasm, God is within you. That is a message that God appears not only to Jacob, not only to the apparently most pious but to us all. All that is required is enthusiasm ("God within" in Greek). Then you can say *anochi lo yadati* (I never realised) that *anochi lo yadati* (I had lost consciousness of my self) and in so doing had discovered the divine.

Andrew Levy is a member of NNLS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

The Extra Day

Question: Does a tourist from abroad who visits Israel during a festival observe the second day of the festival?

Answer: Jewish festivals are celebrated for one day in Israel and two days in the Diaspora. This goes back to the time when the beginning of each Jewish month was determined by the appearance of the new moon and its consecration by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Since it took time to communicate the beginning of the month to the Diaspora, these communities frequently did not know exactly when the festival would start. As the start of the new month could vary by a maximum of one day, Diaspora communities observed the festivals over two days, to make sure that they had it right.

The Jewish calendar was already fixed by the time of the Talmud, and this made adding a second day to the festivals unnecessary. The Talmud asks: [BT Beitza 4b] But now that we are well acquainted with the fixing of the new moon, why do we observe two days? — Because they sent [word] from there [Palestine]: Give heed to the customs of your ancestors; for it might happen that the government might issue a decree and it and the custom will be lost. Thus, we have continued to observe one day for a festival in Israel and two in the Diaspora.

When there is a difference of custom between two communities, and someone travels from one community to the other, the rule is [Mishna Pesachim 4:1]: we lay upon him the restrictions of the place whence he departed and the restrictions of the place whither he has gone. Following this, we would expect both a person who goes from the Diaspora to Israel, or vice versa, to observe the more strict custom. Thus, in any case where a person travels, we would expect the norm to be two days observance.

R. Tzvi Ashkenzi [Germany, Holland; 17th Century] known as the Chacham Tzvi, has a novel approach to the problem. He considered the question of two day festivals as different from other customs, where in principle one may choose whether to observe the custom or not. Celebrating two days for a festival is not just a strict observance if there is no reason to do so; it is actually forbidden because it involves saying the wrong prayers and transgressing the biblical prohibition of not adding new commandments to the Torah. He therefore claims that the second day of the festival is not a local custom and that the rules governing local customs do not apply to it.

In other words, at the time the custom was established, anyone who was in the Diaspora [whether they were residents or tourists] was unsure of the date, and therefore had to observe two days. Anyone in Israel knew the correct date and only observed one day. That was the custom of all Jews. Therefore today, anyone who comes to Israel should only observe one day of the festival, but Israelis travelling abroad should observe two, together with the local Jewish community.

Most Rabbis follow the traditional interpretation that each person carries their local customs with them when they travel. The Chacham Tzvi has a unique position, which is both coherent and compelling.

Based on Responsa of the Chacham Tzvi 167

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

"A Question of Jewish Law" is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to

chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com

Question: It is well known that in Jewish law a child inherits its religious status from its mother. What is the status of a child who was born as the result of an egg donation, where the birth mother was Jewish, but the egg donor was not?

Answer: As medical techniques that enable egg donation are fairly recent, there are no direct precedents to this situation in classical rabbinic sources. There are however two possible sources to guide us in our thinking – one in the Midrash and one in the Halachic sources.

Midrash: The Torah describes Dinah as the 'daughter of Leah' [Gen. 30:21]. Following normal usage, we would have expected the Torah to refer to her as the 'daughter of Jacob'. The Midrash [quoted in Targum Yonatan] explains that a pregnant Leah was carrying a male foetus, but wanted her sister Rachel to give birth to at least 2 of the 12 tribes of Israel. In a miraculous way, the male child in her womb was transferred to Rachel, and the female child was transferred from Rachel to her – and thus she gave birth to Dinah. Although the child was genetically Rachel's daughter, she is known as the 'daughter of Leah' thus indicating that it is the birth mother, rather than the genetic mother that determines a child's status.

Halacha: It is doubtful that a Midrash should be used to establish novel Halachic principles. The closest situation in the classic legal sources is a woman who converts while pregnant. In this case, the child was conceived to a non-Jewish mother, but was carried for part of the pregnancy by a Jewess. The Talmud [BT Yevamot 78a] states that when a pregnant woman converts, the child does not require an additional immersion after birth. Following this, the Shulchan Aruch [YD 168:6] rules that a child whose mother converts when pregnant, is Jewish. This indicates that it is the birth mother that determines a child's Jewish status.

However, there is another possible interpretation of these sources. It is possible that in this case the child in the womb is not considered Jewish from birth – but rather the child was converted at the same time as its mother. If this is the case – without conversion the child would not be Jewish, and it was the genetic mother who determined the child's status! We therefore require further clarification before we can confidently rule on this matter.

There is one further discussion in the Talmud that comes to our aid. In tractate Yevamot [BT 97b], the Talmud asserts that if a mother converts while carrying twins, the babies are siblings. Normally, a convert is considered to be 'born again' – and is not considered in Jewish law to be related to his natural siblings. The fact that the twins are considered to be siblings shows us that they are Jewish from birth and not by conversion. Thus – it is the birth mother who determines status in Jewish law.

Modern medicine raises many challenges to traditional legal systems. Although the roots of Jewish law are many centuries old – the principles transcend time and enable us to meet the challenges of a new age.

Based on: Artificial Insemination, Egg donation and Adoption, Eliot Dorff CJLS 1994

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

"A Question of Jewish Law" is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

CHAYE SARA

22nd Cheshvan 5771 ~ 30th October 2010

By Rabbi Roderick Young

As soon as I started studying Torah I found a whole family nearly as dysfunctional as my own. That's the beauty of Torah. It's the story of our ancestors, but it's our story as well. God chose people like ourselves, with human failings, to carry out God's plan.

Sarah is not one to hold back an opinion. When she can't conceive it is she who suggests that Abraham have a child with her servant Hagar. Then she feels slighted by the pregnant maid. Next, she laughs when God promises her a child. Finally, when she sees that child, Isaac, playing with Hagar's son Ishmael, she screams at Abraham: "Expel that slave woman!"

However, when Abraham takes Isaac away to sacrifice him, then Sarah is quiet. When her only son is brutalised, she has nothing to say.

In the Torah the words with which Sarah expels Hagar are the last words that she speaks. Then comes the binding of Isaac and the next that we hear of Sarah, she is dead. The announcement of her death opens this week's parasha. The woman who has lived so passionately, with a loud voice, is suddenly silent and quickly dead.

We can not be comfortable with Sarah's silence in the face of the suffering of her own son. But that silence adds to her humanity and makes her our teacher, for Sarah reminds us of the many times that we have been silent, when we should have been shouting from the roof tops.

To the rabbis Sarah's silence was also unbearable. And so they gave her a voice – of sorts. Here's a rabbinic midrash on the death of Sarah. Satan is jealous that Abraham has passed God's test and that Isaac wasn't sacrificed. He flies off to Sarah and he says to her: "Nu? Have you heard what's happened in the world?" Sarah says: "No." Satan replies: "Your husband, the old man, took the boy Isaac and sacrificed him as a burnt offering. The lad cried and wailed but he couldn't be rescued." Then the midrash tells us: "Immediately Sarah began to cry and wail. She cried out with three cries like the tekiot sounds made by the shofar (tekiyah, tekiyah, tekiyah). And then she wailed three wails like the sobbing notes of the shofar (teruah, teruah, teruah). And her soul burst forth and she died."

The Torah simply states that she died. But the midrash tells us that she died with the sound of the shofar in her voice. She cries out the ancient battle cry; the blast that heralds the presence of God; and the promise, from the Rosh Hashanah morning service, that a Messianic time will come. Sarah doesn't die in silence. In the midst of her grief she finds the strength to sing of a better world to come.

Sarah dies at the beginning of this week's parasha and Abraham dies at the end. The Torah tells us: "Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him." Ishmael has returned to stand by his brother. At the beginning of the parasha Sarah cries like a shofar and points us towards a vision of a Messianic age. At the end of the parasha we see a glimpse of

that vision – Ishmael the father of the Arabs, stands side by side with Isaac, the father of the Jews. Now let's broaden the vision and imagine all people, regardless of ethnicity, sexuality, or religion, standing there too, side by side, in friendship.

Sarah is telling us to raise our voices in protest, wherever we see injustice or cruelty, because only then will there be justice for all of God's people. Tekiah!

Rabbi Roderick Young is a member of NLS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

The Long Wait

Question: *How long should one wait between eating meat and milk?*

Answer: The prohibition against mixing meat and milk is the strictest law of all the rules of Kashrut. On three different occasions the Torah commands: You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. [Exod. 23:19, Exod 34:26, Deut. 14:21]. From here the Rabbis learned that there are three different prohibitions concerning the mixing of meat and milk – namely, cooking, consuming and profiting from the resulting mixture.

The Talmud [BT Hullin 105a] quotes the opinion of Rav Hisda that one who consumes meat may not eat dairy products but one who eats dairy products is permitted to eat meat. From here we learn that the requirement of separating meat and milk extends to waiting between eating meat and milk meals. Rashi [ad loc] explains that the reason for this is that meat has a strong taste that lingers in the mouth after it is eaten. Maimonides [MT Forbidden Foods 9:28] says the reason is that bits of meat remain stuck between ones teeth, and we must wait until these bits have been digested.

How long do we wait? The Talmud records the statement of Mar Ukva, who called himself "vinegar the son of wine," because his father waited until 24 hours had passed before consuming dairy products after meat, yet he himself only waited until the next meal. The implication is that his father was particularly pious, whereas he followed the Halachic norm.

There are several ways to interpret the term 'until the next meal'. Maimonides [Forbidden Foods 9:28] says that one waits the normal time between meals, which is six hours. At the time of the Talmud people generally ate two meals each day – one mid-morning (say 10 am) and one in the late afternoon (say 4 pm). The requirement to wait six hours is also recorded in the Shulchan Aruch [YD 89:1]. This is the custom of all Sefardi Jews as well as the majority of Eastern European communities.

On the other hand, the Tosephot [Hullin 105a L'Seudata] say that one simply waits until the end of the meal. It is enough to complete the meal by reciting the Grace after Meals and then one is allowed to consume milk. Following this opinion, the custom of Dutch Jews is to wait only one hour.

In many Central European communities the custom was to wait three hours. This isn't rooted in either of the above opinions. There are those who say that in northern Europe the day is very short in winter and therefore people ate their meals at closer intervals. On the shortest winter days there would have been only a three hour gap between meals, and this became the standard waiting time in these countries. This also explains why some communities, presumably further south, waited 4 hours between meat and milk.

There is not a clear ruling on this subject. We therefore follow the Halachic principle of nahara nahara u'pashtei – literally - each river flows down its own river bed. Each community should follow its own custom, and individuals should follow the custom of their family.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

VAYERA

15th Cheshvan 5771 ~ 23rd October 2010

By Rabbi Daniella Kolodny

Parashat Vayera contains the Akedah, one of the most morally and theologically challenging episodes in the entire Tanach. God tests Abraham, commanding him to take his son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham follows God's command and raises a knife ready to sacrifice his son. At the last moment, he is stopped by an angel who directs him, instead, to take a ram caught in the thicket nearby. It is clear that Abraham was a willing participant in the Akedah, but was Isaac ready to lay down his life for God?

“Then Abraham said to his servants: ‘You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there...’” (Gen. 22:5) The JPS Tanach translates the Hebrew word na'ar as boy, but na'ar is an imprecise word. The medieval commentator, Ibn Ezra seizes on this ambiguity and suggests several possible ages for Isaac at the Akedah. At age 5, Isaac was old enough to speak and ask a sensible question about the supposed sacrifice. Illogical, says Ibn Ezra, he would not have been strong enough to carry the wood. The midrashic tradition calculates Isaac's age at 37 years. Ibn Ezra rejects this age too, as the Tanach does not describe Isaac as a pious man. Intellectually mature enough to ask about the absence of sheep but physically immature that Abraham could overpower him and bind him against his will, Ibn Ezra pegs Isaac's age at 13.

Ibn Ezra points out that it would take an extremely pious person to offer themselves as a sacrifice and concludes that no rational person would be willing. However, there is midrashic tradition that claims that Isaac was ready to be sacrificed at the Akedah. “R. Isaac said,” [in Genesis Rabbah] “When Abraham wished to sacrifice his son Isaac, he said to him: ‘Father, I am a young man and am afraid that my body may tremble through fear of the knife and I will grieve thee, whereby the slaughter may be rendered unfit and this will not count as a real sacrifice; therefore bind me very firmly.’” (Genesis Rabbah 56:8) Ibn Ezra knew this tradition but rejects it, depriving Isaac of any agency in the Akedah. A five year old is perceptive enough to understand when a ritual does not correspond to expectations; however, spiritual maturity is not a simple accounting of ritual components. On the other hand, a 13 year old just entering adolescence may be anxious to prove his maturity but is also easily influenced by a charismatic adult. The adolescent Isaac's sacrifice is not motivated by a fear of God but by a blind response to his father's powers of persuasion.

Ibn Ezra is correct; a typical 37 year old would not lay down his life for something inconsequential. But Isaac is not typical. Conceived by aged parents, Isaac is born into a unique milieu, a household that has made a radical break with the past and now participates in a bold new belief in a singular God. As a 37 year old man, Isaac is religiously mature enough to understand the consequences of his surrender. Horrifying and disturbing, but the idea that people are willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs is not limited to the Akedah. Thankfully, these days God does not call on Jews to demonstrate our trust through human sacrifice and in the Akedah itself, God ultimately prohibits human sacrifice. Yet, Isaac's willingness to surrender himself forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about our

own commitments. Are there ever principles for which self-sacrifice is required? Would we be willing to martyr ourselves for our belief in God? Does true devotion demand self-sacrifice?

Rabbi Daniella Kolodny is AMS Small Communities Development Coordinator and a member of NNLS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Cycling on Shabbat: Part III: Further considerations

I have already looked at two of the main issues concerning cycling on Shabbat, based on a response of Rabbi Yoseph Chaim of Baghdad (19th Century, Iraq). He wrote a lengthy response to this question and came to the conclusion that cycling was permitted within an Eruv. In public areas he permitted being carried in a cycle-rickshaw, and then only if the person doing the peddling was not Jewish. If this seems strange, keep in mind that the original question came from Bombay, where rickshaws were common.

Most subsequent authorities forbid cycling on Shabbat. One of the most prominent was Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg [Germany, Switzerland, 20th Century]. Weinberg prohibited cycling for three reasons.

1) **Techum Shabbat** (lit. the Shabbat area). Although one is allowed to travel any distance within a city, on Shabbat, one may travel only 2000 Amot (roughly 1 km) from a city or town of residence on Shabbat. While a person on foot is unlikely to go beyond this limit, this distance is easily covered on a bicycle. According to this opinion, cycling is prohibited in order to prevent one from inadvertently going beyond the Techum.

2) **Repairs**. One may need to repair a bicycle, by adjusting the chain, the brake or inflating a tyre. All these are forbidden on Shabbat, and therefore cycling should be forbidden lest one inadvertently repair the cycle.

R. Yoseph Chaim considered both of these objections in his response and rejected them. He followed the principle that ‘one does not add additional decrees on ones own volition’, and as these activities were not prohibited in the Talmud, we do not add them now.

3) **Uvdin D’chol** – appropriate Shabbat activities. R. Yoseph Chaim had already considered the question of Uvdin d’chol, and came to the conclusion that it doesn’t apply to cycling inside an Eruv. R. Weinberg disagrees. He reasons that there is a difference between regular household activities and activities like cycling which involve a great deal of physical exertion. He claims that hard physical work goes against the very spirit of Shabbat as a day of rest, and that one cannot ‘permit’ them on technical grounds.

The normative practice is to forbid cycling on Shabbat. Children are permitted to cycle within a closed area (backyard or park). Children’s tricycles and bicycles are toys and unlikely to go beyond the Techum, and if they break they are within walking distance of home.

Riding a bicycle is certainly preferable to driving a motor car on Shabbat. Therefore, in those cases where it is necessary to travel, (such as police on patrol or doctors making local rounds) and cycling is a viable alternative, one should choose to cycle.

Based on Weinberg, Tzitz Eliezer 1:21:27

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

LECH LECHA

8th Cheshvan 5771 ~ 16th October 2010

By Matt Plen

The well known stories in this week's portion are punctuated by a curious phrase: following Abram's arrival in Canaan the Torah tells us, 'The Canaanites were then in the land' (12:6). Again, at the time of tension between Abram and his nephew, Lot: 'The Canaanites and the Perizzites were then dwelling in the land' (13:7). Medieval commentator Ibn Ezra interprets this innocuous but seemingly irrelevant piece of historical information as follows: 'It is possible that the Canaanites conquered the land from someone else. But if this is not the case, then there is a secret, and a learned person should be silent.'

According to Ibn Ezra there are two ways to read this verse. If we read 'the Canaanites were already in the land' it implies they entered at some time in the past, but offers no information as to whether they are still there. However, if we understand 'the Canaanites were still in the land,' this hints at the secret to which Ibn Ezra refers: at the time this story was written down, the Canaanites were no longer in the land. But if the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, prior to the Israelite conquest, surely the Canaanites were still there! The anachronism implies that this verse was not given at Sinai but written at a later date.

Masorti scholars have been quick to trumpet this: not only does it reveal that the Torah was written over an extended historical period, but it demonstrates that a traditional commentator like Ibn Ezra – and presumably his educated readers – were well aware of this.

However, there is more to this passage than the question of the Torah's origins. The verse reveals the background to the tension between Abram and Lot. The Torah relates that the size of their herds meant that the land could not support them, therefore they decided to go their separate ways. The ongoing presence of the Canaanites and the Perizzites explains the scarcity of pasture which led to the conflict.

Now, if we apply Ibn Ezra's interpretation, this values-neutral economic reading begins to take on moral overtones. Jewish tradition holds that Lot was an immoral character, as attested by his eventual decision to settle in the infamous city of Sodom (13:10-11). Midrash Pesikta Rabbati relates that Lot's shepherds tried to take more than their fair share of the pasture, arguing that the land had been promised to Abram's heirs and, since Abram was childless, it should pass to their master. God intervened, saying: 'The promise that I made to Abraham to give the land to his children – when will that be? When I drive out the Canaanites and the Perizzites from its midst. To Abraham I have still not given children and the Canaanites and the Perizzites are still rightful owners of the land....' Abram's right to the land was absolute and God-given; the Canaanites' and Perizzites' ongoing presence guaranteed this right.

But the first of Ibn Ezra's two interpretations ('already in the land') implies another approach to ownership. If at one point in the past the Canaanites conquered the land and the Israelites conquered it from the Canaanites, maybe one day someone else will conquer it from the Israelites. Possession is not permanent but ephemeral, not guaranteed by moral character but conditional on moral behaviour.

All too often, fundamentalist, non-historical attitudes to the Torah go hand in hand with uncompromising, one-sided political attitudes. Yet historical readings often threaten to empty the text of substantive, meaningful content. Ibn Ezra shows that it is possible to avoid both dangers, to read critically, emphasising rather than ignoring the contradictions and ambiguities which make Torah such a nuanced, sophisticated source of truth.

Matt Plen is AMS Movement Director

Reflections

By Selma Shrank

Dedicated in most loving memory to Paul Shrank on his 6th Yartzheit.

'Loved beyond words'

Six weeks ago I had the pleasure of being at the Bris or "covenant" of my second grandson. You might say where is the pleasure in seeing a baby being cut at 8 days old - to feel pain so young and to shed his blood.

This most holy of Commandments was ordered by God upon Abraham in this week's Sedra Lekh Lekha. God said to Abraham "As far as you are concerned, you must keep my Covenant- you and your offspring following you throughout their generations" ----"You shall be circumcised through the flesh of your foreskin".

I look at these lines and marvel that in 2010 we Jews continue to practise this commandment with tenacity and acceptance. It is rare that a Jewish baby boy does not have a Bris.

So why is a Bris performed at 8 days old and not three years or even thirteen? This is an indication of God's love for Israel, because at an older age both the child and the parents would suffer. It is considered that at 8 days the suffering of the child is minimal and the reward maximal.

A Bris is also an indelible sign that remains with a person for life and in death. It is sealed in a man's flesh indicating that we are servants of God and we must obey His commandments and not violate them, for this is the reason that we are created. We do not come into this world merely for earthly pleasures but to keep the commandments.

God could have created man already circumcised. But He wanted him to have a foreskin that could be removed. Man is therefore created with a defect and just as he can remove

this defect from his body, so man can try to remove the defects from his soul. Man therefore has the free will to do good and not to choose evil.

One of the rewards of this precept is very moving. It is said that there are special angels who attend each Bris and take the baby's blood and store it in a special place. When God is angry at the people of Israel, he looks at this blood and has mercy on them.

I look at this last story and find it beautiful. For these reasons a Bris at 8 days old should not be a source of upset but the beginning of what we hope is a long, healthy and good life for the child. Even the Mohel is considered to be like a Cohen-priest bringing a sacrifice, and he himself, must repent of all his sins before God as without confession a sacrifice is worthless.

At a Bris the child is brought into the Jewish faith and the covenant with joy and the wish that the child be brought into the world of Torah (study), the marriage canopy and good deeds. The bris is followed by a feast so that it becomes a ritual of joy. With all this happiness what better way can there be to start a child's life?

Paul Shrank z"l, was past chairman of both NNLS and AMS. Rabbi Chaim Weiner's third article on "Can one cycle on Shabbat" will appear next week

NOACH

Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan

1st Cheshvan 5771 ~ 9th October 2010

By 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 p'nei aviv* which Rashi explains (in the same way as *mip'nei 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 '*mip'nei 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.

Dr. Jeremy Collick is Rabbi at EMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Cycling on Shabbat: Part II: Carrying

Question: Is cycling permitted on Shabbat?

Answer: The Mishna [Shabbat 7:2] lists the major categories of work that are prohibited on Shabbat: The primary forms of work are forty less one, ... carrying out from one domain to another. Thus carrying is one of the main archetypal forms of labour on Shabbat.

The Halacha divides the world into four different kinds of areas, known as domains; a public domain, a private domain, a Carmelit and an exempt place. It is forbidden to carry from a private domain into a public domain or Carmelit (or vice versa). There are rules about carrying within each of these domains.

A private domain is an area that is enclosed by walls with only a minimal number of gaps for windows and doors. Carrying is permitted in a private domain. A public domain is a large public area where 600,000 people pass through each day. There is much debate as to how this is calculated, but only the most densely populated cities qualify as a public domain. It is forbidden to carry for a distance of more than four Amot (roughly two meters) in a public domain. A Carmelit is between public and private – it does not have walls so it does not count as being private and it does not have enough people in it to be considered public. The Rabbis have decreed that a Carmelit is to be treated as a public place and therefore carrying is forbidden within it. A Carmelit may be transformed into a private domain by surrounding it with walls and this is called an Eruv. Once the Carmelit has been enclosed, carrying within it is permitted. An exempt place is so small that it does not qualify as being a space at all. The laws of carrying do not apply to it.

When cycling on Shabbat, one will frequently be moving from a private domain (one's home) into a Carmelit (the street), and will be travelling a substantial distance within the Carmelit. Does this transgress the laws of carrying on Shabbat?

There is no question that one is allowed to carry within an Eruv. Outside of an Eruv the situation is more complicated. The Talmud [Shabbat 8a] considered the case of a person who threw a large barrel from a private place into a public place on Shabbat. It determines that there is no transgression in this case. The reason – the barrel is large enough to be considered a domain in its own right. Therefore, anything inside the barrel remains within a private domain, even though it is moving within a Carmelit. Surprisingly, from a Halachic point of view no carrying has taken place!

This determination has ramifications for many situations. Anyone travelling in a car or a bus – not to mention those who are being carried in chairs – are considered to be within a private domain. A private domain moving within a public domain does not count as carrying.

Therefore, when cycling within an Eruv, all carrying is permitted. Even outside an Eruv carrying should be permitted, even if travelling through the Carmelit, for this is a private domain moving within a public space [i.e. a Carmelit].

There are still other considerations that need to be taking into account when looking at cycling on Shabbat. I will be looking at these in part III of this response.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

BEREISHIT

24th Tishri 5771 ~ 2nd October 2010

By Michael Gluckman

Today, with the intensity of the High Holy days and joy of Sukkot behind us we begin our weekly Torah reading once more. The facility to start again is a privilege that life seldom affords us. We tend to see life as linear with its beginnings and endings. Generations come and generations go with sometimes only the briefest of overlaps. Yet with the Torah we come back to it again and again as our lives unfold. Each year we can be inspired by something different.

Paradoxically we start with the section which probably raises some of the most fundamental questions for any modern reader or indeed any reader since maths and physics gave us the tools to analyse and measure our world. We now have the latest M-theory described by eminent scientist Professor Stephen Hawking in his new book *The Grand Design: M Theory* predicts that a great many universes were created out of nothing. Their creation does not require the intervention of some supernatural being or god. Rather these multiple universes arise naturally from physical law. This, together with Darwin's Theory of Evolution, challenges the very foundation of our faith as they seem diametrically opposed to the opening chapters of our Torah which we read today.

However the fact that it appears to conflict with modern knowledge can be sidestepped as, fortunately, we are not literalist readers and are encouraged to draw out lessons from the text.

That it is a strange place to start for a Jewish reader has already been documented by Rashi who, in his first comment to the Torah, explains that it begins at this point to teach that "The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us"

It is easy to believe in a world created by God when we see the beauty of the mountains, hear the inspiring notes of our favourite piece of music or hold our first grandchild. But the vision shatters when we look at the reality of the world around us with the suffering that is apparent at every turn.

If God made the world and gave it to us what does that mean? I can only understand it by accepting that true ownership is responsible ownership. The environmental lobby is already there; although well behind the Midrash "...do not corrupt or desolate my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you." (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

Altering our life style to preserve our planet is I believe a subsidiary to a change that is far more important. I believe that it is our responsibility to each other which grants us ownership of the world. If we could create true community which extends to all people then much of the suffering in the world could be cured. The intellect which has enabled us to reach M-Theory also gives us the tools to understand that it is only through the mutual acceptance of each others needs that we can mend our world. As we start our year again let us understand that God's centrality in the creation story is there to teach us to value each other above all else. Through that idea will come true Tikkun Olam.

Michael Gluckman is Executive Director of AMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Cycling on Shabbat. Part I: Uvdin D’Hol

Question: Is cycling permitted on Shabbat?

Answer: It is obvious that there is nothing wrong with the act of cycling itself, which involves moving legs up and down on pedals, in a manner that is not unlike walking. However, cycling as an activity touches on several areas of the Laws of Shabbat and I will address each one separately. The first question is whether riding a bicycle is an ‘appropriate’ Shabbat activity in principle.

The Talmud [Beitza 25b] quotes a Braita which states: A blind man may not go out with his staff, nor a shepherd with his wallet, neither may a man or a woman go out in a chair. Rashi explains that these activities were forbidden because they are ‘weekday activities’ - Uvdin D’Hol. Any activity which belongs to the everyday work week, and not necessary or special for Shabbat, is proscribed under this regulation. As a form of transport, cycling may be prohibited under the category of Uvdin d’Hol.

The subsequent discussion in the Talmud concentrates on the Chair – which was a Roman sedan chair carried by two or more people – an early form of transport. The Talmud states that although going out in a Chair is usually considered Uvdin d’Hol – if one needs to go out for the benefit of the public, it is permitted. Based on this, the Shulchan Aruch rules: [OH 522:2] One may not go out in a chair on Yom Tov, man or woman, but if needed by the community it is permitted.

Examples of public benefit would include a Rabbi going to give a sermon, going to shul to read Torah, to make up the minyan or even just attending shul. The Talmud takes a lenient view and even one who rides in the chair to avoid walking on a crowded street or because he wishes to arrive relaxed is permitted. Thus Uvdin d’Hol does not apply where there is a public need.

Both Maimonides [MT Yom Tov 5:3] and Karo [ibid] include this ruling in the laws of Yom Tov, but not under the laws of Shabbat. They obviously think that although one may go out with a chair on Yom Tov, on Shabbat it is forbidden. This is because carrying is forbidden on Shabbat – so the chair could not be carried outside of an Eruv in any case.

To summarise, according to all commentators it is permitted to carry the chair on Yom Tov whenever there is public need. On Shabbat, most commentators agree that it is permitted to carry it inside the Eruv. Interestingly, the Tur does include this rule under the laws of Shabbat. He obviously felt that it is permitted to carry the chair on Shabbat, possibly even outside of an Eruv!

Back to the bicycle. Following this discussion in the Talmud, and strictly from the point of view of Uvdin d’Hol, it is permitted to cycle on Shabbat inside an Eruv. However, once we go outside of the Eruv we encounter the prohibition of carrying on Shabbat.

But is cycling a form of carrying? And why does the Tur think one is allowed to carry the chair outside of the Eruv? To answer these questions we need to take a closer look at the laws of carrying on Shabbat. This is a subject I will deal with in part two of this response.

Based on R. Chaim of Baghdad, Rav Pa’alim, Part 1, OH 25.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

CHOL HAMOED

SUKKOT

17th Tishri 5771 ~ 25th Sept 2010

By Nahum Gordon

Have you noticed how our religion never lets us off the hook? Every moment of happiness is tempered by sadness, excess is inevitably balanced by deprivation, eg, the Fast of the Firstborn precedes Pesach, we deliberately spill some of our wine at the Seder and the lack of chametz permeates the entire festival; Shavuot is preceded by the restrictions of the Omer; the 15th of Av, which was a day of courting, is preceded by the fasting and bitter memories of the tragic events that occurred during the three weeks from the 17th of Tammuz to Tisha B'Av; Sukkot is preceded by the sombre reflection and self-correction of the 10 days of Repentance; Simchat Torah is preceded by the solemn Shemini Atzeret; we work on Chanukah and read no Megillah (the Rabbis disliked the Hasmoneans); and Purim, another working holiday, is preceded by the Fast of Esther.

Biblically, Sukkot was the most important festival, HeChag: the profusion of sacrifices (Bamidbar 29:12-39); the public Torah reading every seven years (Devarim 31:10-13); the dedication of the First Temple (1 Melachim 8); the water-drawing ceremony; and the messianic convention (Zecharyah 14:16-21). Sukkot was THE time for rejoicing, Zeman Simchatenu; people came to the Temple to thank God for the harvest that would tide them over the winter. However, our joy is restrained by two injunctions which remind us of how fragile life is. The first is living in a hut exposed to the elements. The other is reading Megillat Kohelet today.

K assembled the populace. Hence the Greek epithet, Ecclesiastes. He provides an experiential commentary on our existence – its futility and our inability to fathom God's purpose. The good are not necessarily rewarded in this life; neither are the wicked punished. The only thing we can be sure of is death. K doesn't mention taxes.

K's perspective was so disconcerting that the Talmud records debates in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE about whether his musings should remain in the canon. The Rabbis nearly disqualified Shir HaShirim for its eroticism and Ezekiel for contradicting Torah law on Temple services. Tradition indicates that K was not purged because he was none other than King Solomon imparting a lifetime of wisdom and because his conclusion was pure orthodoxy – "fear God and keep His mitzvot." Scholars have detected Persian and Greek influences which suggest the book was written around the 3rd century BCE. Only by around the 10th century CE did the book become mandatory reading on Sukkot, probably because it was the only major festival without a megillah!

I have suffered a grievous loss this year. I need no reminding of life's fragility. Here today and gone tomorrow. An afterlife? Who knows? Tefillah offers no solace. But I chuckle at K's Epicurean hedonism – eat, drink and enjoy life to the full – and admire his struggle for meaning as he confronts oblivion. And his orthodox conclusion? I cannot share his faith but giving up on Judaism as a way of ordering my life is inconceivable.

Nahum Gordon is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Michael Gold

Sukkot, often simply called HeHag, the festival, is the festival par excellence in Jewish tradition. It is also known as z'man simhatenu, the time of our joy. We are commanded to be joyous on all festivals– but we are commanded to be particularly joyous on Sukkot.

Sukkot is a seven day festival. The first two days (and in Israel and in congregations that have adopted this custom, this is true for only the first day) are full festivals, including all the observances and restrictions of all festival days. The remainder of the days are known as chol hamoed, the festival's intermediate days. After the seven day observance there are two more days of full festivals – Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. These are separate festivals with their own particular observances. (In Israel and some congregations these are combined on one day.) Therefore, the total time of the Sukkot festivals is nine days in the diaspora, eight days in Israel.

“You shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days” (Leviticus 23:40)

Discussion

1. The Torah can command actions – but can it command feelings? Can we be joyous if we do not feel joyous? In general, do we have control over our feelings and emotions?
2. One answer - How would a joyous person behave? Even if our hearts are not there, we can act as if we were joyous. We behave in a certain way, and the heart follows. If we can sing a little, dance a little, smile a little, clown around on Simchat Torah, the inner feeling will follow.
3. This is a profound teaching from our tradition. Actions come first, and inner feelings often follow actions. Motivational speakers often teach “Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” The actor Cary Grant once explained how he became a romantic leading man. He said that he was an actor first, and by acting like a romantic leading man, he became a romantic leading man. What can we learn from this?

Here is one area where the biblical outlook is at variance with contemporary values. In our contemporary world, many people feel that motivation must come before behaviour. You feel love in your heart, and then you act in accordance with that love. I hear so often, “I don't love them, it would be hypocritical to act as if I do.” In the Bible it is the other way around. We act or behave in a certain way, and the inner feelings of the heart come later. When the Israelites received the Torah at Mount Sinai, they said, “We shall do and we shall understand” (Exodus 24:7). First came the action, then the inner feeling. Can actions change feelings?

YOM KIPPUR

10th Tishri 5771 ~ 18th Sept 2010

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you for all your sins before the Lord you shall be cleansed. [Lev. 16:30]

Yom Kippur is the most powerful day in the Jewish calendar. Its power derives from the spiritual intensity of the day, which in itself comes from the sense of standing 'before the Lord'. The verse quoted above, which speaks of cleansing ourselves before our God, gives the tone to the entire proceedings.

But what does 'standing before the Lord' mean? Multiple interpretations have been given to this verse, which highlight a variety of ways in which people understand their relationship to God.

R. Eliezer, in a famous Midrash, notes that Yom Kippur atones for sins before God, but not for sins between people. When it comes to our wrongdoings towards other people, we must first ask and receive their forgiveness. He reads the verse, as if it says 'for all your sins before the Lord - you shall be cleansed' – implying that for sins before others there is a different route for atonement.

R. Akiva has a different reading of the verse. Happy are you, O Israel, before whom are you cleansed, and who grants you atonement – your Father in Heaven. It is within God's power to atone for all our sins. Indeed there are wrongdoings that will never be forgiven – either because the people are no longer around to forgive or because they carry a grudge and are not the forgiving type. It is within God's power to recognize that our repentance is sincere, and within the scope of the Day of Atonement to release us from our guilt and permit us to move on with our lives. Rabbi Akiva reads the verse as if it says 'for all your sins' - before the Lord you shall be cleansed'.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntschitz [known as the Klei Yakar, 15 century, Prague] writes that before one asks for forgiveness, he or she must first purify themselves before their God. Atonement isn't about how we relate to the past, it is about how we are in the present and about our plans for the future. The key to atonement is ability to stand before God now with a pure heart. He reads the verse as saying - 'before the Lord' - you shall be cleansed – i.e. cleanse yourself first - before coming to stand before God.

He also gives another completely novel interpretation to the verse. He warns us that at the time of repentance we should not be like those people who parade their religious observance so that others can see how righteous and pious they are. He warns us that even in asking for atonement we can misunderstand; that our relationship with God is first and foremost an intimate relationship that exists only for ourselves. So – he says – the verse admonishes us that 'before the Lord you shall be cleansed' – before the Lord but not in the presence of others.

Yom Kippur is primarily a day for thinking about our relationship with God. There are multiple ways in which people construct their religious lives. Now is the time to find yours.

Rabbi Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din and Director of Masorti Europe

Book of Jonah

By Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

There are different ways of understanding the stories of the Bible. The Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Elijah (18th century), chose to interpret the book of Jonah as an allegory, namely, as a story that symbolically represents a higher spiritual reality in the guise of a tale about a prophet who tries to escape an inevitable divinely commanded mission. According to the Gaon, the story of Jonah is about the mission of the soul in the world. Its purpose on earth is to repair the world. However, in the meantime, its mission is thwarted and it taints itself. In the end, after being sent a second time (reincarnation), the soul accomplishes its task but only after much trouble and anguish.

Jonah, the hero of our story, represents the soul. His God commanded mission symbolizes each individual's role in the world. Jonah is sent to Ninveh, the symbolic representation of the world, to restore it. Instead, he decides to escape his mission by escaping to Tarshish in a boat. The boat, according to the Gaon, represents the body and the sea, a person's life. Jonah's journey at sea is symbolic of the soul's descent into life in the body. The escape to Tarshish symbolizes the soul's fall into human sensuality and consequently to abort his God-given mission. The storm, which breaks the ship apart, represents things like pain and suffering which cause a person to recognize life's futility and cause a person to reconsider his or her ways. Jonah (the soul) realizes that his failure and now yearns for another attempt to accomplish his mission to save Ninveh (the world). At this juncture, Jonah (the soul) is cast into the sea and the storm is quieted. He is swallowed up by a fish, which represents the grave, and is brought down into the depths to answer for his misguided life. Jonah (the soul) is saved from this fate by the good deeds that he has done only to start his mission again in another life.

This time, Jonah is willing to go on his mission to Ninveh and fulfil God's word. The Gaon notes that Jonah's (the soul's) mission (the second time around) begins on Rosh Chodesh Elul and ends forty days later on Yom Kippur. This was the period given to Ninveh (the world) to do "tikkun" – repair. The king and people of Ninveh heed Jonah's call and repent and God shows them mercy. Jonah (the soul) does not quite understand this process. He has difficulty discerning what has been wrought before his eyes. God must teach him the wisdom of divine mercy. The gourd, at the end of the story, was created to teach Jonah this lesson. It provides Jonah with shade in the heat of the day and Jonah becomes quite fond of it. When it is destroyed Jonah despairs. Once Jonah can appreciate God's mercy, he understands the importance of teshuvah and we, too, the readers of the Gaon's allegory, are enjoined, as well, to respond to this model during this season of repentance.

From: The Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. More can be found on their website
<http://www.conservativeyeshiva.org>

HAAZINU

Shabbat Shuva

3rd Tishri 5771 ~ 11th September 2010

By Michael Wegier

Moses' penultimate speech to the Children of Israel is told to them in the form of a poem. Unlike the previous speeches that make up the bulk of Deuteronomy, Moses exchanges the prose style for the lyrical. He calls upon the earth to hear his words. He compares God to an "eagle who rouses his nestlings." The central themes of Deuteronomy remain potent. God created a covenant with Israel when they were a weak people. With God's help they became strong. They then spurned God who predicts both the disasters that will befall them as well as the eventual redemption he will provide.

Moses impresses upon the people that these words cannot be lightly dismissed. "It is your very life" - Remembering these words and particularly seeking to avoid rejecting God's commands are seen as essential in ensuring the longevity of the sojourn in the Land.

Why does Moses turn to poetry in this speech and to a blessing also in a poetic form in the final Parsha of the Torah? I would like to suggest a couple of possible reasons. Firstly, the change of style allows for dramatic effect. He is aware that while narrative will speak to some of the people, others will be more inspired or terrified by poetry. Secondly, Moses himself is aware that he will not enter the land and is about to die. At this traumatic moment, perhaps the poetic style is a way of maintaining his own strength and commitment?

Thirdly, perhaps it is the closeness to the land of Israel which moves him to recite the poem. Immediately afterwards he climbs Mt Nevo and looks over the Jordan to view a great deal of the land. Later biblical texts (such as the Psalms) as well as medieval and modern poetry have long celebrated the connection between Israel (the people) and Israel (the land).

Moses will view the land from north to south and east to west. He will see the actual territory that was promised to Abraham and which has been the prize offered once again to the Israelites since Moses led them out of Egypt. God reminds him that he will not enter the land because Moses "broke faith" with God at Meribath-Kadesh when he struck the rock rather than just speak to it.

But what was so terrible about Moses' mistake? After during a previous period when the people had no water, God himself told Moses to strike a rock (Exodus 17:6). The latter mistake, recorded in Numbers 20, during the final year in the wilderness showed God that Moses himself displayed the characteristic of a slave. In disobeying God's command, he reverted to the precedent of Exodus which he knew would work. It did indeed produce the water, but it created a breach between Moses and God that could not be fully healed as this week's Parsha recalls.

One lesson for us as we head towards Yom Kippur is not to necessarily rely on precedent. We will achieve the same results if we apply the same strategies. If we are not satisfied with our relationships, our careers, our communities or our faith it would be a mistake to repeat that which is failing. The poetry of the parsha and the story of Moses and his punishment can be a sign to us to allow the Tefilot of the Days of Awe to inspire us to change our approach to those material, human and spiritual goals we hold most dear.

Michael Wegier is a former member of NNLS and director of Melitz

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

You neglected the Rock that begot you, forgot the God who brought you forth [m'hol'lekhah]. (Deuteronomy 32:18)

1. M'hol'lekhah – that brought you forth from the womb, as in the expression “causes hinds to calve” -- y'holel aiyalot (Psalm 29:9) and “a trembling like a woman in the throes of labor” – hil kayoleidah (Psalm 48:7) Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France]
2. Many contemporary Jewish feminists have been sharply critical of the dominant masculine, hierarchical images of God in traditional Jewish texts. This attack has taken two complementary tracks: first, an aggressive program for replacing masculine pronouns for God with gender-neutral or even explicitly feminine forms. God is now referred to as “She,” as “She/He,” as “S/he,” by alternating “He” and “She” in different paragraphs, or by simply avoiding the use of any personal pronoun for God. Hebrew second-person pronouns for God, which differ depending on whether the speaker is addressing a male or a female (atah for a man, at for a woman), also are changed. The second, more radical strategy is to search for

metaphors for God that are perceived to be more explicitly feminine. One of the more popular is Mekor HaChayim, God is “the fountain of life” or “the source of life.” Implicit in this image is the notion of God birthing the world. More radical metaphors reflect the sense of God as Goddess...Not surprisingly, more traditionalist readers have labelled all of these proposals simple paganism.. The core of the feminist critique is the conviction that the issue is not simply one of language. The language we use reflects and in turn shapes the way we construct our experience of the world. Judith Plaskow [Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College, NY] acknowledges that all of these images of God are humanly crafted metaphors, but our metaphors emerge out of specific cultural and political contexts. When these contexts change, the old metaphors must change with them. Rabbi Neil Gillman, *The Way Into Encountering God in Judaism*, pp. 83-84

Sparks for Discussion

Rashi offers a startling image – an unambiguously female God giving birth. While we know that God is neither male nor female, our language doesn’t accommodate such a concept. Some people solve the problem by refusing to use pronouns for God – e.g., when God revealed God’s Torah – but that only works in English. In Hebrew, all nouns and their accompanying verbs and adjectives are either masculine or feminine.

Does male-only God-language bother you? Under what circumstances? When you pray? When you study the Torah and other texts? All the time? How do you feel about using God/She? Our Mother, our Queen? Goddess? What words do you use when you think and talk about God?

NITZAVIM/VAYELECH

25th Elul 5770 ~ 4th September 2010

Shabbat begins in London at 19.28 and ends at 20.29

By Reli Israeli

In the beginning of parashat Nitzavim, Moshe approaches all of Israel, from the most respected person to the simplest person among the people of Israel: “You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God, your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer, for you to pass into the covenant of the Lord your God...” (Deuteronomy 29: 9-11) The detailed manner in which Moshe chooses to describe who exactly he is addressing might suggest that he wants to take the opportunity to emphasize the unity of the people of Israel. Moshe’s strong message is clear, everyone, without exception, is standing before God, without mediators or special priests, regardless of class, social status or views.

Nitzavim is one of the parashot read before Rosh Hashanah, and both Nitzavim and the Jewish New Year, share a central value in Judaism – unity. Rosh Hashanah is a day where we all stand before God and take account for our actions, but we do not stand alone, we are gathered together, the same way our ancestors stood in front of Moshe and were reminded by him about the covenant with God. Rambam suggests that we should not only feel united, we should also feel responsible for one another and for the fate of this world: “...Every person should view himself all year as if he were half innocent and half guilty. And that is the way he should look at the world as well, as if it were half innocent and half guilty. If he

would do just one sin, he would thereby tip both himself and the entire world towards the "guilty" side, and cause it great destruction. And If he would do just one Mitzvah, he would tip both himself and the entire world towards the "innocent" side and cause for himself and for them salvation, as it says "The Righteous Person is the Foundation of the World" - because his being righteous tipped the world for good, and saved it." (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4)

Nitzavim, Rosh Hashanah and this piece by Rambam, are a good reminder of every individual's important role as part of the Jewish people and of this world - each of us might feel helpless at times in light of different crises and moral issues occurring daily in so many places in our close environment and around the world . Maybe during this Rosh Hashanah, between the different services and times of self reflection, we should take a minute to look at the people standing beside us and feel the communal responsibility that lies on our shoulders and aim to do our best to become better. According to Rambam's approach, this will certainly have a good influence on the world in which we live.

Reli Israeli is the immediate past JAFI Shlichah to the UK Masorti Movement

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it." (Deuteronomy 30:11-13)

1. Rava said, "Set fixed times for Torah, as Avdimi bar Hana bar Dosi said, Why is it written, "It is not in the heavens... it is not beyond the sea." "It is not in the heavens" – if it would be in heaven you would be obliged to go up after it. "It is not beyond the sea" – if it would be beyond the sea you would be obliged to cross it in pursuit. Talmud Eruvin 54b-55a
2. Every Jew is required to study Torah, whether poor or rich, healthy or ailing, young or old and feeble. Even a man so poor that he is maintained by charity or goes begging from door to door, as also a man with a wife and children to support, is under the obligation to set aside a definite period during the day and night for the study of the Torah... Until what period in life is one obligated to study Torah? Until the day of one's death. Rambam [Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1209, Spain and Egypt] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah, 1:8,10
3. [The prophet] Elijah, ever mentioned on good occasions, said: Once, as I was walking on the road, a man who met me mocked and reviled me. I asked him, "My son, since you have refused to learn Torah, what will you say on the Day of Judgment?" He replied, "I have an answer: Understanding, knowledge, and spirit were not given me from Heaven [so how could I study Torah]?" I said, "My son, what is your work?" He replied, "I am a trapper of fowls and fish." I asked, "Who gave you knowledge and spirit to take flax, spin it into cords, weave the cords into nets, use

the nets to trap fish and fowls, and sell them?" He replied, "Understanding and knowledge [to do my work] were given me from Heaven." I said, "To take flax, spin it into cords, weave cords into nets, and use nets to trap fish and fowls, understanding and knowledge were given to you from Heaven. But do you suppose that, for words of Torah, about which it is written, 'The thing is very close to you' (30:14), understanding and knowledge were not given to you?" Tanhuma, Va-Yeilekh, 2

4. Hillel said: Do not say, "I shall study when I have leisure." Perhaps you will never have leisure. Pirkei Avot 2:4
5. These are the things whose fruits a person eats in this world while the capital remains for him in the world to come: honouring one's parents, the practice of loving-kindness, hospitality to strangers, and making peace between a person and his neighbour. And the study of Torah surpasses them all. Mishnah Peah 1:1

Sparks for Discussion

How would you define Torah study? What texts and topics are included within "Torah"? Our commentators insist that there are no excuses for neglecting Torah study. Do you agree? How might you respond to someone who claims that he would like to study Torah, but it just isn't possible? What is the goal of Torah study? Why do you think the Rabbis consider Torah study the preeminent mitzvah?

KI TAVO

18th Elul 5770 ~ 28th August 2010

By Rabbi Markus Lange

A Vision of New Light in the World

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 that "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 -similar to Rabbi Hertz- 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?

The Reality of Blessings and Curses

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.

Let us not forget: The price for our economical blessings may be paid by people somewhere else on this globe who perceive their daily life as a struggle and their working conditions as painful and harmful - or even as a punishment. Someone's blessing may well be someone else's curse. And also nature and our precious wildlife suffer from the way we tread our world. Fair trade, ethically monitored production and products, ecologically sound forms of trading and transportation as well as smart use and re-use of our natural source are of paramount importance when we want to prevent the bad and promote the good.

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)

Mazal Tov to Rabbi Markus Lange on recently receiving Semicha.

Markus is Resident Chaplain to the Marie Curie Hospice, Hampstead

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country. (Deuteronomy 28:3)

1. Rav said: "Blessed shall you be in the city" – that your home will be close to the synagogue (Yalkut Shimoni 28). There are people whose behaviour at home is far from their behaviour in the synagogue. In the synagogue they observe all the smallest details of the law, but not so at home. Their homes are far from the

synagogue, and the synagogue has no influence on their life at home. This is the blessing that your home should be close to the synagogue – that the spirit of the synagogue will saturate your home as well. Meged Yerahim, cited in Itturei Torah, Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg

2. "In the city": by the reward for the commandments that you observe (publicly) in the city. (Midrash) Some people observe their Judaism and perform its commandments within the walls of their own homes, but are ashamed of their religion when they go out among people, fearing that they might be called "fanatical," "old-fashioned," and such. Therefore Scripture says: "Only if you will not be ashamed to observe the commandments even in the city, when you are among others, will you receive the blessings." Divrei Shaarei Hayyim -Rabbi Hayyim Sofer) [1821-1886, Hungary]
3. The late 19th-century Russian Jewish thinker Yehuda Leib Gordon coined what might be called the motto of the Enlightenment: "Be a Jew in your home and a man on the street." He was saying that for Jews to make our way in the world, we must keep our Jewish identity private, secluded, in the confines of our homes or the privacy of our backyards. For my grandparents and immigrants like them, in order to make it in America they cast off their Jewish observances in exchange for material and social success. Jewish practices that they kept were relegated to the seclusion of private spaces, or the synagogue, JCC, or federation. Gordon's notion of a bifurcated identity is less pertinent today where we are blessed with the privilege of living in a pluralistic and open society. Politicians, artists, business people, and others are more public as Jews in their professional lives and on the street. Ironically, many are less Jewish at home in a world that allows and even celebrates multiple, partial, and constructed identities. On the street, they can label their actions "Jewish" as a positive and public expression of identity, whether or not their private lives are enriched with Jewish learning and practice. Professor Lisa D. Grant, "The Front Porch," Sh'ma, A Journal of Jewish Responsibility, June 2009

Sparks for Discussion

What does it mean to be Jewish "in the city?" One of our commentators says it refers to public observance; another says it refers to private observance. Which makes more sense to you? Have you encountered people who try to impress others with their punctilious public observance? Do you know people who are uncomfortable with public displays of Jewish identity? Do you think this is because they are ashamed? Could it be that they fear discrimination?

Professor Grant says that our modern, multicultural society no longer requires Jews to hide our identity to succeed. Do you agree? Do you think there are some types of Jewish observance that are still problematic "in the city?"

KI TEZE

11th Elul 5770 ~ 21st August 2010

By Rabbi David Soetendorp

Ki Tetze is one of the concluding chapters in the Torah in which Moses leaves the people of Israel with his most important legacy: a commitment to the highest ethical standards in all that applies to living as a nation in Eretz Yisrael.

Some of what we read in this sedrah is controversial, such as the obligation for parents of “a rebellious son to present him to the city gates for stoning” The many commentators on this instruction appropriately are in agreement that this Torah obligation ought to be treated with a pinch of salt. In fact there is no evidence that this horrifying act ever to take place.

The same approach does not apply to the instructions with which the sedrah commences. In the commandments at the beginning of the sedrah we are told that “when soldiers fighting the People of Israel’s enemies are victorious, and then want to take the enemy’s women back home with them, they must treat them with the utmost respect and consideration for their feelings.

If we take into account that, tragically, the conduct of victorious soldiers towards the women of defeated enemies is but too often recorded in human history as particularly savage, we can rightly take pride in how victorious Israelite soldiers are commanded here to conduct themselves in their treatment of those they defeated

During two millennia of the Jews living in exile from Eretz Yisrael, what Ki Tetze taught them about standards of conduct at time of war was of no practical concern. Jews were devoid of any power and national independence. They were really only ever the victims of ill treatment at the hands of their enemies. To be instructed regarding the moral obligations of how to treat defeated enemies, was to generations of Jews only of symbolic significance.

For the past 62 years Jews have been blessed with the experience of owning their own land. Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, has had to depend ever since its coming into being on maintaining a strong army, able to defend the nation’s borders against a perennial enemy.

In 1967, when in the aftermath of the Six Day War large sections of land adjoining the original borders of Medinat Yisrael came under Israeli administration, Ki Tetze’s teaching about the treatment of a defeated enemy has become very relevant. The erstwhile enemy living in that conquered and now under Israeli administration land ought to be able to expect to be treated with the highest respect and concern for their welfare and dignity as taught in our scriptures. Ki Tetze is only one of several sederot in Devarim in which the Israelites, about to enter the Land and take it into possession, are instructed by the Almighty concerning the highest moral obligations with regards to the treatment of defeated enemies.

The existence of Medinat Yisrael gives the Jewish people, especially those living in Israel, serving in its defence forces, and supporting them from the Diaspora, an added opportunity to recognise, understand and adhere to the ethical obligations of Ki Tetze, with commitment and urgency.

Collectively, as Jews living as citizens of Medinat Yisrael and as Jews living in the Galut, we should take the teaching of Ki Tetze to heart and respect it.

David Soetendorp is visiting Rabbi to the Almere community in the Netherlands

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not put off fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will require it of you, and you will have incurred guilt; whereas you incur no guilt if you refrain from vowing. You must fulfill what has

crossed your lips and perform what you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God, having made the promise with your own mouth. (Deuteronomy 23:22-24)

1. The Torah warned you to be careful before making vows, and remember that though they constitute an incentive to bring a sacrifice, if you do make a vow there is always the danger of committing a sin through neglecting or deferring its fulfilment, while if you do not vow at all, you have committed no sin. Ramban— Rabbi Moses ben Nachman [1194-1270, Spain]
2. Rabbi Dimi, the brother of Rabbi Safra, stated: Whoever makes a vow, even though he fulfils it, is called a sinner. What is the scriptural source for this? “Whereas you incur no guilt if you refrain from vowing” – but if you do not refrain, there is guilt.” Talmud Nedarim 77b
3. Behold, it is proper that your word be trustworthy with all. However, that which you vow to God, not only are you obligated to pay it, but, in addition, the payment must be made without delay. For if you delay payment, He will collect it from you against your will. And that which you do pay in this manner will still carry with it punishment for the delay. Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, [1475-1550, Italy]
4. As Maimonides explains: “By this injunction, we are commanded to fulfil every obligation that we have taken upon ourselves by word of mouth.” . . . Although this verse seems to be speaking of someone who has made a formal vow to do something, subsequent Jewish law regards it as obligatory to fulfil whatever you have said you were going to do. Therefore, keep your word, particularly if someone is relying on it, and even when it is inconvenient to do so. Not infrequently, we offer to do someone a favour. At the time we commit ourselves, we really intend to do it. Later, however, we realize that the favour is more inconvenient or time-consuming than we originally thought, and we are tempted not to follow through. Nonetheless, we remain obligated to carry out our word. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, A Code of Jewish Ethics: You Shall Be Holy, p. 411
5. One should not promise a child something and then not give it to him, because as a result the child will learn to lie. Talmud Sukkah 46b

Sparks for Discussion

None of our commentators doubts that people make vows and promises with sincere intent. Why are they nevertheless so opposed to the making of vows? What happens when circumstances beyond our control prevent the fulfilment of a vow or promise?

Imagine you have a friend who pledged to donate \$5,000, an amount well within her means, to a synagogue, federation, or other organization. She then loses her job and has no immediate prospects for new employment. Is she still obligated to pay the pledge? Was she wrong to make the pledge rather than writing a cheque on the spot? What would you advise her to do?

SHOFETIM

4th Elul 5770 ~ 14th August 2010

By Vicky Fox

This week’s sedra is about power, justice and communal responsibility. As the Jewish people prepare to enter the land of Israel, Moses instructs them on how to build a society.

Shoftim (translated as “judges”) outlines the separation of powers that is echoed in most modern societies today. The principle of judicial independence is fundamental to this system and Moses instructs the judges to judge everyone equally, regardless of their position in society. Shoftim opens with the commandment to establish a just and effective judicial system that shows no favoritism and accepts no bribes.

The famous Torah injunction found in Shoftim - “Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof” is hard to translate accurately. Usually translated as “Justice, Justice you shall pursue”, this is not quite enough to convey the true meaning of tzedek or the closely related word tzedakah. Tzedek conveys many shades of meaning: justice, charity, righteousness, integrity, equity, fairness and innocence. It certainly means more than strictly legal justice.

According to traditional Biblical interpretation, when a word is repeated it is to imply either emphasis or the fact that the word may be construed in alternative ways. So the phrase could be understood as “LISTEN! This is really important – you shall pursue justice”. Alternatively, some commentators understand the repeated “tzedek” as meaning that there are two types of justice one should pursue: righteous action and equity. There are times when disputing parties may have equal rights to something and the only way to resolve the dispute is to find a compromise or some equitable middle ground. Others suggest that the words are repeated to explain that it is intended for two audiences - the responsibility of ensuring a just society falls not only on the judges but upon the community as whole.

The Sfat Emet (a 19th century Chasidic scholar) takes issue with a different part of the phrase. He is more concerned with the word “pursue” and explains that the primary obligation is to pursue justice rather than achieve it. The Sfat Emet’s emphasis reminds us that a just world is not something easily achieved but it is not incumbent upon us to complete a just world, only to pursue this goal to the best of our ability. This shift in emphasis reminds us that we can not simply observe the world as it is, or allow ourselves to succumb to moral exhaustion or a sense of failure at the scale of the task. We must always “pursue,” even when we may feel that our contribution is too small in a world with so many problems.

We have now entered the month of Elul, our services now include Psalm 27 and we prepare for the season of repentance. Shoftim reminds us of the centrality of justice in Judaism, a justice that does not belong in the courts alone. Whichever meaning of tzedek one takes, it is each and every person’s responsibility to commit to making a more just world – whether through social justice, political activism or simple acts of loving-kindness.

Vicky Fox is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

You must be wholehearted [tamim] with the Lord your God. (Deut. 18:13)

1. “You must be wholehearted”... perfect and complete with Him. Even when you seek to inquire as to the future you shall inquire of none other than Him, through a prophet or the Urim and Tumim. Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, [1475-1550, Italy]
2. And you are only to consult Him, not the dead. Seeing that the existence of necromancers is a form of God’s testing the faith of the people in Him, He enabled the spiritually negative elements in this world, the demons, to possess some apparent powers to reveal the future. Rashbam—Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir—Rashi’s grandson, [1080-1158, France]
3. You should know that the precepts of the heart imply a complete harmony between our inner and outward actions, as regards the service of the Lord, till the heart and tongue and other limbs will be at one with each

other, each one justifying and bearing witness in favor of the other, neither contradicting nor belying each other. This is what Scripture refers to in the term “wholehearted,” when it admonishes us to be “wholehearted with the Lord your God.”... It is well known that a man whose conduct is contradictory, his words being at variance with his deeds, is not trusted. People do not believe in his sincerity. If we are similarly insincere in our dealings with God, the intention of our hearts being contradicted by our words, and our inner conscience by our outward actions, our service to God cannot be perfect, since He does not accept insincere service. Hovot Ha-levavot—Bahya ibn Pekuda [1050-1120, Spain]

4. There are only two commandments that must be performed “with the Lord your God.” One is “You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God,” while the other is “Walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The reason why the Torah stresses this in these two commandments is because in both it is very easy to fool others. A person can act as purely innocent and yet be involved in all types of devilish schemes, or he can pose as the most humble of all men while pride rages within him. The Torah stresses that in both the cases God Himself, as it were, tests you, and while you may be able to fool others, you cannot fool Him. Rabbi Pinhas Shapiro of Koretz, [1726-1791, Ukraine]
5. Walk with Him in wholeheartedness and depend upon Him and do not seek into the future; but whatever befalls you, accept it with wholeheartedness and then you will be with Him and His portion. Rashi—Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak [1040-1105, France]
6. This verse enjoins us to trust in the Almighty. A question that can frequently arise is what is considered normal hishtadlus [effort], that is, human efforts that we have an obligation to make and what is considered a lack of trust?... Having trust in the Almighty will give a person peace of mind and serenity. But one should never use a claim of trust in the Almighty to condone laziness or rash behaviour. There is a thin line between the virtue of bitochon [trust] and the fault of carelessness and lack of taking responsibility. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Growth Through Torah, p. 431

Sparks for Discussion

This brief verse is not so simple to understand. The word tamim, translated as “wholehearted,” can also mean perfect, innocent, sincere or trusting. Does this verse mean that by engaging in sorcery we betray our faith in God? Is it an admonition that we must make sure our words and deeds are honest and trustworthy? How would you explain this verse? How might Rashi’s comment be used to our detriment? How does Rabbi Pliskin address this concern? What does it mean to be tamim with God?

RE’EH

27th Av 5770 ~ 7th August 2010

By Andrew Levy

Chambers English Dictionary defines the word “Hyperbole” as “a rhetorical figure which produces a vivid impression by extravagant and obvious exaggeration”. Given that Greek and Jewish thought are seen so often to be polar opposites, it is perhaps ironic that such an obviously Greek word should describe perfectly one passage in this week’s Sidrah.

A slave is about to be set free by a master who provides adequately for his upkeep as he plans to liberate the slave: “And it shall be that if he says to you, ‘I’m not leaving you’ because he loves you and your house since he is happy with you, then you should take a

nail and thrust it through his ear and through the door and he shall be your eternal slave – and you shall do likewise for your female slave.” (Devarim 15, 16-17).

First things first – this passage makes it very difficult to accept any view arguing that the Bible must be taken literally. Surely here is the passage which shows in all its obvious, naked overstatement that the literal Bible reader misses the point entirely.

So how then should we read this text? At its most obvious in context, it appears to be about never forgetting the importance of freedom - gained as a result of the Exodus. Yet here we are entering the second week of August reading a passage which on that basis should have formed one of the most central points of our Seder service in April (which of course it did not).

This text is surely about more than the importance of freedom as a concept. Why give such a concrete, hyperbolic example if it were only about a concept? This passage, it seems to me, is more about psychology than anything else. Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously introduced his “Social Contract” with the oft-quoted words: “Man is born free, and everywhere is in chains.” Less quoted is the sentence immediately following: “One believes himself the others’ master, and yet is more a slave than they”.

Slavery is all too real and appalling but the opposite of slavery is not freedom. The opposite of slavery is not the lack of shackles, fundamental as that unfettered state may be. As Rousseau rightly said, masters can be slaves too.

The opposite of slavery, rather, is a mind freed from slavish thoughts, dependence and fear of the new. We are all inherently cautious; and caution is no bad thing at the right time. Yet a life without risk is hardly worth living. In Jewish tradition, the “Yetser ha’ra” (the evil inclination) is interpreted as the creative force within which moves us on in our lives and without which our existence would be sullen.

The freedom we have, away from the nail of pained-eared slavery, is a balancing act between caution and risk. It is a high-wire act with a vertiginous drop either side. I could not encapsulate the liberty dilemma which Judaism poses better than in quoting the title which the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas gave to a collection of Jewish essays - “Difficile Liberté”.

Andrew Levy is a member of NMLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Follow none but the Lord your God, and revere none but Him; observe His commandments alone, and heed only His orders; worship none but Him, and hold fast to Him. (Devarim 13:5)

1. “Follow none but the Lord your God” ... and not in new (incorrect) ways that the prophet or dreamer shows, with the intent of leading you astray from the (proper) way. “And revere none but Him” Even though that prophet was already (accepted) among you as an important and revered person, (yet if) he now exaggerates (his prophetic powers), then nullify your reverence of this prophet before the reverence

of God, the Blessed One. "Observe His commandments alone"... but not new commandments devised by a prophet, especially idolatry which is contradictory to all the commandments of God, the Exalted One, because He commanded His covenant forever, He will not exchange it or change it. "And heed only His orders" ... that which He commands you through His prophets, in order to preserve His Torah and sanctify His name, as we find with Elijah on Mt. Carmel – but (one is not to hearken) to the voice of he who nullifies all the commandments of God, the Exalted One. "Worship none but Him"... Him alone and none other with Him... "And hold fast to Him" The purpose of all your actions shall be to do His will, and your animosity toward this (false prophet) shall not be motivated by a prior hatred. Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, [1475-1550, Italy]

2. "Follow none but the Lord your God" – this refers to (following the pillar of) cloud – "and revere none but Him" – meaning that the awe (of the Lord) shall be upon you – "His commandments" – referring to positive commandments – "observe" – including (the implied) negative commandments – "and heed only His orders" – meaning the voice of His prophets – "worship none but Him" – serve Him according to His Torah and in His Sanctuary – "and hold fast to Him" – separate yourselves from idolatry and cleave unto the Lord. Sifrei, Piska 85
3. Rabbi Hama ben Rabbi Hanina said: "Follow none but the Lord your God" [literally, After the Lord your God shall you walk] But is it possible for a man to walk right behind the Presence? Has it not already been said, "The Lord your God is a consuming fire" (4:24)? Yes, but what the verse means is that you are to follow the ways of the Holy One. He clothed the naked: "The Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (B'reishit 3:21). So should you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick: "The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre" (B'reishit 18:1). So should you visit the sick. The Holy One buried the dead: "He buried [Moses] in the valley" (D'varim 34:6). So should you bury the dead. The Holy One comforted mourners: "After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac" (B'reishit 25:11). So should you comfort mourners. Talmud Sotah 14a

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators offer three different ways to interpret this verse. Sforno interprets it in context, elaborating on the laws of the false prophet. The Sifrei understands it as a general reference to the obligation to worship only God and shun idolatry. The gemara in Sotah interprets it as a call to engage in acts of chesed (loving-kindness). If you were giving a d'var Torah, which interpretation would you use? Why? What balance of mitzvot bein adam laMakom (between a person and God) and mitzvot bein adam l'haveiro (between one person and another) do you believe is required for a meaningful Judaism?

EKEV

20th Av 5770 ~ 31st July 2010

By Allan Myers

Why is this night different from all other nights? Don't worry, I haven't got the wrong time of year. It's just that questions seem to abound amongst the Children of Israel as they win their freedom.

But this is to be expected. After all, once you have freedom, all sorts of questions crop up. What are we going to do, now? How are we going to live? Is this a good situation for us?

Joining the Masorti movement was a bit like getting my freedom. For the first time, I was able to ask lots of questions – questions that wouldn't have been well received in some other environments.

And when I started teaching at a Masorti cheder, we had to do whatever we could to get the children to ask as many questions as possible. Many of the questions started with an interrogative, like “what”; in Hebrew, “mah”.

In this week's sedra, Moses continues his reprise of the biblical story so far. One of the first things that he reminds the people about is the Manna.

“Manna” is a “what” question. The word comes from the expression, “Man Hu”, “What is it? In this reading, the Manna is portrayed as a mystery.

Alternatively, in Rashi's view, “Manna” means some kind of food preparation. In this reading, the Manna is portrayed as some kind of Providence. Whatever the manna is, its precise nature or form is unknown.

The S'fat Emmet (the head of the Hasidim of Gur in the nineteenth century) says it was God's intention that the children of Israel wouldn't know what it was – it was just “the bread that God commanded” He goes on to say, “The purpose of knowing is to realize that we do not know”. Or, as Aviva Zornberg puts it, “without a real question, there can be no real answer...the understanding of the limits of the questioner's knowledge is fired by his sense of another world of knowledge, intimated but never penetrated”

Mei Hashiloach, (the Ishbitzer Rabbi of the nineteenth century) notices that the children of Israel didn't call it Manna because they didn't know what it was – rather, they saw what it was but couldn't understand how it could help them. This is exactly what Moses tells them – “God subjected you to hardship, and then gave you manna...which teaches you that man does not live by bread alone but on everything that He decrees”. [Deut 8:3

So the Manna sustains us by making us think! We get something we were not expecting, suggesting that the Manna is not just Providence - there is some mystery involved in our understanding and this must deepen our spiritual life.

Allan Myers is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

The Lord your God who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers had never known, in order to test you by hardships... (Devarim 8:16)

1. Whether they will keep the commandments which are associated with it, that they should not leave any of it over and that they should not go out on the Sabbath to gather. Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France] on Sh'mot 16:4

2. ...whether you would do His will when He grants you sustenance without pain (without effort). Rabbi Ovadia ben [Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy]
3. The situation in which the Israelites were placed regarding the manna represented a great trial for them since they entered a desert without food of any sort and with no way out. They were totally dependent on the daily portion of manna which rained down and melted in the heat of the sun. They hungered for it greatly, but bore all their suffering in obedience to God who might have led them through an inhabited route. He chose, however, to confront them with this trial in order to test their eternal loyalty to Him... Ramban [Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain]
4. [God said] it is essential that I find men for whom it suffices to be provided for wife and family for each day by itself. Men who can cheerfully and happily enjoy today, carry out their duties for today and leave the worry for tomorrow to Him Who has provided for today and Who can be trusted for tomorrow. Only such unreserved confidence in God ensures the fulfilment of His laws against infringement out of supposed or actual concern about material necessities. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, [1808-1888, Germany]
5. Everyone knows that life is a test. We struggle to make a living, to raise our children, to build up our communities. Nothing comes easy, and our test is to deal with the hardships and frustrations in the best way possible. But what if our livelihood were served up to us on a silver platter? How wonderful that would be! No more worries about how to pay for the children's tuition or the new roof. What if everything we needed came to us like manna from heaven? Would we consider this a test? Hardly. We would consider it a blessing. The Torah, however, seems to say otherwise. Sforno explains that the test is to see if the Jews would still follow the Torah when they do not have to worry about their livelihood. Yes, there is a great test in "bread raining down from heaven." Affluence without effort is a dangerous thing. It comes with a great amount of leisure time and freedom of action. What do we do with that leisure time and that freedom of action? Do we use our leisure time and freedom of action to taste the forbidden? This is the great test of the manna. We are all aware of the test of poverty. We are all aware of the trials and tribulations of being poor. However, says Sforno, affluence also comes with great temptations. It puts a tremendous responsibility on a person. This is the test of the manna, and it is the test for many Jews in these affluent times. Rabbi Yissocher Frand, ["Rabbi Frand on the Parsha"]

Sparks for Discussion

In what way was the manna a test? The commentators offer several suggestions for what was being tested – obedience, faith, dealing with poverty or affluence. How do you understand the test of manna? Is it possible that it tested different people in different ways – some struggled with faith, others with obedience? How do you think the test of manna would challenge you? Do you believe that God tests human beings? How? When God does test people?, is He gathering information about us or trying to teach us lessons about ourselves?

VAETCHANAN

Shabbat Nachamu

13th Av 5770 ~ 24th July 2010

By Marc Shoffren

The second parasha of D'varim is a roller coaster of a ride. It starts with an application from Moses to enter the promised land (rejected), a repetition of the ten commandments, the liturgical text we recite as the first paragraph of the Shema, the section incorporated into the haggadah in answer to the wise son's question, and a lecture against intermarriage. However one of the most interesting verses is one that is not in the parasha...

Many will know that although the shema text is taken from Devarim 6 (vs 4-9), the second line of the liturgy (Barukh shem kavod...) does not appear in the biblical text. In traditional communities this line is recited in a quiet voice, except on Yom Kippur, when we can reach the levels of the malakhim (angels) and speak the words at full volume. For the rest of the year, whether recited or read, this line is said under our breath. One midrash explains that when we recite the shema we reenact Jacob's teaching to his sons. In the midrash Jacob / Israel lays on his death bed, as his sons gather around him. They recite together 'Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheynu Adonai echad' – 'listen father (Israel), Adonai is our God, Adonai is one'. Then Jacob, the dying father whispers his reply, barukh shem kavod... blessed is God's name forever more.

As well as explaining the insertion of the extra line into the liturgy, the midrash seems to suggest something more powerful: that the idea of worship involves dialogue between humans, as much as it involves dialogue between God and humanity. This is something that resonates for me, for as Karen Armstrong explores, our ideas of God rarely arrive fully formed in our heads. More often, they are the results of discussions with others, encounters with new concepts and reactions to challenging situations.

In the parasha the Israelites are in the valley of Beit Peor, where earlier some of the camp had been unfaithful to God, and where they now receive an extended discourse on the futility of idol worship. In addition to commandments forbidding the worship of sculptured images in any form, the Israelites get a clear set of warnings forbidding them from worshipping heavenly bodies. The repeated presence of such warnings in the Torah is testament to the seductive powers of such ideas. It is, in all truth, easier to fix our spiritual focus on solid objects in front of us, or even on objects such as stars that we can only regard at a distance, than it is to engage in the metaphysical and abstract ideas of an intangible God. It is often hard to find our mental way to a God we can't touch or see, and it is frustrating to engage with a God which is beyond our understanding.

Perhaps that is the importance of that extra line introduced into the liturgy, a reminder that despite our public confidence about our understanding of God, there is also a need for a quiet personal voice, the need for a dialogue either internally or with others. The quiet voice is a reminder that God is present in our dialogue with other, in our contemplation and moments of reflection.

Marc Shoffren is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. (Devarim 6:4)

1. Alternate translations: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Hertz Humash) Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our God, Hashem is the One and Only. (Artscroll Stone Humash) Harken O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One! (Schocken, Everett Fox translation) Listen, Israel: YHWH is our God. YHWH is one. (Commentary on the Torah, Richard Friedman translation)
2. The precise meaning of the Shema is uncertain. The four Hebrew words "YHVH eloheinu, YHVH ehad" literally mean "YHVH our God YHVH one." Since Hebrew does not have a present-tense verb meaning "is" to link subject and predicate, the link must be supplied by the listener or reader. Where to do so depends on context and sometimes is uncertain. Grammatically, "YHVH our God YHVH one" could be rendered in several ways such as (1) "YHVH is our God, YHVH alone"; (2) "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (literally "YHVH our God, YHVH is one"); (3) "YHVH our God is one YHVH." (Dr. Jeffrey Tigay, "The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy," Excursus 10)
3. Another interpretation: "The Lord, our God," over us (the children of Israel); "the Lord is one," over all the creatures of the world. "The Lord, our God" in this world; "the Lord is one," in the world to come, as it is said, "The Lord shall be king over all the earth. In that day shall the Lord be one and His name one."

([Zechariah 14:9] Sifrei, Piska 31)

4. “The Lord is our God” The Lord alone is our God, there is no other kind of divinity that is a partner to Him... “The Lord alone” He alone, and Him we will serve without resorting to any man-made intermediary such as charms, etc. Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir), 1080-1158, France, (Rashi’s grandson)
5. “The Lord” Who gives existence and is the Creator. “Our God” He is the Chosen One of all who are separated (from matter), and Him (alone), not through any intermediary... “The Lord alone” Now, being that He granted existence from total nothingness, it is understood that there does not exist any kind similar to Him and that He is separated in kind from all that exists in the world... (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
6. The rabbis say: God said to Israel: My children, all that I have created I have created in pairs; heaven and earth are a pair; the sun and the moon are a pair; Adam and Eve are a pair; this world and the world to come are a pair; but My glory is one, and unique in the world. (Devarim Rabbah 2:31)

Sparks for Discussion

This verse is at once perhaps the best known in the Torah and one of the most difficult to translate and interpret. How do you usually translate it? Which of the alternate translations or explanations to you find appealing? Do you find any of them unsettling? What exactly do you mean when you say Shema?

DEVARIM

Shabbat Chazon

6th Av 5770 ~ 17th July 2010

By Rabbi Michael Foulds

On Tuesday it is Tisha B’Av when we shall remember, and mourn, the destruction of the first and second temples. This shabbat takes its name from the first word (chazon – vision) of the Haftarah which is always read on the shabbat immediately preceding Tisha B’Av. The Haftarah, Isaiah 1: 1-27, is chanted with the same mournful melody as that for the book of Lamentations (Eicha) which is read on Tisha B’Av itself.

For the Talmudic rabbis, nothing ever happens by pure chance. Everything takes place in accordance with God’s knowledge and will. So why then were the two temples destroyed? The rabbis had little doubt concerning the first temple: it was destroyed, they say, because of the idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed that was prevalent then. However, they found it more difficult to explain why the second temple was destroyed as, at that time, the people were occupying themselves with Torah, observance of the mitzvot, and the practice of charity (Yoma 9b). Faced with this difficulty, the rabbis offered various answers. Jochanan said it was because the rabbis ruled in accordance with the strict rule of the law. They were not compassionate in their rulings and did not go beyond the requirements of the law, according to the principle of lifenim mishurat ha-din – inside the line of justice (Baba Metzia 30b). Abaye said it was because of the desecration of Shabbat; Abbahu, because of neglecting to recite the Shema; Hamnuna, because of the neglect of the education of school children; Ulla, because the people were totally shameless; Judah, because scholars were

despised there (Shabbat 119b). However, the commonly accepted reason of the rabbis is that the second temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam* – gratuitous hatred. The Talmud states that despite all the engagement with Torah, observance of the mitzvot, and the practice of charity, *sinat chinam* prevailed and this was considered as serious as idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together (Yoma 9b). The Talmud tells of the effect of *sinat chinam* in the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza which contains the account of the over-scrupulous ruling of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas who placed a minute aspect of the law over the more desirable and important pursuit of peace. The story recounts the trivial beginning and the subsequent train of events which led to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (Gittin 55b-56a).

Did *sinat chinam* end with the second temple? It appears not. It has manifested from time to time in our history and, I believe, is evident today. Recently we have heard of stones being thrown by the 'orthodox' at the windows of Masorti shuls in Israel and of a physical attack on a young woman by a man in orthodox dress, allegedly because her arm retained the marks shown by the tefillin shel yad she had worn that morning. In this country maybe physical rocks are not hurled, but certainly verbal ones are thrown at us. The ever stricter positions adopted by some of the so called Torah observant amongst us accompanied by increasing hostility and intolerance is, I believe, *sinat chinam*. Such attitudes are very likely to lead to damaging and deeply undesirable splits and divisions both within communities here and within Israel, within the wider Jewish world, and also between Israel and the Diaspora. These could be as profoundly, damaging, and dangerous as were the results of that first emergence of *sinat chinam*.

Michael Foulds is rabbi at NEMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

What food you eat you shall obtain from them for money; even the water you drink you shall procure from them for money. Indeed, the Lord your God has blessed you in all your undertakings. He has watched over your wanderings through this great wilderness; the Lord your God has been with you these past forty years: you have lacked nothing. (Devarim 2:6-7)

1. "You have lacked nothing." Hence, they will realize that you are not buying necessary things, but your purchases are motivated (solely) by brotherly feelings, so that they might have benefit (from you). Another reason is that they will come to your (camp) and observe the deeds of God and His wonders. Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, [1475-1550, Italy]
2. "The Lord your God has blessed you." Therefore do not be ungrateful for His kindness by appearing as though you were poor, but show yourselves wealthy. Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France]
3. "In all your undertakings" Even those things that you did not receive directly from God, like manna and water, such as clothing, etc., He paid attention to your wanderings in the wilderness and directed His protective care thereto. The descendents of Esau shall get an idea of God and His unlimited powers by their contact with this people, who had been provided with everything by God during the

whole of their 40 years wandering through the wilderness and their consequent behaviour, so contrary to all that had been expected and feared from them. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, [1808-1888, Germany]

4. The Torah teaches good manners. If a man travels in a strange country and has his food and drink with him, he should, nevertheless, not eat and drink what he has brought with him, he should put it aside and buy what he wants from the shopkeepers, in order to improve trade. And so Moses said to the king of Edom, "The well is with us, but we will not drink its waters; and the manna which we have, we will not eat. You shall not say that we are nothing but trouble to you for you will do business for yourself." (Tanhuma (Buber) Hukat)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators wonder: If God had provided for all the material needs of the Israelites for 40 years, why does He now tell them to buy their provisions from the descendants of Esau? Was it to make the residents of Seir more favourably disposed to this large population because it would be a source of significant profits? Was it to be an outreach effort, showing them how well God treated those who served Him? Or, as Rashi suggests, was the lesson meant for the Israelites – namely, that spending can be an act of gratitude?

These days we hear a lot about buying locally, largely in connection with buying food at farmers' markets and similar places to reduce the environmental impact of packaging and transportation. What other good reasons might there be for buying from local merchants and producers? Today, it's easy to use the internet to find not only low prices but also almost endless variety for almost everything we buy. What happens to local merchants – and Council tax revenues – when more and more people do most of their shopping online? What about the ethics of using local stores to investigate products and then, once you know exactly what you want, going online to buy it at the lowest possible price? Is it a mitzvah to do a least some shopping locally?

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website <http://www.uscj.org>

MATTOT/MASSEI

28th Tammuz 5770 ~ 10th July 2010

By Rina Wolfson

This week's double parsha of Mattot-Massei is one of the most challenging, and the most chilling, of the entire Torah. Whilst there are certainly elements that are uplifting and inspiring, such as the stand made by the daughters of Zelophchad for a share in their father's inheritance, there is a great deal that is disturbing to the modern reader. Mattot begins with an example of blatant gender inequality. A man's vow is to be strictly honoured whilst a woman's vow can be annulled by her father or husband. The parsha goes on to describe an incident of gruesome bloodshed. Acting in the name of revenge, Moses sends thousands of troops to invade the territory of Midian, killing every male. When he hears the battle report, Moses is furious that the women have been spared, and orders the troops to finish the job, leading to the deaths of all the adult women as well as the young boys. What makes the story more unsettling is that Moses' wife, Zipporah, and his father-in-law, Yitro, were themselves Midianite. Later, in Parshat Massei, the text foretells the process of the systematic dispossession of the resident Canaanites from their native land.

What does the modern reader do with these stories? It is tempting to ignore them, and focus instead only on those passages which confirm our own moral values and sense of justice. Or we can try to sanitize the text, so that problematic events are creatively refashioned to suit our modern sensibilities. But neither of these approaches is satisfactory, and there is something slightly dishonest about treating our sacred texts in this way.

The issue is particularly problematic because we have a tradition that the Torah is a source of blessing and peace. The Book of Proverbs maintains, in a phrase that should be well-known to all members of NOAM “Her ways are very pleasant (noam), and all her paths are peaceful (shalom)”. How can we harmonise the stories in Mattot-Massei of sexism, genocide and dispossession with shalom?

Perhaps the answer lies in an understanding of the word shalom. It’s usually translated as ‘peace’, but that’s a bit deceptive, since peace assumes an absence of conflict or dispute. However, the root of the word shalom is shalem, which denotes wholeness, completion. Shalom is not a state of unchallenged tranquillity. Rather, it is a state where we are open to embrace the completeness and the wholeness of a given situation, in its entirety. Shalom is possible only when we are open to seeing all sides of a situation; when we try to ignore aspects that we find unpalatable, shalom becomes impossible.

It is tempting to ignore the stories in this week’s parasha. But, if we avoid the texts that are challenging, distressing or even shameful, we only see part of the picture, and that prevents shalom. Ironically, when we are brave enough to face the disturbing passages of the Torah, even at the risk of generating feelings of revulsion, despair or anger, we come closer to that state of shalom. (Inspired by Sam Berrin Shonkoff)

Rina Wolfson is a member of KNMS and the AMS Education Coordinator

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Then they stepped up to him and said, “We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children.” (Numbers 32:16)

They had consideration for their wealth more than for their sons and their daughters, for they mentioned their cattle before their little ones. Moses said to them: Not thus shall you do. What is of primary significance (should be) primary, and what is secondary (should be) secondary. Build for yourselves cities for your little ones first, and afterwards folds for your sheep (32:24). Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France]

In the case of the children of Gad and the children of Reuben, you find that they were rich, possessing large numbers of cattle, but they loved their money and settled outside the Land of Israel. Consequently they were the first of all the tribes to go into exile, as is borne out by the text, “And he carried them away, namely, the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh” (I Chronicles 5:26). What brought it on them? The fact that they separated themselves from their brethren because of their possessions. From where can we infer this? From what is written in the Torah, “The Reubenites and the Gadites owned cattle in very great numbers” (32:1). (Bamidbar Rabbah 22:7)

Rabbi Aharon Kotler writes that the two tribes’ intentions may have seemed commendable. With abundant grazing land for their livestock, they would not have to work as hard as farmers, and they would have more time to devote to Torah study. However, in fact this was not their true motivation. Their decision was induced by the wealth that Transjordan would bring them... As we have noted, the accounts in the Torah are intended for teaching and guidance rather than history. We have so many waking hours that we allot to prayer, Torah study, and work. Which of these gets the lion’s share? Is it proper that we often make short order of our morning prayers in order to get to the office as early as possible?... We would do well to rethink our priorities. (Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., Twerski on Chumash, p. 345)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators fault the tribes of Reuben and Gad for placing money and possessions – their cattle – before their families, their community (the other Israelite tribes), and God. Today, when technology allows us to be in contact with the office, clients, and co-workers 24/7, the problem has grown worse. Particularly in the current recession, when many people have lost their jobs and many more worry that they may, it is even more difficult not to make work our priority. Do you work to live or live to work? What do our commentators teach us about what our priorities should be? Are there mitzvot that can help us see our lives in the proper perspective? If you knew that you only had a few days or weeks left to live, how would you spend your time?

PINCHAS

21st Tammuz 5770 ~ 3rd July 2010

By Alex Stein

"And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Get thee up into this mountain of Abarim, and behold the land which I have given unto the children of Israel. And when thou hast seen it, though also shalt be gathered unto thy people, as Aaron thy brother was gathered; because ye rebelled against My commandment in the wilderness of Zin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes....' [Numbers 27: 12-14]

Such are the perils of power. Moses, the exalted leader who led the Jewish people out of slavery, finds himself denied entry into the holy land at the last, all on account of one temper tantrum while carrying out the arduous task of leading his people through the desert. This seems to be the norm of political authority: no matter how great the leader, disgrace always seems to be lurking round the corner.

Transgression – however uncharacteristic – is swiftly punished. God, the mob, the football club chairman, the electorate: we are all quick to depose those who disappoint us. On the other end of the spectrum lies indulgence. It takes time to settle into a job, it takes time to implement change, Rome wasn't built in a day. According to this approach, we should not deify our leaders. Instead, we should patiently nurture them, and not just lash out when mistakes are made, even if they are critical ones. But how can we know which of the approaches is more suitable? It certainly seems that God was unduly harsh on Moses, or – to use a more fashionable term – disproportionate. Because of this, many commentators have argued that Moses's sin went much deeper – that in striking the rock he was trying to play God, or that he had suffered from a breakdown after hearing the spies' reports.

This seems to be an apologetic approach. The God of the Bible is no stranger to intemperate outbursts of his own, and it seems more appropriate to focus on his strange behaviour throughout this episode, rather than Moses. Did he respond to Moses's temper tantrum with one of his own? And did his ego drive him to it? We are constantly told not to apply anthropomorphic traits to God's behaviour, but – all too often – he seems to perform deeds that would be condemned if carried out by mere humans. Perhaps it's time to cast a more critical eye on the seemingly irrational deeds of our creator.

Alex Stein is a former NOAM movement worker now living in Israel

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, “Let the Lord, Source of the breath of all flesh [alternate translation – God of the spirits of all flesh], appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the Lord’s community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.” (Numbers 27:15-17)

1. “Moses spoke to the Lord, saying:” The verse proclaims the excellence of the righteous: even when about to depart from the world, they set aside their own needs and occupy themselves with the needs of the community. (Sifrei)
2. “Let the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the community.” When Moses saw that his sons were not worthy to succeed him in the dignity of his office, he wrapped himself in his tallit, and standing up in prayer before the Holy One, said: “Master of the universe, the disposition of every one of them is revealed to You – the disposition of one is not at all like the disposition of another. After I depart from them, when You will be setting another leader over them, I beg you, set over them a leader who will put up with each and every man according to his particular disposition. (Yalkut, Pinhas 776)
3. When Moses saw how great Pinchas was, he was afraid that he would be chosen as the leader, and he was not pleased with the prospect of having such a zealot as the leader of the Jewish people. He therefore asked of God that the leader be a tolerant man and not a zealous one. (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, 1787-1854, Poland)
4. “Who shall go out before them” That he not act like others, who have their legions go forth while they themselves remain in their homes; that he not lead them out in myriads and bring them back in thousands, or lead them out in thousands and bring them back in hundreds. (Sifrei Zuta)
5. A true leader must “go out before” his people and not trail behind them. He must raise them to his level and not allow himself to descend to theirs. He must “go out before them” and “come in before them,” always at the head of his people. He must have them follow him and not keep looking back to see what they want and follow their wishes. A leader who truly leads his people will raise them to his own level. He has a chance to “take them out” from corruption and to “bring them in” to holiness (as Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter of Ger explains it). A leader who trails behind his people will finally be dragged down by them to their own low level. (Avnei Ezel (Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman), 1897-1943, Poland)

Sparks for Discussion

What qualities do our commentators see as essential for leadership? Do you agree? Are there other qualities you would add? Do you think this is a good prescription for leadership in the modern world – for a president or prime minister? for a CEO? for a rabbi? How would you explain the difference between a leader and a politician?

CHUKAT

7th Tammuz 5770 ~ 19th June 2010

By Alan Orchover

This is one of the most problematic sidrot in the Torah. It is often read together with Balak, although any link between the two is tenuous. First we have the commandment of the Red Heifer taken as a special maftir several weeks before Pesach (Shabbat Parah) as the rabbis considered it emblematic of the exceptional purity required in connection with the preparation of the festival. The ashes of an unblemished totally red heifer mixed with certain

additions were sprinkled on the third and seventh days on the person who had come into contact with a corpse. This purified that person but the priest who carried out the process and the person who burnt the cow became defiled and were not clean until the evening of that day having in the meantime washed themselves and their clothes. Therefore, those who purified others became themselves defiled. A Midrash states that even King Solomon could not explain the ritual. Maimonides, however, did explain it at some length. It is a Chok – a statute for all time, although it was abolished by the rabbis after the destruction of the Temple. There are some groups in Israel today who would wish it to be reinstated as apparently unblemished red heifers are being bred!

The Sedra then suddenly goes forwards 38 years to nearly the end of the wanderings. Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. The people then grumble at Moses and Aaron for water. God instructs Moses and Aaron to speak to the rock to yield water. Moses and Aaron assemble the people in front of the rock. The text states “He said (probably Moses although it is unclear) listen you rebels shall we get water for you from this rock?” Moses struck the rock twice and water came forth copiously. God said to Moses and Aaron “Because you did not trust me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the people, you shall not be allowed to enter into the Land of Israel.” These are the waters of Meribah (waters of strife) also known as Ein Mishpot (Well of judgement).

It seems that a minor transgression committed in frustration and justifiable anger could wipe out a lifetime of merit and service. The commentators have a field day endeavouring to justify God’s excessive punishment. Aaron dies soon thereafter and Moses will die within a year of Aaron. The punishment does not appear to fit the crime. However, the anger of “listen you rebels” showed lack of leadership and publicly expressed wrath and leadership do not go together (Ibn Ezra). Maybe they had sinned in some other way that was edited out to safeguard their reputations. It cannot be proved either way.

The best epitaph for Aaron was composed by Hillel centuries later who stated “Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow men and bringing them near to the Torah.”

Alan Orchover is a member of EMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: What is the size of an olive, the standard unit of measurement, according to Halacha?

Answer: Measuring is central to any legal system. How fast is ‘speeding’? How much drink is intoxicating? Jewish law is also based on a system of measurements; some units of measurement, such as the cubit, go back to the bible. Some come from the Romans, such as the Parsa and some come from nature, such as the egg and the olive.

How big is an olive? An average olive is around 3 to 4 cubic centimetres, but halachic olives are much larger. Most authorities consider the size of a halachic olive to be around 28 cc – some go as far as 56cc. How did this come about, and what is the real size of an olive in Jewish law?

There is no definition of the size of an olive in the Talmud, amongst the Geonim. (Babylon, 6th-10th century), or among the Spanish Rabbis. The Rabbis of Ashkenaz are the first to address the question in detail. Olives are not native to Ashkenazi countries and Ashkenazi Rabbis would never have seen an olive. The question of how to estimate the size of an olive was a serious question for them.

Although there is no direct discussion of the size of an olive in the Talmud, it is possible to deduce its size from places where it is mentioned. There are two such instances. In tractate Kritut the sages discuss how much food a person can swallow in one gulp. The sages stated that the throat cannot hold more than two olives. Elsewhere, the

sages estimated that the throat cannot hold more than a chicken's egg. From here we can deduce that an olive is half the size of an egg.

It is possible to deduce the size of an olive using a different method. Rambam, [MT, Hilchot Eiruvin 1:9] states that a dried fig is one third the size of an egg. The Talmud [BT Shabbat 91a] states that an olive is less than the size of a fig. From here we can deduce that an olive is no bigger than one third the size of an egg.

Based on these calculations, the Ashkenazi Rabbis adopted two different standards. R. Yitzchak of Dampierre (France, 12th century) ruled that an olive is the size of half an egg. Rabbeinu Tam of Remerupt (France, 12th century) ruled that it is the size of one third of an egg. The Shulchan Aruch simply states: "The size of an olive – some say it is around half an egg". [OH 486:1] This odd wording indicates that he is not expressing his own opinion, but the strict view of others. Finally, R. Yechezkel Landau (Prague, 18th century), trying to reconcile measurements that were given in eggs and in fingers, came to the conclusion that in biblical times eggs were much larger than the eggs of our time. He writes "It is clear to me [that] a whole egg of our day is only half the size of an egg that was used for the Torah quantities. Thus the size of an olive grew from 3 to 28 and then to 56 cubic centimetres. There is no reason to believe that olives today are any different from the olives in the time of the bible or the Talmud. There are 2000 and 3000 year old trees still living in Israel that testify to this fact. Based on this, the size of a halachic olive is the average size of a common olive today – roughly 3 to 4 cc. All other measurements are based on a misunderstanding and are not the original intention of the Torah.

Based on: The Evolution of the Olive. Rabbi Natan Slifkin

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

KORACH

Rosh Chodesh Tammuz

30th Sivan 5770 ~ 12th June 2010

News from the past (?)

By Annette Boeckler

The revolt in the Israelite camp reached its climax at a mass meeting of the rebels. The majority of the speakers were from the tribe of Reuben. In their so far sharpest attack the rebels questioned Moses and Aaron and held them guilty for usurpation and severe mismanagement. They called for an immediate return of the people to Egypt and warned clearly that under the continued leadership of Moses the people of Israel would be led into disaster. One of the speakers said: "Nobody believes in the empty promises that this man has uttered. We will never see a land of milk and honey, but only desert." The speaker suggested choosing new leadership and returning to Egypt. Among the rebels is the famous singer songwriter Korach from the tribe of Levy, who became famous by performances in the sanctuary with his sons.

Bulletin: We have just received the news that Korach and his supporters, who took part in the rebellion against Moses, died this morning in a tragic manner. In front of thousands of people, who watched terrified, they literally sank into the ground, as a rift broke up and dragged the men, whom Moses had told to stand at that place, into the depth. No trace

could be found of the rebels so far. Among the missing are Dathan and Abiram, the leaders of the tribe of Reuben. Strangely the sons of Korach had just composed a song saying "You have put me at the bottom of the Pit" (Ps 88:7). They probably would never have thought that they themselves would actually experience this.

The enquiries so far prove that the strange disappearance of Korach and his fans was very likely caused by a divine interference, as the revolt was about the question whether Israel is holy, which means set apart. The rebels had claimed that the whole people of Israel are holy. This opinion was new, as Moses had so far always preached that one should strive to become holy, one should strive to be a moral and religious people. Moses published some guidelines to help this striving. The rebels had sharply attacked Moses' position and had proclaimed, the whole people of Israel as it is, is holy. They understood holy as being special, with no need of guidance in religious matters. It looks, as if God had now had separated the rebels from the rest of the community, to avoid the spread of their teachings.

A different topic. Religious institutions need your support; this was revealed in a recently published law by Moses. The law says that 10% of one's income should be given to support the house of God. Responsible for the administration of the donations and also for the religious services in general will be the family of Aaron.

Our information is based on Parashat Korach, Numbers 16-18 and was published first as Leo Baeck College D'var Torah.

Annette Boeckler is lecturer/librarian at the Leo Baeck College and is a member of KNMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Is vegetarian cheese kosher?

Answer: The Mishnah in tractate Avodah Zara [2:4] lists a number of foods that must be made by Jewish people. Cheese is on this list. The Talmud does not explain why cheese needs to be produced by Jews. It is usually understood that the production of cheese is particularly susceptible to inadvertent mixing with non-kosher ingredients. This is the reason given by Maimonides [MT Forbidden Foods 3:13]. The demand that cheese be produced by Jews is to guarantee that the cheese has remained kosher.

Cheese is made by the curdling of milk fats. Specific enzymes are used to promote the curdling process. Different cheeses are made by using different enzymes. The most common enzyme used is rennet, which is found naturally in an animal's stomach. Since cheese was historically made by setting the milk to curdle in the stomachs of non-kosher animals, the Rabbis decreed that we should only use cheese made by Jews.

Animal rennet is not used in the making of vegetarian cheese. The Tosephot [BT Avodah Zara 35a Hada] report that many places permitted 'non-Jewish' cheeses because they were made with flowers. They also record that the sages of Narbonne permitted cheese that was

produced by non-Jews in their area because they used plant based enzymes. This would suggest that vegetarian cheese should be permitted, and is the reason some people choose to eat unsupervised vegetarian cheese.

However, both Maimonides [ibid] and Joseph Karo [Shulchan Aruch YD 115:2] rule that all cheeses need to be produced by Jews. Why is vegetarian cheese included in a ban on cheese made in animal stomachs? There is a Talmudic principle called 'Lo Plug', which literally means – 'do not differentiate'. This principle states that when establishing a law, the Rabbis prefer those that cover broad, readily recognised categories rather than many specific rules which may be confusing. Following this principle, the halacha prefers a rule that all cheese needs to be produced by Jews – rather than set separate rules for different types of cheese.

Civil law adopts the same principle. For example, the Highway Code sets the speed limit in built up areas as 30 mph. Theoretically, it could have decided that on sunny days the speed limit is 35 but in the fog it is 25; that younger drivers with quick reflexes can drive at 40, whereas older drivers can only drive at 20. A law like this would be confusing and hard to enforce. Legal systems prefer to keep it simple. And once a rabbinic decree has been introduced, it generally remains law even when circumstances change.

There may be an exception for white curd cheeses, such as cottage cheese, which are not made with rennet at all. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein [USA, 20th century] [Igrot Moshe, YD 1:49] suggests that as they are not made with rennet, these cheeses may not be considered 'cheese' from a Halachic point of view, and therefore may not be included in the general ban against cheese made by non-Jews.

Most Kashrut authorities rule that all cheeses, including vegetarian cheese, require supervision. Some allow white curd cheeses without supervision.

Based on Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 1:49

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

SHELACH LECHA

23rd Sivan 5770 ~ 5th June 2010

By Eva Frojmovic

The colour of the evening sky

The bulk of the Parashah is taken up by the story of the twelve spies and the aftermath of this tragically botched act of espionage, the parashah then continues with a series of laws concerning sin-offerings. The enunciation of these laws is interrupted by the short narrative about the man gathering sticks on Shabbat and his capital punishment. The

Parashah ends with the commandment of Tzitzit. This last passage is of course a passage recited regularly as the third section of the Shema, and is thus familiar.

As a Parashah, this assemblage of narrative and legal texts poses a problem of coherence. Like many parts of the Torah, it shows the holy book to be a text composed of texts. Paradoxically, this composite nature has provided a spur to interpretation over many generations.

Some of the Rishonim considered that the laws followed the story of the spies in order to reassure the children of Israel that despite the spies' rebellion and the divine punishment (they said they would rather die in the desert than fight against the Canaanites, so God lets the present generation die in the desert by prolonging the time of their wanderings by forty years), they would indeed one day settle the promised land. The reassurance rests in the opening of this section of laws: "when you will come to the land of your dwelling places that I give you..." (Num 15:2).

The final commandment given in this segment is that of Tzitzit. Rashi, at the end of his own commentary, has transmitted precious excerpts from an older scholar, Moshe ha-Darshan (Moses "the commentator") from Narbonne, a great centre of learning between Ashkenaz and Sefarad. Moshe ha-Darshan's treatise is now lost except for the extracts copied by Rashi and other medieval admirers.

In the extract transmitted by Rashi, Moshe reflects on the connection between tzitzit and Exodus from Egypt – why is it invoked in this commandment? The answer is alluded to in the choice of vocabulary: "'on the corners', literally wings (kanfei) 'of their garments', corresponding to 'I carried you on eagle's wings'. On four corners, but not on [a garment] which has three corners, nor on one with five, corresponding to the four expressions of redemption which were said of Egypt: I shall take out, I shall rescue, I shall redeem, and I shall take (Ex 6:6-7)." Then, Moshe undercuts any triumphalism that might arise: "A thread of Tekhelet" (Num 15:38), because of the bereavement of the [Egyptian] firstborn: the Aramaic translation [Targum] of bereavement is Tikhla [i.e. Tekhelet and Tikhla would echo each other, in this piece of imaginative etymology]. And that plague happened at night; and the colour of Tekhelet resembles a sky which grows dark towards evening. And the eight strings in it correspond to the eight days that Israel waited from when they left Egypt until they recited the song at the sea." With this exhortation to mourn the enemy, the Narbonnese rabbi quietly commented upon the great (forgotten) clash of civilisations in his own time, when Christian armies were pouring south to expel Muslims from Andalusia. His attitude of compassion for the enemy's suffering is worth rescuing from the "dark ages".

Eva Frojmovic is a member of LMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Does a Rabbi need to be present when a female convert immerses in the Mikvah? If not, how can a conversion without witnesses be Kosher?

Answer: In the Book of Leviticus [Lev. 5:1], the Torah talks about the sin of withholding testimony. It includes one who "although able to testify as one who has either seen or knows of the matter, does not give the information". The Talmud [BT Shavuot 34a] elaborates upon this verse. "R. Jose the Galilean said... of such testimony as may be established by seeing without knowing, and by knowing without seeing, the verse deals." This statement establishes the principle that one may be a witness to actions that one knows about without actually having seen the action, if the circumstances are such that one is absolutely certain that the testimony is true. This principle has been applied to many areas of Jewish law. Ritual immersion is one such instance. The Talmud [BT Yevamot 45b] discusses the Jewish status of a woman who had not formally converted with a Bet Din, but who had immersed in a Mikvah. R. Yosef accepts her as a Jew. The Tosephot [10th-13th Century, mainly France and Germany] debate how the

woman's status could be confirmed. Even if she had previously immersed, the Bet Din did not witness the immersion! They suggest two possible answers: 1) a Bet Din is not required for every stage of the conversion. It is required when the convert accepts the obligation to observe the Mitzvot, but not for immersion in the Mikvah. 2) Even if the Bet Din is required for immersion, they don't actually have to see the immersion. It is enough for the Bet Din to know for certain that the immersion took place for them to count as having witnessed the immersion.

This principle has also been evoked to certify the Kashrut of milk. The Mishnah [Avodah Zara 2:6] declares that one is not allowed to consume milk unless a Jew was present at the time of the milking. This is because milk from a non-Kosher animal could easily be mixed into the Kosher milk. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein [20th Century, USA] rules that in a country where the government conducts regular inspections, it is permitted to consume any milk. Since we rely on the government inspections we 'know' that the milk has not been mixed, and this counts as if we had witnessed the milking ourselves.

At the root of this question lies a deep philosophical issue – what does it mean to know something? It is rare that we have the absolute certainty that comes from witnessing something ourselves. For society to function, we need a way to also accept 'quite certain' as being good enough. Jewish law is the law of life. It has established reasonable expectations of what needs to be done in order to know. There are many different ways to ascertain that a proper immersion has taken place. Female witnesses that the Bet Din trusts are present at the immersion. Rabbis witness the convert entering the Mikvah room and subsequently returning with wet hair. As long as the Bet Din is convinced that a proper immersion took place, the conversion is Kosher.

Based on Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe YD Part 1, 47.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

BEHA'LOTACHA

16th Sivan 5770 ~ 29th May 2010

By Rabbi Joel Levy

At the end of this parasha we find the disturbing story of Miriam and Aaron, Moses' siblings, expressing their bitter jealousy:

Bemidbar Chapter 12 verses 1-3

"And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Kushite woman. And they said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only with Moses? Has he not spoken also with us?" And the Lord heard it. And the man Moses was very humble ("anav"), more than any other man upon the face of the earth."

The issue with the Kushite is hard to understand, but the editorial insertion insisting that Moses was in fact humble ("anav") leads us to think that his siblings were accusing Moses of some particular arrogance; either in his marriage or in his relationship with God.

But what does it really mean to be "anav"? This is in fact the only use of this word in its singular form in the whole Tanach. It appears multiple times in its plural form: "anavim", especially in the book of Psalms, but there in the book of Psalms it refers to a whole social class; the downtrodden, disadvantaged and impoverished, rather than to an elevated moral quality.

The Siphrei, a compilation of early midrashim on Numbers and Deuteronomy, explores the meaning of "anav" in the story of Moses and his siblings. It actively rejects the very reasonable assumption that "anav" is just the singular form of "anavim" as found in the rest of the Tanach:

Siphrei B'Ha'alotecha Piska 43

"And the man Moses was very humble" – He was humble in his consciousness ("da'at").

You say it means in his da'at – but maybe it means in his body (i.e. he was physically weak!)

The Torah says (Numbers 21:34) "(And the Lord said to Moses, Fear him not; for I have delivered him into your hand, and all his people, and his land;) and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites"

He fell upon Sihon and killed him as he fell upon Og and killed him.

Alternatively:

"..Very humble" – He was humble in his da'at.

You say it means in his da'at – but maybe it means in his finances (i.e. he was poor!)

[The Torah says (Ex. 11:3) "(And the Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians.) Moreover the man Moses was very great (in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people.)"

If we were going to learn the meaning of "anav" from its plural form "anavim" we would have to assume that Moses was a member of a downtrodden, disadvantaged and impoverished social class. This midrash goes out of its way to assure us that he was in fact physically powerful, a king-killer, and considered wealthy, even amongst the Egyptians. The Rabbis systematically read "anavah" (humility) as a special quality that can really only be found amongst the wealthy and the politically powerful. Who else do they describe as "anav"? Saul, Jonathan, Hezekiah, Hillel, Shimon Ben Gamliel, Judah HaNasi to name but a few - all leaders of their respective generations. The downtrodden are not humble – they are just oppressed – "anavim". Only a person of wealth, power and stature has the possibility of transcending their power and becoming "anav".

Joel Levy is rabbi at KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

They marched from the mountain of the Lord a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord travelled in front of them on that three days' journey to seek out a resting place for them. (Numbers 10:33)

This is the ark that went out with them to war, and in it the broken pieces of the tablets lay; and it went before them a distance of three days to prepare for them a place of encampment. Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France])

Rabbi Yehudah ben Lakish said, there were two arks, one that stayed in the camp and one that would go out with them to war, and in it were the fragments of the tablets [that Moses broke], and it is said, "the ark of the Covenant of the Lord travelled," and the one that was with them in the camp had in it a sefer Torah, as is written (Numbers 14:44), "Neither the Lord's ark of the Covenant nor Moses stirred from the camp." (Baraita d'Melechet HaMishkan, chapter 6, cited in "Torah Sheleimah," Rabbi Menahem Mendel Kasher)

Show respect to an old person who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his own, for we have learned that the fragments of the tablets were kept alongside the tablets in the ark of the Covenant. (Talmud Berakhot 8b)

It is natural for old people to be despised by the general population when they can no longer function as they once did, but sit idle and have no purpose. The commandment "Honour your father and your mother" was given specifically for this situation. (Melechet Mahshevet (Rabbi Gur Aryeh ha-Levi), 7th century)

One whose father or mother has become demented should try to behave with them according to their mental state until He will have mercy on them [until they recover or die], and if it is impossible for him to bear because of their altered condition, he should go and leave them and appoint others to care for them as is fitting. (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 240:10 [Laws of Honouring One's Father and Mother])

Sparks for Discussion

Some commentators teach that there were two arks, some that there was only one, but all agree that the broken fragments of the first set of tablets were placed in the ark. Why was this done? Why do you think the Talmud compares these fragments to an elderly person suffering from dementia?

As our population continues to age, the number of seniors in our families and communities will grow. Some of these people will remain active and engaged well into their eighties and beyond; others will slow down a bit and experience an occasional "senior moment." And some, sadly, will develop Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. What do our communities owe to these "broken" elders? How can we support those who care for them? What does the Shulchan Aruch want us to understand about caring for elders suffering from dementia?

9th Sivan 5770 ~ 22nd May 2010

By Michael Alpert

Chapter five of Naso contains the so-called 'Ordeal of Jealousy.' What is to be done with a wife suspected of infidelity? She is brought before a priest, a Cohen, who mixes some earth from the Temple floor with water and gives her a solemn warning. If she is innocent, the 'water of bitterness' will be harmless. But, if not, her belly will swell and her thighs rot. The Cohen writes the words on a scroll and dissolves it in the water which the wife must drink.

The ordeal of jealousy was less cruel than similar rituals in other cultures, such as when a suspected witch was thrown into water with her hands and feet bound. If she floated she was a witch; if she sank she was innocent, although she might well have drowned before being pulled out. In the test described in the Torah, drinking the water would do no harm to an innocent wife, while a guilty woman might be so frightened that she would confess. On the other hand, she might be brazen enough not to allow the priestly curse to frighten her. She might even take a chance and not confess infidelity because her husband would be obliged to divorce her. This may be why the ritual was discontinued.

The ordeal of jealousy is discussed in the Mishna (the codification of Jewish law written down in about 200 CE) in the section called Sotah or 'the straying wife'. In Chapter 9 of Sotah, the reason given for abandoning the ordeal of jealousy was that by the time the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE there was so much immorality around that there was no longer any point in continuing the procedure (perhaps because husbands tolerated unfaithful wives).

Chapter 7 of Sotah is, however, of practical significance even today, because it discusses which texts must be uttered in Hebrew and which in any language that is understood by the hearers. One may utter the curse in the ordeal of jealousy, the Shema', the Birkat Ha-Mazon - Grace after Meals -, and certain oaths, in any language that the participants understand. The public reading of the 'Amidah, however, must be conducted in Hebrew as must the Blessing that the cohanim give from the Bimah.

Yet, though it may be derived from this that Torah and the daily and Shabbat services may be read in people's daily language, there is little evidence that this was ever done. One or two items (notably kaddish) are said partly in Aramaic, which was the daily language when kaddish was introduced, and some Yiddish prayers were composed for women, who did not usually know Hebrew. In the Spanish and Portuguese tradition, the Aramaic translation or Targum of the Haftarah on Tish'a Be'Av - is recited in Spanish. This however is all, and it is in Hebrew that our historic liturgy has been recited everywhere and throughout the centuries. We should strive to read and understand it.

Michael Alpert is a member of NLS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: When coming across God's name in a passage of Midrash or Talmud, should God's name be pronounced, or is it better to use a different appellation such as Hashem or Adoshem?

Answer: The Talmud [BT Brachot 21a] records a debate concerning the status of a person who is ritually impure: R. Nathan b. Abishalom says: He may expound the Talmud, provided only that he does not mention the divine names that occur in it. Rashi explains that this refers to names that appear in the verses of scripture that are quoted in the Talmud, i.e. a person who is ritually impure should avoid pronouncing God's name when studying. If only one who is ritually impure is prevented from pronouncing the Divine name, we can deduce that everyone else is permitted.

Furthermore, the Talmud states [ibid]: Words of Torah are not susceptible to uncleanness. ... as it says, Is not My word like as fire. Just as fire is not susceptible to uncleanness, so words of Torah are not susceptible to uncleanness. This means that we are no longer concerned with questions of ritual purity when it comes to the study of Torah. Anyone is permitted to pronounce God's name during their study. In spite of the widespread custom of saying Hashem instead of pronouncing God's name, there is strong Halachic support for the opposite opinion. Rabbi Yaakov Emden [Germany, 18th Century] relates that as a young child studying with his father [also a famous Rabbi, the Chacham Tzvi], the students would sometimes use one of the other appellations, rather than pronounce God's name. His father, using the Talmud reference quoted above, would admonish the students and insist that they pronounce the name correctly. Many later scholars adopted this view. Furthermore, the use of the word Adoshem, which is a corruption of God's name, is considered disrespectful, and therefore if using an appellation, it is always preferable to use Hashem rather than any other alternative.

All of the above only applies to saying God's name when quoting verses. If when studying one comes across a proper blessing, i.e. the formula that starts Baruch Ata ..., there are different considerations. It is forbidden to recite a blessing without cause. Saying a blessing without a proper reason is regarded as taking God's name in vain and is strictly forbidden. Therefore, if one comes to a blessing while studying, one should say Hashem or Elokim, rather than recite a proper blessing without cause. Here the concern for not reciting an improper blessing takes precedence over pronouncing God's name properly.

Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da'at, 3, 13.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: [jewishjourneys@supanet.com](mailto: jewishjourneys@supanet.com).

BEMIDBAR

2nd Sivan 5770 ~ 15th May 2010

By David Kosky

The Book of Bamidbar opens with a reference which is at first sight strange:

“And God spoke to Moses in the desert saying...”

Why does the Torah need to mention where this communication happened? We already know where the Children of Israel are travelling. Why is it necessary to introduce the Fourth Book of the Torah in this way?

Midrash Rabbah provides an answer. “Anyone that does not make themselves into a desert, barren and ownerless cannot acquire wisdom and Torah. Therefore it says, ‘God spoke to Moses in the desert’”

It can be no coincidence that the three Abrahamic religions were all forged in the Desert. Anyone who has been privileged to trek on foot in the desert, cannot fail to understand the deeply spiritual ethos of the Desert and the awesome realisation of one's own insignificance in its vast emptiness and infinite antiquity.

The Midrash and Gemarah clearly state that considering ourselves as a “Midbar” is a necessary pre-requisite to acceptance of the Torah. This is surely not a reference to adoption of a “Midbar” lifestyle in a physical sense.

Rather it is a reference to our natural inclination to selfishness which on the one hand is responsible for our struggle for survival but which on the other hinders the making of meaningful personal relationships. To be successfully engaged in a relationship with another party one must suppress the focus on self and break down the emphasis on one's own ego. If this is true in personal relationships, how much more necessary can this be in our relationship with God. To engage in a relationship with God we must view ourselves as in a "Midbar", barren and empty. Only by realisation of the insignificance of our own ego, can we understand the nature of dependence upon and make room for God in our lives.

In Parshat Bamidbar the Twelve Tribes are divided into four groups of three with the Mishkan in the centre. The banner of each tribe is directed towards the Mishkan. One would have thought that the natural place for the Mishkan would be right at the front. According to Bamidbar Rabbah, Moses feared that each tribe would complain of its position. The solution he was told, was to have the Mishkan at the centre. In the desert, as in life people can complain about their position, the division of their roles, and their lot and standing in the community only if their "self" is at the middle of the camp. When the Mishkan is at the centre their focus is directed to their relationship with God.

David Kosky is a member of EMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Kashrut authorities seem to be increasingly concerned about checking for insects in salads and vegetables. How concerned do we need to be about this?

Answer: Eating any kind of insect is forbidden. The Torah specifically commands: All the things that swarm upon the earth are an abomination ...you shall not eat ... anything that crawls on its belly, or anything that walks on fours, or anything that has many legs; for they are an abomination. [Lev. 11:41-42] Therefore one must take great care to remove all insects from food before it is consumed.

The concern about eating insects is further complicated by the rules of Kashrut that deal with mixtures. In general, if a forbidden substance is mixed into permitted food we may disregard a very small quantity. Depending on the circumstances, the proportion of the forbidden substance in the mixture must usually be less than 1:2 or 1:60. However, this rule does not apply to whole creatures. Therefore, although a tiny drop of milk may become nullified in a meat mixture, a small insect is never considered nullified, even in a very large salad.

The issue of insects became acute with the development of means to extend our vision using magnifying glasses or microscopes. We now know that with strong enough magnification, it is possible to find living creatures everywhere – in every food and every surface. The question is: at what point do we stop being concerned about the existence of these creatures, even when we know they are there?

The simple rule is that we are only concerned with those things that can be seen with the naked eye. This is obvious from the fact that the entire Halachic literature assumes that we all need to eat and drink – but this would be impossible if we were to pay attention to microscopic creatures. The standard position is summarised by Rabbi Yechiel Epstein [19th Cent., Lithuania] in his book Aruch HaShulchan [YD 84]. "I have found written in the name of scientists that one who looks through a magnifying glass will find hundreds of worms in the vinegar – but vinegar is not forbidden ... and I have also heard that in water, particularly rain water, there are hundreds of small creatures that cannot be seen with the naked eye. In my childhood I heard about a person who found hundreds of thousands of small creatures in water – but should we say that we must not drink water? The truth is that the Torah does not forbid things that cannot be seen with the naked eye, for the Torah was not given to angels."

This rule has far reaching consequences. If we look hard enough, we would certainly find blemishes in every Etrog, holes in the lung of every animal (rendering the meat non-kosher) or flaws in the ink on every mezuzah or Torah scroll. The principle “The Torah was given to people and not angels” is a plea for a reasonable approach to observance.

Therefore, one should certainly check for insects in food. But there is no need for special equipment to find the smallest bug – for if it can’t be seen, you do not need to worry about it.

Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da’at, 6, 47.

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

BEHAR/BECHUKOTAI

24th Iyar 5770 ~ 8th May 2010

By Deborah Silver

It’s spiritually fashionable to live in the present. T-shirts, coffee mugs (!), websites and the messages at the end of people’s emails proclaim the merits of living in the moment, zoning in rather than zoning out.

There’s even a section about it on wikihow

(<http://www.wikihow.com/Live-in-the-Moment>).

Perhaps the intention is to curb our human urge towards impatience. Many of us at times resemble Juliet eagerly anticipating her wedding night:

...so tedious is this day

is the night before some festival

an impatient child that hath new robes

may not wear them....(Romeo and Juliet, III:2)

Yet, when we arrive we find, in the words of Elizabeth Smart, ‘the event that too much anticipation has fingered to shreds’ (By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept).

Given this, it is a little strange that each year, at this time, we follow the commandment:

‘You shall count seven complete Sabbaths from the day after the Sabbath, from the day of waving the omer of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to God...’ (Vayikra 23:15-17)

What happens to ‘living in the moment’ while we are counting the Omer? The text from the Torah seems clear - we are to count forwards, towards a specific end. Based on Shakespeare and Elizabeth Smart, aren’t we ruining both the time in between and the end itself by doing so?

The Sfat Emet - the Gur Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Lieb Alter, says we aren’t. He teaches, in relation to the mention of Har Sinai at the beginning of this week’s Torah portion, that both the shemittah year - the year of release - and the Jubilee, the fiftieth year after seven cycles of seven shemittah years - represent a standing outside of the rules of nature, in which we rest and prove that we are not subservient to them. But we are not capable of standing entirely outside of nature, and so we must count towards these goals. Each act of counting, he teaches - the seven years of the shemittah cycle, the seven times seven years of the Jubilee cycle and the seven weeks of the Omer cycle - draws all of the time within the count towards the desired end. In that way we are able to reach towards the source of all life and draw energy from it, overcoming the restrictions of nature and achieving the status of angels, like we once did at Sinai.

If so, living in the moment is over-rated. Instead, according to the Sfat Emet, we draw our greatest spiritual strength from looking and reaching forward towards a goal. And the goal, in its turn, sheds its influence back over the time preceding it. If we count with dedication, with intention, with patience and attention, we will not finger the event to shreds. Rather, the closer we get to it, the more energy we will draw from it.

Isn’t that a great image for our journey to Sinai?

Mazal Tov to Deborah Silver currently a rabbinic student at the University of Judaism LA and a member of Assif who receives Semicha next week.

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: There are those who recite the words “Baruch Hu U’Varuch Shemo” whenever they hear a blessing. What is the source of this custom and when should this be recited.

The roots of this custom are in the bible. When Noah is first introduced in the Torah the verse states [Gen. 6:9] : “These are the generations of Noah – Noah was a righteous man ...” Why are we told that he was a righteous man? Rashi explains the principle – zecher tzadiik levracha - whenever a righteous person is mentioned his praise is also mentioned.

This principle is applied also to God. At the beginning of the Ha’azinu song, Moses states: For the Name of the Lord I proclaim; Give glory to our God [Deut. 32;3]. ... the Talmud explains [BT Yoma 37a] For the Name of the Lord I proclaim; Give glory to our God: Moses said to Israel: When I mention the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, ascribe greatness unto Him.” The Sefer Haredim [Eliezer Azikri, Tzafat, 16th Cent.] interprets this obligation as meaning that one should recite ‘Baruch Hu U’Varuch Shemo’ whenever one hears God’s name.

The specific custom of reciting ‘Baruch Hu U’Varuch Shemo’ upon hearing a blessing is first mentioned in the Tur [Jacob ben Asher, Spain 15th Cent.] [OC 124], who states “I have a tradition from my father, the Rosh, that it was his custom that each time he heard a blessing he would recite ‘Baruch Hu U’Varuch Shemo’.

Not everyone has approved of this custom. God's name is mentioned so frequently in our prayers, that taken to the extreme, it would be impossible to concentrate on the meaning of the prayers and it would render almost any prayer unintelligible.

Ma'asei Rav writes in the name of R. Elijah of Vilna [Lithuania, 18th Cent.] that one should not say this recitation during the repetition of the Amidah, for frequently it means that one misses hearing the end of the blessing and thereby does not fulfil his obligation. In his siddur The Vilna Gaon writes that it is forbidden to recite the 'Baruch Hu ...' because one must concentrate only on the blessings he is hearing and on reciting amen at the end of each blessing.

The common practice is to recite this praise, but only in places where it is not disruptive to the flow of the service. We recite it at the end of a blessing – where there is a natural pause after God's name, but not at the beginning of blessings, where God's name is in the middle of a phrase. The 'Baruch Hu...' is not recited at any point of the service where it is forbidden to interrupt the flow. This means that we do not say it during the Pesukei D'zimra, during the recitation of the Shema and the surrounding blessings until the end of the silent Amidah. We also do not recite the 'Baruch Hu' if someone else is reciting a blessing on our behalf – such as the public recitation of the Kiddush or the Hamotzei. It is commonly recited during the repetition of the Amidah by those who are listening to the service leader. The leader should pause slightly after saying Gods name – to leave time for the praise.

Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da'at, 4, 9.

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

EMOR

17th Iyar 5770 ~ 1st May 2010

Shabbat begins in London at 20.08 and ends at 21.17

By Harriet Oppenheimer

Emor sets out rules and order about the purity of priests and their families, purity of those connected with offerings, and rules associated with Shabbat and the festivals.

On the face of it these rules appear to set out an order that is formulaic and theoretic in its neatness. Not only are the priests held to the highest standards of purity, but so are their families, hence the custom that kohanim do not marry those who have been divorced. And not only must the priests be scrupulous in all matters concerning offerings, but so must any person connected with them – descendants of Aaron who have any physical infirmity are not qualified to offer sacrificial food to God. And then the festivals follow, according to God's "fixed times".

The orderly societal laws described in Emor are exemplified at the end of the parasha with the story of a man whose mother was Jewish but whose father was Egyptian. Immediately we understand that this man does not fit into the normative order of society, and indeed we find out that during a fight he profanes God's name, an act which has been explicitly prohibited at the start of this parashah. This is brought to Moses' attention to pass judgement. God tells Moses that the punishment should be that the man is taken outside the camp and stoned by the people – he is expelled for his unnatural sin, and physically expunged, annihilated by the people to whose societal laws he does not conform.

But there's more to these laws in Emor than just this reading. When God sets the standard for the purity of the kohanim, God enumerates the range of human conditions that are not acceptable, makes reference to the defiled daughter of a priest, their disabled or diseased children – these too are part of the Jewish people, even if not the chosen priests. The ideal of the normative society is clearly part of God's vision, but situated within the wider realities and diversity of the people of Israel.

And so too for the "fixed times" of the festivals. The Talmud tells a story of a dispute between the Rabbis on how to calculate the calendar, which culminated in Rabban Gamliel, the supreme rabbinic authority, summoning his disputant Rabbi Yehoshua to visit Rabban Gamliel bearing a staff and money on the date which Rabbi Yehoshua held to be Yom Kippur. Rabbi Yehoshua was distressed. But Rabbi Akiva reassured him, citing the verse in this parashah "...the festivals of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions". The date of Yom Kippur, said Rabbi Akiva, was not a matter of objective fact, but rather it was when the authorities say it is. Rabbi Yehoshua agreed and went to see Rabban Gamliel on the date required. In other words the timing of the festivals too, though it may appear to be an absolute standard imposed from without by God, in fact is determined by fallible, disputatious human beings

Harriet Oppenheimer is a member of NNLS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: What is the proper way to use ovens and stoves on Shabbat, when either reheating or serving food that has been left on the flame from before Shabbat? The Shulchan Aruch (OH 253:5) states: "It is permitted to place a previously cooked dish on top of a pot in order to heat it, because this is not a usual method of cooking". Elsewhere the Shulchan Aruch (OH 318:8) states: "It is permitted to place a cold dish on top of a hot pot which is on the fire on Shabbat, for anything which is permitted to be placed near the fire on Shabbat, such as a dry dish, may be placed on top of a pot which is on the fire".

These two statements indicate that it is not permitted to place a cold dish directly on the fire in order to heat it up – there needs to be some distinction between the way things are heated up and they was that they are normally cooked. Therefore, even though reheating on Shabbat is permitted – placing things directly on the fire in the manner of normal cooking, is not.

The Shulchan Aruch is also concerned about the Talmudic prohibition of 'Shema Yechate' – lest one stirs the coals. The fear is that one who places something on a fire on Shabbat is likely to do something to adjust the temperature – which would directly violate the prohibition of fire on Shabbat. Any use of an oven or stove must ensure that it is impossible to use the controls to adjust the flame.

In our modern context, there are several ways to make sure that food is reheated in an 'indirect' manner. One way is the blech – a metal covering which is placed over a stove on Shabbat when the top is used for reheating. The blech must completely cover the gas hob, and also the controls for the gas to prevent any adjustments being made on Shabbat. The Shabbat Plata is an electrical equivalent. The electric heating element is completely covered by a metal box, and it has no temperature controls that can be adjusted.

Liquids may not be reheated on Shabbat, but may be left on the fire from before Shabbat comes in on Friday. The prohibition of Shema yechate also applies. A Shabbat urn is specifically used for keeping water hot over Shabbat. To meet Shabbat regulations the urn must be turned on and brought to a boil before Shabbat. A good Shabbat urn keeps the water just under 100 degrees – so that the water does not boil away. It should ideally have no adjustable temperature controls. Furthermore, there are other ways that the temperature of food left on the fire might be regulated on Shabbat. The Shulchan Aruch (OH 253:3) states: "One who rises in the morning and sees that his food

is overcooked, and fears it will burn, may place an old empty pot on the fire and place his pot on top – but he or she must take care not to place his boiling pot on the ground”.

The fear of placing the pot on the ground is because moving a pot on and off a flame is a good way to regulate its temperature, and therefore too much like real cooking. One who places a boiling pot of liquid food on the fire from before Shabbat – may not return the pot to the fire once it has been removed and set down. It is permitted to temporarily take the pot off the fire to serve – as long as the pot is held until it is placed back on the flame. All these seem like pedantic details. But the Halacha is trying to bridge the gap between two different concerns. It wants to prevent us from cooking – which is one of the major prohibitions, but it knows that a good hot meal is the key to Shabbat enjoyment. The details of law enable us to enjoy the meal without the preparation of the meal supplanting the enjoyment of the day. Shabbat Shalom! Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da’at, 4, 9.

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

ACHAREI MOT/KEDOSHIM

10th Iyar 5770 ~ 24th April 2010

By Alan Orchover

In the middle of Leviticus we suddenly come upon the story and commandments relating to Yom Kippur. This is quite surprising because, apart from Pesach, no other festival is given such lengthy treatment in the Torah.

The ancient ritual of Azazel, possibly pagan in origin, sets out in detail the story of the goat in the wilderness where, as part of an elaborate ritual, it is symbolically sent off and thrown off a cliff with all the sins of the people having been transferred to it. Not only ancient communal ritual but individual atonement was also required. This meant that, although the High Priest had an elaborate ceremony for removing the sins of the people, the latter were also required to show personal commitment.

Later, we have the statutory provisions for the day referred to as “Shabbat Shabbaton”. The Israelites are told “you shall afflict your souls” which is stated twice to show the importance of personal repentance on this day. Tradition has held that this is interpreted as referring to fasting, but the translation in the Plaut Chumash “you shall practice self-denial” and the contention that this chapter is not concerned with personal inner contrition cannot be right as it is not borne out by the text. Maimonides stated that the two occasions mentioned for “afflicting the souls” (which is the literal translation of the Hebrew) refer to fasting and teshuvah (return).

Azazel seems to mean dismissal or possibly removal and was also used to refer to the rock in the wilderness from which the hapless goat was hurled. Nachmanides stated that Azazel was the embodiment of evil which is why the peoples’ sins were transferred to

Unfortunately, the legend of the Azazel has been taken and distorted historically. The “scapegoat” has been replaced by the Jew as the sacrificial victim with all the alleged sins

and 'crimes' including blood libels and calumnies thrown on the Jew through 2,000 years. The concept of the scapegoat has meant the suffering of the Jewish people since early Christianity made worse by the words of Matthew's gospel, "His blood be on us and on our children." This "travesty of Azazel" (Franz Rosenzweig) through the ages led inexorably to the Holocaust.

Kedoshim, the second Sedra is usually read together with Acharei Mot, except for an occasional leap year when they are recited separately. It comes in the very centre of the Torah. In many ways it contains the heart of Judaism – the ethical mitzvot, culminating in the "Golden Rule" of Judaism "And you shall love thy neighbour as yourself." It is one of the ironies of the history of our people that many Jews no longer realise that this comes from our own text in Leviticus. There is, perhaps, a lesson here for us; that we should know and take ownership of our own textual tradition. We can be proud of what we have given to humanity and, despite a history filled with tragic interactions, devote ourselves to work with people of all faiths and none to build a world with that rule at its very heart.

Alan Orchover is a member of EMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Is there a religious obligation to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah? If so, is there the same obligation to celebrate a Bat Mitzvah.

Answer: The Talmud [BT Kiddushin 31a] tells a story about Rav Yossef, who was blind. There is a discussion amongst the rabbis whether blind people are obligated to observe the Mitzvot – and R. Judah declared that they are exempt. According to the story, Rav Yossef says that when he first heard that the Halacha followed R. Judah (and that he was exempt) he wanted to make a big celebration for the Rabbis. He observed the commandments – and was sure that his reward for observing them, in spite of being exempt, would be great. Then he heard the teaching of R. Haninah the Great, who stated that "One who is obligated and observes is greater than one who is exempt and observes". Therefore, when he heard that the Halacha didn't follow R. Judah (and he was obligated), he wanted to make a big celebration for the Rabbis.

We learn from this story that being obligated to observe God's commandments is a worthy cause for celebration. Based on this, Rabbi Shlomo Luria [16th century, Lithuania] rules that a Bar Mitzvah meal counts as a Seudat Mitzvah. Logically, there should be no difference between boys and girls. Just as we celebrate when our sons reach the age of commandments, so we should celebrate when our daughters do so.

In spite of this, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a leading authority of 20th century Orthodoxy, (USA) wrote that there is no particular merit in celebrating a Bat Mitzvah. A Bat Mitzvah is no different from any other birthday. When questioned, he later explained that there is a difference between a Bar Mitzvah and a Bat Mitzvah. The mitzvot that the boy observes are public in nature. From the time of Bar Mitzvah a boy is counted in the minyan, is called to the Torah and reads the haftarah. When a girl becomes Bat Mitzvah the differences are all private. Therefore, there is no obligation for a public celebration.

This opinion was rejected by most other authorities. Of particular note are the words of Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg (20th century, Lithuania / Switzerland) (Seredai Aish 3,93). After showing that it is proper to celebrate a Bat Mitzvah he adds: The intention of those who celebrate a Bat Mitzvah is to celebrate that their daughters have reached the age of commandments. This is a worthy purpose Those who oppose this practice, on the grounds that it is a recent innovation ... are mistaken. In previous generations we had no need to publicly educate our daughters – girls were educated in the home, where they learned the fear of the Lord and proper conduct. In our generation the world has changed. The surrounding environment poses a huge challenge to our daughters' commitment ... both common sense and pedagogical principles say we must also celebrate when a girl reaches the age of Mitzvot, and that any discrimination between girls and boys is deeply hurtful."

In our days the celebration of a Bat Mitzvah is a custom widely practiced throughout the Jewish world. May we see many such celebrations, and may we merit seeing our children grow in their commitments and obligations.

Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da'at, 2, 29.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

TAZRIA/METZORA

3rd Iyar 5770 ~ 17th April 2010

Shabbat begins in London at 19.44 and ends at 20.51

By Jackie Gerber

In the beginning of this week's sedra we learn that one or two months after giving birth, a woman is required to make an atonement offering at the Temple. It is very unclear from the text for what sin exactly she is atoning. At first glance, one might be tempted to say that there is something inherently sinful about the process of reproduction and giving birth. In Genesis, Eve tempts Adam to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge and as punishment must bear the pains of giving birth. Perhaps the atonement offering relates to this first sin? However, once we think through the situation we see that the pangs of childbirth in and of themselves constitute a type of atonement, seeming to make an additional offering redundant and unnecessary. Furthermore, while the difficulty of giving birth might be punishment, the process of reproduction is actually a positive thing in the Bible and Jewish tradition. In fact, the very first commandment in the Torah, two chapters before Adam and Eve's sins, is "be fruitful and multiply."

If a woman is not atoning for Eve's sin and there is nothing inherently sinful about the process of giving birth, for what is she atoning? The Rabbis asked themselves this same question and came up with a comedic yet very clever answer:

[The reason for these offerings is] that at the moment she bends down to give birth she rashly swears: "I will no longer have relationships with my husband." -Niddah 31b

Inevitably, while in labour a woman is going to think and say things that she does not truly mean (I picture the typical scene in movies where a woman giving birth screams how she'll never let her husband touch her again, yet as soon as the baby is born they cuddle up). Therefore the Torah builds in a system whereby a woman automatically atones after giving birth. This explanation seems funny and overly practical at first glance yet is actually brilliantly nuanced in its approach to sin. To begin with it acknowledges the inevitability of sin in certain situations. The Torah could take the approach of saying a given action is not always a sin (for example, false swearing is permissible while giving birth); however, it remains true to its values and statutes. We learn that even if you cannot avoid the sin, it is still a sin. However, the Torah takes a compassionate approach by mandating that all women make atonement after giving birth. If a woman has to make this offering after giving birth even if while in labour she spends the entire time thinking of rainbows and lollies, it gives her the space to say or think anything. There is no risk that some women will be ranked more pure than others based on whether they needed to make an offering or not. Worth noting however, this sin offering does have the potential to be dangerous as it removes the potential motivation to not swear falsely while giving birth. However, if we follow the assumption that virtually all women will inevitably say or think these things, the need switches from preventing sin to protecting those who cannot avoid it. By mandating this atonement offering, the Torah allows us to be real people, accepting that we may not live up to the perfection mandated by its decrees, and understanding that at times such perfection is impossible.

Jackie Gerber is the AMS Student Field Worker

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: What blessing does a person whose hand is in a cast, or who only has one hand, recite when washing before a meal?

Answer: At first sight it is tempting to compare this to a rule that was formulated in the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 120:3) which deals with the requirement to immerse utensils before using them for the first time. The Shulchan Aruch states that if one is immersing only one item, one should recite the blessing in the singular: *al tevilat kelee*. If there are two or more items to be immersed, the blessing is recited in the plural: *al tevilat keilim*. Using this logic,

one might think that a person who is only washing one hand should recite the blessing al netilat yad in the singular, instead of the normal blessing in the plural: al netilat yadayim.

This is not the case. The rule is that a person should use the normal formula of the blessing - al netilat yadayim – whether they have one hand or two. The same rule applies when donning tefillin in the morning. The word tefillin is plural – referring to both the box that goes on the arm and the one on the head. The singular form of the word is tefilla. If a person dons only one part of the tefillin – either on the arm or the head – we still use the blessing in the plural. This is because we always use the standard formula of a blessing, even in those cases where there isn't a perfect match between the blessing and reality.

Behind this rule lies an important distinction between two different types of religious activity – prayer and liturgy. Prayer is a personal outpouring of the heart directed towards God. Prayer is usually spontaneous and personal. What we recite in the synagogue isn't prayer – it is liturgy. Liturgy is a formalised service, like the service of God in the temple. Liturgy has fixed words – and there are always rules that guide the right way and the right time to recite it. Liturgies are passed down from generation to generation. Although we moderns have an instinctive attraction to prayer, there is a special magic to liturgy, which comes from familiarity and recognition. If you have ever been moved by the intensity of the Kol Nidrei service – then you have experienced the power that liturgy can hold over us.

Although there is room for personal prayer in the Jewish tradition, our regular prayers and blessings are liturgies. This can be best summed up by the statement of the Talmud: R. Yossi says: Anyone who changes the formulas that were established by the Rabbis has not fulfilled their obligation. [BT Brachot: 40b] Getting back to our original question – the fixed formula of the blessing is al netilat yadayim – and we recite this blessing whether we have washed one hand or two. We still need to ask, why does the formula of the blessing change when immersing vessels? Rabbi Ovadiah Yossef explains that it is not unusual to immerse only one pot or plate and therefore, the Rabbis established a standard blessing for this occurrence. Since we sometimes immerse one vessel and sometimes immerse many – there is a standard blessing for one and a standard blessing for many. It is extremely rare for a person to have only one hand and therefore there is no fixed blessing for this case. The standard form of the blessing is in the plural – and we use it whether we are washing one hand or two.

Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da'at, 2, 26.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

SHEMINI

26th Nisan 5770 ~ 10th April 2010

By Alex Stein

This week's Torah portion and Haftarah deal with Holy Space: In Leviticus 9 Moses consecrates the tabernacle; in the Haftarah David brings the Ark to Jerusalem. Nadab and Abihu are killed when they draw near to the Ark; Uzzah is killed when he puts forth his hand to the Ark. Like in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, getting close to God's presence without his permission can be fatal.

Here in Israel, holy space can be equally fatal, although if God is to blame, he's doing it in very mysterious ways. There are frequent clashes at sites like the Temple Mount or the Tomb of the Patriarchs, religious spillage from the fundamentally political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Reflections isn't, of course, a place for politics. But it's worth reminding ourselves that holiness can't be distilled into any single space. Nadab, Abihy and Uzzah were attracted to the seductive but false notion that holiness can be embodied in a particular terrain or monument; their reward was death. I recently had the pleasure to climb Mount Sinai, or at least what's known as Mount Sinai. The real Mount Sinai, if indeed it existed, was probably further to the north. As I climbed up the mountain, I was proud that Jewish authorities have consistently downplayed its significance as a site of religious pilgrimage.

A few Haredim climbed with me, but they were there for curiosity and pleasure, just like me, rather than out of a sense of commandment. What matters isn't the place but the idea of what happened there. And so it goes today. The strengthening of devotional attachment to religious sites, whether it is the Western Wall in Israel or the Ayodhya Temple/Mosque in India, can only lead to conflict.

Religious leaders should concentrate their efforts in getting their followers to replicate the holy in their daily lives, and not on focusing their efforts on holy sites, at least if they don't want the surroundings to go up in flames like Nadab and Abihu.

NOAM movement worker now living in Israel Alex Stein is a former

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Is a person who has flown on an aeroplane obligated to recite the Hagomel blessing?

Answer: The Hagomel is a blessing recited to thank God for redemption from danger.

The Talmud [Brachot 54b] says: Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Four are obligated to give thanks, one who has gone to sea, one who has travelled through the desert, one who was ill and has recovered and one who has been imprisoned and released.

All four of these circumstances can be derived from the verses of Psalm 107: Praise the Lord for He is good ... Some lost their way in the wilderness ... Others go down to the sea in ships ... in their adversity they cried to the Lord, and He saved them from their troubles. Based on this, Maimonides, [MT Brachot, 10:8] rules that people who have been on the road must recite the Hagomel blessing once they have reached civilisation.

In the early days of air travel there was some debate amongst the Rabbis as to whether travel through the air counted as being 'on the road'. Now it is universally accepted that air travel is also included in this obligation.

A more interesting question, given current safety statistics and our attitude to flying, is whether air travel is dangerous enough to justify reciting a blessing. This forces us to consider what this blessing is really about.

Menachem HaMeiri [Catalonia, 13th century] writes, "There are those who say that the Hagomel is only required of one who was travelling through the desert and got lost, or went to sea and was caught up in a storm, or who was dangerously ill – for in all these cases there was a miracle. If, however, a person was in no real danger there is no obligation to say the blessing. Although the verses [of Psalm 107] support this commentary – I do not agree with it. For all roads are dangerous, and all travel has an element of risk."

Behind this comment lies a different understanding of Hagomel. It is not a blessing about being saved from danger, but rather, it is a blessing about the precariousness of life. The

blessing reminds us of the simple fact that we are frequently in situations of potential danger and that all life is uncertain. Hanging between heaven and earth in a plane, being hundreds of miles out at sea or lying under the surgeon's scalpel are by definition dangerous – no matter how used to these experiences we may have become. It is at times such as these that we are expected to thank God for looking after us, and not only at those times when things have gone wrong.

Finally, we must consider whether all journeys require a blessing. The Talmud [Brachot 30a] tells us that tefilat haderech, (traveller's prayer) is only recited if one is going a distance of at least one Parsa. This is approximately 4 kilometres. On foot that would take 1.2 hours. Following this reasoning, the obligation to recite Hagomel applies only if one has gone on a journey of at least an hour and 12 minutes.

Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, Yachve Da'at, 2, 26.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

SHABBAT CHOL HAMOED PESACH

19th Nisan 5770 ~ 3rd April 2010

By Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg

The strictly textual reasons why we say the Song of Songs on Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed, the Shabbat in the middle of Pesach, may be a bit thin. Among them is the fact that the beloved is referred to in the Songs as a horse among Pharaoh's chariots, (not what most of us today would consider a flattering or romantic comparison) and we read about that Egyptian cavalry on the seventh day of the festival. But the heart understands the connection between this most beautiful of poems and Passover. Pesach marks a decisive moment in the historical relationship between God and Israel; the Song celebrates the emotional and spiritual bond of love between us. Pesach is defined in the Torah as Chag Ha'aviv, the spring festival, and the Song of Songs rejoices in the beauty of life.

If we go out at this season into a park or garden we find it full of glory. In Britain the first rhododendrons flower at Pesach while the daffodils are still in bloom. The wild cherry turns from a darker to a paler pink, matching the blossoms of the crab apples. The blackbirds and thrushes search for worms; the birds are building and settling into their nests. At Pesach I don't just say the shehecheyanu, I truly feel it.

The wonders of the spring make me even more grateful to be alive.

One of the most beautiful interpretations of the Seder I recently heard concerned the karpas, the green vegetables we dip in salt water, the original Jewish hors d'oeuvres. 'I look at the green and I see all the beauty of the world', this man said to me. 'Then I find in the salt water all the tears of so many people, including my own. I know that all the glory and wonder of life, everything we've ever loved, will inevitably be immersed in those tears, but I try to remember that it's still glorious, still marvellous to be alive'.

I don't believe in all those long academic debates about whether the Song of Songs is just a love lyric, or a pure, true, spiritual song of the soul before God. Why the 'either or' approach? Where's the contradiction? The Song of Songs is beautiful on every level; precisely that is its secret. For once Judaism, so full of laments and elegies, allows us to rejoice with a whole heart, - in the scents or the garden, in the plants and animals of the land of Israel, in the energy and passion of the brief Mediterranean spring, in the joy and longing of human love, and in the relationship of the spirit to mysteries which elude it and transcend our comprehension, our relationship to the creator of all this wonder, to our God.

There's only one limitation: this season, life's joy, is all too brief. The Song of Songs captures the fleeting nature of intense joy in the repeated image of the deer which timidly approaches the fence and the window before it swiftly turns and springs away across the mountains. Suddenly it's gone.

Therefore, says the poet of the Song of Songs, 'Arise, my beloved' - and appreciate the garden while we can.

Jonathan Wittenberg is Rabbi of NNLS and Senior Rabbi of AMS

A Question of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Chaim Weiner

Question: Is it permissible to reheat food on Shabbat? If the reheating of food is permitted, does it matter how it is heated, or how hot it gets?

Answer: The prohibition against working is the central mitzvah of Shabbat. Cooking is one of the 39 master categories of work. From a halachic point of view, the question is whether reheating food is considered to be a form of cooking.

In the Mishnah [Shabbat 22:2] we read: Whatever was put into hot water before Shabbat may be steeped again in hot water on Shabbat; but whatever was not put into hot water before Shabbat may only be rinsed with hot water on Shabbat.

This means that any food which was cooked before Shabbat may be placed in boiling water and reheated on Shabbat, but food which had not been cooked before Shabbat may only be placed in warm water to prevent cooking from taking place. From this Mishnah we learn an important halachic principle – *ain bishul achar bishul* - there is no cooking after cooking. Once something is fully cooked it cannot be cooked again. Therefore cooked food can be reheated to any temperature without risk of transgressing the prohibition against cooking. This ruling is stated in the Shulchan Aruch [OH 318:15].

However, many important commentators, including Rashi and the Rosh, rule that this principle only applies to dry food. They maintain that it is forbidden to reheat liquids. The reasoning behind this is quite simple. If you take a slice of bread and put it in the toaster it will become toast. If after you toasted it you let it cool down it will be cold toast. This is because dry food does not ‘uncook’ itself when it cools. However, if you boil a kettle of water it becomes boiling or ‘cooked’ water. When you let the boiling water cool it returns to being cold water – just as it was before it was ‘cooked’. In this case, cooling returns the water to its previous state and if it is then reheated, it cooks again. Thus cooked dry food can be reheated without fear that it will cook again, but liquids cannot be reheated on Shabbat.

Whenever there is a difference of opinion among the main halachic authorities concerning a Torah Law (as in this case) the stricter view is adopted. Therefore, one is allowed to reheat dry food on Shabbat, but not liquid food. But what about combinations of dry and liquid foods – such as meat with gravy or a ratatouille sauce with lots of vegetables? Dry food is rarely completely dry – so when the Mishnah permitted reheating food it must have meant food with some liquid element. When determining whether something is a liquid or a solid - we must calculate the proportions of each . If more than 50% of the dish is dry it may be reheated. If more than 50% is liquid it may not be reheated on Shabbat.

The question of whether reheating is considered to be cooking, is not the only consideration when reheating food. There are other concerns, such as whether it is acceptable to use fire or other sources of heat on Shabbat. These will be considered in a forthcoming Halacha sheet. Based on R. Ovadia Yossef, *Yachve Da’at*, 4, 9.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner is head of the European Masorti Bet Din

This study sheet is available as a regular email newsletter. To sign up and receive your copy, send an email to chaimweiner@gmail.com. This study sheet is sponsored by Jewish Journeys Ltd: Currently booking trips to Vilna. For details email: jewishjourneys@supanet.com.

Shabbat HaGadol

12th Nisan 5770 ~ 27th March 2010

By Nahum Gordon

"[Moses] poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him..."

(Lev. 8:12). What was this ritual? Part of an elaborate ordination ceremony? To sanctify Aaron? To complete his purification after washing him with water? To eternalise the High Priesthood in his family? To underline the unique role of Cohen Gadol? To acknowledge that the Anointed One was exalted above all other men? The Torah posits all these answers.

Creating priests is first mentioned in Exodus 28. Aaron and his four sons will need special vestments (2, 40). Then they must be anointed (41). Using oil is first referred to in Exodus 29:7, but only for anointing Aaron. Sprinkling sacrificial blood and oil on Aaron and his sons will make them and their priestly clothes holy (21). The oil's composition is described in Exodus 30: myrrh, cinnamon, cane, cassia and olive oil, and is prepared by none other than God's designated architect, Bezalel (Ex. 37:29). Then, on the 1st of Nisan, Moses must erect the Tabernacle, place the Ark of the Covenant inside it, and anoint with oil the Tabernacle and everything within plus the altar for burnt sacrifices. Then Moses must anoint Aaron and his sons (Ex. 40: 1 -5).

But was oil-anointing really necessary? Who else was anointed this way and more interestingly who was not? After Aaron, the next explicit case is Saul by Samuel privately (1 Sam. 10:1), then David by Samuel relatively privately (1 Sam. 16:13), Solomon by Zadok in public (1 Kings 1:39), Jehu privately by one of Elisha's acolytes (2 Kings 9:6) and finally Joash by Jehoiada in public (2 Kings 11:12). Five kings oil-anointed either by a

Cohen Gadol (Zadok) or a Cohen (Jehoiada) or a prophet (Elisha's disciple and Samuel who might also have been a Levite). But didn't the kings have a semi-priestly role? Didn't Saul offering a sacrifice to God, albeit without Samuel's permission? Didn't a king like Josiah read the Torah to his subjects (2 Kings 23:2) long before the weekly routine introduced by the descendant of Aaron-Eleazar-Pinchas-Zadok, the scribe Ezra?

And which prominent leaders were chosen divinely but not oil-anointed? Moses was spoken to directly by God, as were Samuel and Elijah, while Gideon and Samson were informed by angels. God's choice of Joshua was formalised by Moses laying his hands on him; he became so "full of the spirit of wisdom" that the people were in awe of him (Deut. 34:9). So, absence of oil-anointing clearly did not impair his leadership skills.

There is one clue as to anointing's primary function. Part of the priestly ritual involved Moses placing some blood on the right ear (diligent listening?), the thumb of the right hand (appropriate action?) and the big toe of the right foot (walking on the correct path?) [Lev. 8: 23-24]. Exactly the same format was prescribed to cleanse lepers (Lev. 14: 14-18). This suggests that anointing was designed to purify the individual. What a pity it did not confer immunity from spiritual contamination!

Nahum Gordon is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

And the flesh of his thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day that it is offered; none of it shall be set aside until morning. (Leviticus 7:15)

1. Why was an offering of bread added to the offering of thanksgiving? In order that the donor might be able to share this, the tangible demonstration of his gratitude to God, with as many of his friends and neighbours as possible. (*Klei Yakar (Rabbi Solomon Ephraim ben Aaron of Lunschitz), d. 1619, Poland*)
2. When a person's life was in danger and he was saved, it is incumbent upon him to bring a korban todah, a thanksgiving offering. Together with the offering he also brought 40 loaves of bread in four different forms. One of each kind was given to the priest. The remaining 36 were his to eat. There was a time limit of the remainder of that day and the following night. After that time they could not be eaten. Sforno [an Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher and physician, 1475-1550] comments that the purpose of this extremely short time period was to ensure that he would share the bread with others. This would publicize the fortunate event.

Note that the only time that such publicity was a part of the offering was in the case of good news. A person felt deep gratitude to the Almighty for His help and in this joyous state he shared his joy with others. When a person brought an offering for a sin, this was not publicized. When things were going wrong in someone's life, he did not do this. Only when he had an event to be thankful for did he publicize it. This should be our model for choosing topics to speak about. Keep your main focus on the multitude of kindnesses the Almighty does for you. While there is definitely a need to share problems and difficulties with a sympathetic and understanding listener, the main areas to publicize are the good that happens to you. (*Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, "Growth Through Torah," p. 244-245*)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators suggest that it is not enough for a person to express gratitude to God privately. Thanksgiving requires public expression. Why? The implication appears to be that when a person publicizes the good that God has done for him, others will be drawn closer to

God. Do you agree? How do you think most people respond to news of another person's good fortune? Why?

How do you answer when someone asks, "How are you doing?" Do you begin to complain or do you mention something you feel good about? How do you react to people who complain all the time? How can we learn to be more grateful on a daily basis?

VAYIKRA

5th Nisan 5770 ~ 20th March 2010

By Georgia Kaufmann

A recent exhibition at the British Museum on *Moctezuma* with its descriptions of human sacrifice and its images of the pyramidal temples built high to offer up the blood and hearts of the victims to the gods filled me with a cold dread. It reminded me of the Aztec exhibition at the RA in 2003 where I admired the bubbly texture of an outfit a statue was wearing until I read that this sculpted image was of a priest dressed as the god Xipe Totec and was wearing the inverted skin of a flayed man, a someone, who had been sacrificed. The bubbly texture must have been his fatty tissue. Well, thank goodness for the Akedah, that's not the kind of thing that we do. But we did – not to humans – and in Vayikra we read in detail of our own bloodletting.

Nehama Leibovitz focussed her discussion of Vayikra on the dispute between Maimonides and Nahmanides. Nahmanides argued that there was an intrinsic purpose in sacrifice, that sacrifice is something that is positively desired by God, who enjoys the "sweet savour" of burnt offerings. He posits that by substituting an animal for ourselves, the act of seeing it cut open and having its blood dashed about will induce more meaningful penance in ourselves (there but for the grace of God go I?). For Maimonides there was no intrinsic

value in it. He considered that the Israelites were incapable of giving up all the practices of idol worship and that by taking sacrifice (an ancient practice) and transmuting it into sin offerings to YHVH the Israelites could be encouraged towards prayer (which mercifully once the Temple was destroyed we got on with instead). The statutes in Leviticus channelled sacrifices in a specific direction and limited who could perform them and where.

Our ancestors offered up cattle, sheep and fowl for sacrifice on a regular basis and the Temple must have been awash with the hot, red blood. The way in which the sacrifices are described, the precise and orderly modus operandi of the priests, the specification of whether the blood should be dashed or sprinkled, all around the altar or just in front of the curtain of the shrine, the choice of animal: bull, sheep or fowl – I find these rituals impossible to identify with and can only relate to them with revulsion. How different would the blood-drenched Temple in Jerusalem have been from the Aztecs' temple in Tenochtitlan? Yet Maimonides says that sacrifice was a way to help the Israelites forge a separate identity to the nations around them – because we were not sacrificing humans.

Hertz suggest that Vayikra is traditionally the starting point to teach Torah to children – because it is about purity. My daughter, Ruth, is Bat Mitzvah today. Faced with Vayikra she came to the conclusion that in taking on the Mitzvot she is choosing to make sacrifices for her Judaism. Not eating pork, not going to friends' parties on Friday night, the myriad little offerings are what for her being a Jew means. As Maimonides suggests these small, bloodless sacrifices help her forge her identity. Perhaps Hertz was right, we teach this difficult parashah to our children – so that they can teach it to us.

Georgia Kaufmann is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When it is a chieftain who incurs guilt by doing unwittingly any of the things that by the commandment of the Lord his God ought not to be done, and he realizes his guilt. (Leviticus 4:22)

1. Regarding the high priest, it says (4:3) "If it is the anointed priest who has incurred guilt." And again, regarding the people as a whole, the Torah says (4:13), "If it is the whole community of Israel that has erred." Why, then, in regard to the ruler, does the Torah say, "When it is a chieftain who incurs guilt." The answer is that it is almost impossible for someone in a ruling position not to sin as a direct result of exercising his power. (*Itturei Torah (Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg), 1900-1963, Poland and Israel*)
2. An acknowledged leader must be even more careful than ordinary people not to fall into the trap of wrongdoing. Even sins committed unintentionally may lead others to do evil, for others are eager to point to such a person as their example when they sin. (*Rabbi Jacob ben Jacob Moses of Lissa, 1760-1832, Poland*)
3. Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant taught: What special merit does a generation have when the ruler of its time brings an offering for an unwitting sin? As is known, a person does not consider it a duty to bring such an offering. This is particularly so with a ruler who is elevated above the people and is often arrogant, since everything is permitted to a ruler and there is no one to question this ruler's actions. That is why Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai teaches us that when the ruler of the people brings an offering for a sin and does not hide any failures, this testifies as to the greatness of the generation. The people did not flatter the errant ruler but pointed out the offense, assisting the ruler to do penance. Such an insightful generation is worthy of all praise because it is not only influenced by their leader but exerts an influence on their leader too, ensuring that all travel the right path. (*Simcha Raz, "The Torah's Seventy Faces: Commentaries on the Weekly Sidrah," edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p. 175*)

Sparks for Discussion

Rabbinic tradition understands the "chieftain" of this verse to be the king. Our commentators see the use of "when" here as an indication that it is inevitable that the king will sin unwittingly. Why? Why is it so important that a ruler publicly acknowledge his errors? How might you apply this idea to our modern elected leaders?

Rabbi Jacob of Lissa suggests that the reason for this commandment is that rulers serve as role models. Do you believe that today's role models – not only government officials, but sports stars, actors and musicians, and others – tend to behave as if they were above the law? How can we teach young people, in particular, to separate their heroes' accomplishments from their sins?

VAYAKHEL/PEKUDEY

Shabbat HaChodesh

27th Adar 5770 ~ 13th March 2010

By Norman Bar

Moses reminds the Israelites to observe Shabbat and of the penalties for non-compliance. The Israelites give so generously towards building the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) that Moses asks them to stop giving. Betzalel and Oholiav oversee the *Mishkan's* construction by the skilled Israelites. The construction, materials, appurtenances, and priestly garments are detailed. Accounts are kept. God's presence fills the *Mishkan*. A cloud by day and fire by night guide the Israelites' travel. Shemot ends.

In Shemot 35:10 we read:

- - -

And every wise-hearted person among you shall come and make everything that the Lord has commanded:"

An interesting but oblique and casual reference to wisdom in 'wise-hearted'.

Hertz comments on "wise-hearted" in Shemot 28:3 and 35 :10 (used elsewhere e.g. 35:25 & 35, and 36:1 & 8): "In Bible psychology, the heart is the seat of intellect, not of feeling." So Biblical wisdom is intellectual and rational. Thus Telushkin (Jewish Values p.43): "The rabbinic understanding (is) that one of wisdom's main components is the ability to anticipate the implications of one's words and acts" Thus if building a new house make a parapet for the roof, to avoid 'bloodguilt' if someone falls off. Yet Nechamah Leibowitz (New Studies in Bereshit p.448) describes Joseph's wisdom as "that which (was) accompanied by Divine communion and revelation": hardly intellectual or rational: clearly involving profound emotion.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs (The Jewish Religion pp. 588/9) echoes Hertz in describing chochma "usually translated as wisdom" as being used in Jewish literature to describe "mental processes and intellectual attitudes", and in the Bible to mean 'skill'. The meaning develops. In the Wisdom literature and some late biblical passages, "the sage, (chacham) has acquired 'knowledge of the world and human nature, sharing his experience with others. ... gives prudent advice and is the author of wise saws.'" The meaning of wisdom alters further over time until (Rabbi Jacobs, p. 589) ' In everyday Jewish use *hochma* denotes wisdom of a deeper quality than mere cleverness. The *hacham* is not a clever

know-all but a man capable of penetrating into the depths of the human situation and of seeing things as a whole.”

And here we more nearly approach the true meaning of wisdom. Wisdom involves insight, vision, seeing beyond the surface, far more than intellect, rationality or knowing facts. Who has not met clever and knowledgeable people who are anything *but* wise? Scholars perhaps, but lacking insight, understanding, compassion.

Is wisdom passé? Too subtle, too impractical? Are our scholastically pressurised young people encouraged to value those “capable of penetrating into the depths of the human situation and of seeing things as a whole”, including some who, though for many reasons denied formal education, are undoubtedly “wise-hearted”? In our bustling, ‘knowing’, competitive world, is there room or time for *wisdom*? There should be. As we read in Proverbs (31:26) “(The Ayshtet Chayil) opens her mouth with wisdom; and the law of kindness is on her tongue.”

Norman Bar is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

The 100 talents of silver were for casting the sockets of the sanctuary and the sockets for the curtain, 100 sockets to the 100 talents, a talent a socket. (Shemot 38:27)

The number of sockets needed for the sanctuary was one hundred, the same number as that of the blessings that must be recited daily. This implies that even as the sockets served as the foundation of the sanctuary, so the daily blessings represent the foundations for the sanctity of the Jewish individual. (Hidushei HaRIM [Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter, the Gerer Rabbi, 1799-1866, Poland])

Rabbi Meir said, a person is obligated to recite 100 Brachot every day, as it is written, “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you?” (Devarim 10:12) [Rabbi Meir reads mah (mem-hay, what) as me’ah (mem-aleph-hay, hundred)] (Menahot 43b)

A person should taste nothing before he utters a blessing. Since “the earth is the Lord’s, and all that it holds” (Tehillim 24:1), a person embezzles from God when he makes use of this world without uttering a blessing. (Tosefta Berakhot 4:1)

The berakhah, like most of Jewish prayer, is both a declaration of dependence and an expression of gratitude praising our Creator for the many gifts with which we are blessed. Prayer, which begins with the self, can move us away from self-centeredness and an

unreflective routinization of life. Too often we take the world for granted. The berachah is a specific way of not taking the world for granted, of responding to each of God's gifts with awareness, awe, and gratitude. (Siddur Sim Shalom, page xii)

Sparks for Discussion

Reciting 100 blessings each day seems daunting – however, a person who prays the three daily services and recites Brachot before and after eating will accomplish it easily. Do you think this minimum daily requirement of 100 Brachot should be taken literally? What point is Rabbi Meir trying to make? How often do you say Brachot outside of services or communal meals? How do you feel when you stop to say a berachah?

KI TISSA Shabbat Parah

20th Adar 5770 ~ 6th March 2010

By Markus Lange

“When you take a census of the Israelite people (bnei-Israel) according to their enrolment, every person shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself (v'na'tenu ish kopher naphsho l'Adonai) ... a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD.” (Exodus 30:12,13)

In Parashat Ki Tissa we hear about the half-shekel. Everybody gives an equal contribution to the foundations of the structure of Mishkan, the travelling sanctuary, God's mobile home. No distinction is made between rich and poor. The half-shekel contributions are designated to go for the sockets for the poles of the Mishkan.

Of course from the half-shekel alone the Mishkan could not be built, obviously more funds were needed. And further, both the rich and the poor giving the same amount sounds unfair. Therefore I suggest: let us understand the Half-Shekel symbolically. All are meant to carry out the project of building the 'House of God' together—supportively, emotionally, proudly—in ways different from material abilities and means.

What does the Torah tell us about the half-shekel? What does it do before and beyond going into the supportive elements of the building? The ritual and spiritual function of the half-shekel is that of kapparah, understood to mean 'ransom', 'expiation', 'purification', 'cleansing' in a physical sense. On an emotional level one can say, kapparah makes you feel good—good about the ritual you have just performed, about yourself, about the task ahead.

We see, the monetary aspect does not matter so much; rather the half-shekel highlights a spiritual quality. The foundations of the Mishkan are of special significance. The message of the half-shekel in the context of the building of the Mishkan now becomes obvious: make yourself feel good when you do your part in building a place for immediate encounters with God.

Biblical commentators have pointed out that the word ish (in this sense “every person”) underscores the fact that everybody's life is involved in the building process. Built upon the foundations laid by all—made from everybody's half-shekel contribution—the Mishkan is a structure which is then filled and furnished with sacred tools and objects to service God, and it is the work place of specialists and experts, professionals of all kind with various skills and responsibilities.

This was the case in the Mishkan where the priests and Levites—supported by all of the children of Israel—were entrusted to take care of that special connection with God. Today we also build our communities and places where we want to be in touch with God. Through prayer, companionship and the pursuit of loving kindness we take care of each other, of our neighbours and of all of God’s creation.

What best empowers the experts and specialists of our day to be effective? For the prayer leaders and youth workers, coordinators and administrators, chairs of committees and project managers it is the knowledge and strong sense that they are supported by all equally - rich and poor. In the same way that everybody’s half-shekel went into the foundations of the Mishkan, ensuring that the sacred tasks of the entire community can be done, mutual appreciation for each other’s share and contribution is vital to building and maintaining a sacred structure and community; a place and space where we encounter God in prayer and loving kindness.

Markus Lange is student rabbi at NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him.” (Exodus 32:1)

1. Hur arose and rebuked them, “You brainless fools! Have you forgotten the miracles God performed for you?” Whereupon they rose against him and slew him. They then gathered against Aaron and said, “If you make a god for us, well and good; but if not, we will do to you what we have done to this man.” When Aaron saw the state of affairs, he was afraid... The people wanted to build an altar with him, but he would not allow them, saying, “Allow me to build it by myself, for it is not befitting the respect due to the altar that another should build it.” Aaron’s intention in this was to delay matters; he said to himself, “By the time I build it all by myself Moses will come down.” But when he had built it and Moses had not yet descended, we read, “Early the next day, the people offered up burnt offerings.” (Shemot Rabbah 41:7)
2. Aaron argued with himself, saying: If I say to them, give me silver and gold, they will bring it immediately; but behold I will say to them give me the earrings of your wives and sons and daughters and right away this thing will fail, as it is said, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters.” The women heard, but they were unwilling to give their earrings to their husbands, but they said to them, “[You want] to make an idol and an abomination that has no power to save – we will not listen to you.”... What did the men do? They broke off the earrings that were in their own ears and gave them to Aaron. (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 45)
3. The law is that a person must allow himself to be killed rather than to engage in idolatrous practices. Why then didn’t Aaron allow himself to be killed rather than build the people an idol? The explanation is as follows: the people never forced Aaron to engage in such idolatrous practices. All they asked was, “Come, make us a god,” make an idol that we will worship. The prohibition involved, as far as Aaron was concerned, was only that of lifnei iver – “placing a stumbling block in front of the blind,” i.e., enabling someone else to commit a sin. One is not required to lay down his life in order to prevent another from committing a sin. (Imrei Shefer [Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, 1785-1869, Croatia])
4. Hillel taught: Be a disciple of Aaron: loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and attracting them to the study of Torah. (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

Sparks for Discussion

How could God's chosen high priest have made an idol? The various midrashim portray Aaron engaging in delaying tactics, hoping that Moses would return and defuse the situation. Why didn't Aaron just say "No!"? How much blame does Aaron bear for the sin of the Golden Calf?

The rabbis portray Aaron as the paradigmatic peacemaker, willing to go to extremes to heal conflicts or to prevent them. How much did this figure into the episode of the calf? Where does peace rank in the hierarchy of values? What happens when people decide there is no cause worth fighting (that is, killing or being killed) for?

TETZAVEH Shabbat Zachor

13th Adar 5770 ~ 27th February 2010

By Michael Gluckman

And you shall command the children of Israel, and they shall take to you pure olive oil, crushed for lighting, to kindle the lamps continually [Shemot 27:20]

Light is central in Jewish existence – at the very beginning of the process of creation the first to be created is light; God said, 'There shall be light,' and light came into existence. God saw that the light was good, and God divided between the light and the darkness [Bereishit 1:3-4]

In terms of our contemporary understanding of science, light is one of the key elements that have made life possible on this planet. Without it there would be no photosynthesis in plants, the process which produces the oxygen that is a prerequisite of life.

For Judaism light has become one of our central symbols. When we rise in the morning as part of Shachrit we bless God for creating light. We usher in Shabbat and all our Chagim by the kindling of light and use the extinguishing of a flame as part of the Havdalah ceremony which divides Shabbat from the rest of the week. Most famously of all we commemorate the miracle of the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees by kindling the Chanukiah. To many of us our mother lighting the Shabbat Candles evokes our deepest Jewish memories and of course we use light to preserve those very memories through the lighting of a Yarzeit candle.

In our tradition light and dark, as opposites parallel good and evil. The Havdalah blessing parallels holiness and secularity with light and dark and goes on to parallel Israel and the other nations and the Shabbat and the six working days.

The people Israel themselves are likened to a light – we should according to Isaiah be Or I'goyim – a light to the nations. That is our role as "the chosen people" not to be better than anyone but being charged with a special responsibility to live in such a way that we bring God's ways to the rest of the world by example. The spreading of that light is an awesome responsibility that devolves on us all. For that light to be most effective it requires the participation of each and every one of us.

What sort of qualities do we want ascribed to that light. Looking around our community we all shudder when we see people behaving in a way that gives a bad impression of what it means to be Jew. One of my teachers taught that God measures all the choices that we made through the year. Not the choices of which dress or car that we bought. Not the choice of what we ordered at a restaurant. But the choice of how we spoke to the shop assistant, how we behaved towards the waitress. Being that light lays responsibilities upon us. And if that light illuminates something

unjust, something uncomfortable, in the world then it is our duty as Jews not to put on the dark glasses and just walk on by; rather to get involved and work to correct that injustice.

Michael Gluckman is Executive Director of AMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out – that he may not die. (Exodus 28:35)

- A. So that he does not sneak in on Me like a thief in the night. From this we learn good manners: One should not simply walk unannounced into someone else's home, in case he is doing something that requires privacy. (Bechor Shor (Rabbi Yosef of Orleans), 1140-1190, France)
- B. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai said: The man who enters his own house or, needless to say, the house of his fellow man, unexpectedly, the Holy One hates, and I too do not exactly love him. Rav said: Do not enter your city or even your own home unexpectedly. When Rabbi Yohanan was about to go in to inquire about the welfare of Rabbi Hanina, he would first clear his throat, in keeping with "So that the sound of it is heard when he comes in." (Vayikra Rabbah 21:8)
- C. "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!" (B'midbar 24:5). Because he saw that their doors were not directed one opposite the other. (Rashi [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, France])
- D. "As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped upon him" (B'midbar 24:2). What did he see? He saw that their tent openings were not facing each other, so that they could not peek into each other's tents. Admiring their modesty and decency, Balaam declared, "People such as these deserve to have the shechina rest upon them." (Bava Batra 60a)

Sparks for Discussion

We would all agree that it is wrong to snoop or invade the privacy of our neighbours -- even if we can't always resist the temptation to do so -- but what about family members? Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai says that we must respect the privacy of those who live in our own home. Do you agree? Are there limits? Should spouses read each other's email? Should a parent knock on a child's door and wait to be invited in? Do parents have the right or even the responsibility to monitor their child's on-line activity, to read her diary, or to search his room for drugs?

What responsibility does a person have to guard her or his own privacy? Today it's hard to avoid hearing people's cell phone conversations or seeing others' embarrassing moments posted online. How do you keep your private life private?

TERUMAH

6th Adar 5770 ~ 20th February 2010

By Andrew Levy

The word chosen as the name of a parshah is one of the ways Jews have internalised the Torah. Traditionally, this is the first major word in the parshah. Because it is the first major word, the Rabbis had a choice. It sounds like a value-free choice; yet which word constitutes the first “major” word is surely itself a statement of ideology of sorts. If you analyse the words chosen, they tend to be either verbs of doing (Va’era, Bo, Beshallach) or proper names (Noach, Chayyei Sarah, Yitro). Only rarely are they, like today’s parshah, nouns of action and, as such, those actions have been stressed by the Rabbis as important.

So what is a “Terumah”? Reading the Torah chronologically, we don’t know because this is its first use in the Torah. It comes from the root “Ram” meaning high (often used for where God dwells) and shares this root, more significantly for the Masorti movement, with the word “Marom” meaning height. So the reader is being asked to associate it with something which is elevated. As the reader realises as s/he follows the Torah further, that is the meaning which it will take on. It becomes something “lifted off” as a sacrifice – the thigh bone to be sacrificed in the Temple service.

Yet that understanding sits very uneasily with its meaning here - the first time it appears in the Torah:-

“And God spoke to Moses saying – speak to the children of Israel so that they bring me a Terumah – from each person as their heart moves them to give shall you bring my Terumah” (Ex 25 1-2)

Here Terumah does not mean lifting off in any literal sense. Here it means something much more like “offering” or “contribution”. And this is how it has entered the Hebrew language; it came to mean the offering to be set apart for the Temple and used by the priests. However, as can be seen from its original context it also has a much wider meaning than that. The word means something contributed voluntarily and from the heart. So how does this link with the word’s root meaning of “high”?

Words in Hebrew often double up in their meaning – a word with a specific mundane meaning can also have an elevated meaning as well. So the word “Tzedakah” meaning charity comes from the word “Tzedek” meaning “just”. In other words for the Hebrew language charity is not what you do if you feel like it – it is nothing more and nothing less than what is right or just.

The same idea works for Terumah – a Terumah is more than an offering or contribution. It is also something elevated; in Hebrew, the word links with the notion of a God residing on high. So the making of a donation (Terumah) has an immediate association with God; that which “their heart moves them to give” is also divinely inspired.

Andrew Levy is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

You shall make the planks for the Tabernacle of acacia wood, upright. The length of each plank shall be ten cubits and the width of each plank a cubit and a half. (Exodus 26:15-16)

Where did the boards come from? Jacob our father planted them. When he came down to Egypt, he said to his sons: My sons! You are destined to be redeemed from here, and when you are redeemed, the Holy One will tell you that you are to make a Tabernacle for Him. Rise up and plant cedars now, so that when He tells you to make a Tabernacle for Him, these cedars will be on hand. So Jacob’s sons set to planting cedars, doing just what he told them. Hence Scripture speaks of “the planks,” the boards their father had arranged should be on hand. (Tanhuma Terumah 9)

One day, as he was walking on the road, Honi the Circle Maker saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, “How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?” The man replied, “Seventy years.” He asked, “Are you quite sure you will live another seventy years to eat its fruit?” The man replied, “I myself found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my forebears planted for me, so am I planting for my children.” (Taanit 23a)

Why of acacia wood? God set an example for all time, that when a man is about to build his house from a fruit-producing tree, he should be reminded: If, when the supreme King of kings commanded the Tabernacle to be erected, His instructions were to use only such trees as are not fruit-bearing – even though all things belong to Him; how much more should this be so in your case! (Shemot Rabbah 35:2)

Not only one who cuts down food trees, but also one who [purposely and impulsively] smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys food violates the command “You must not destroy...” (Devarim 20:19) (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Malachim 6:10 (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon), 1135-1209, Spain and Egypt)

Sparks for Discussion

The Biblical cubit is about 18 inches, so the planks mentioned here would measure some 15 feet by a little more than two feet. Where would the Israelites have found them? Why does the Tanhuma explain their origin in the way it does?

Shemot Rabbah uses our verse to teach an environmental lesson. What does it add to the concept of bal tashchit (do not destroy) as codified by Rambam? What are you doing to incorporate bal tashchit into your life? The passages from Tanhuma and Taanit remind us that concern for the environment means making long-term commitments. Do you think this is realistic? How can we encourage people to think in terms of generations rather than weeks or months?

MISHPATIM

Shabbat Shekalim

29th Shevat 5770 ~ 13th February 2010

By Allan Myers

What’s today’s Hebrew date? (No turning back the page!)

Two weeks ago today was Tu B’Shvat, the 15th of Shevat. That was fourteen days ago so today is the 29th day of Shevat. Shevat has thirty days, so tomorrow is the last day of Shevat and is the first day of Rosh Chodesh Adar.

In the time of the building of the Temple, the Jewish poll tax was collected during Adar. It was originally a way of counting the people. Later, it was called *kessef kipurim* (atonement silver).

It was half a shekel's weight in silver per person and had to be collected by the end of the following month (Nissan).

This year, the last day of Adar is on Monday 15 March, the day when Council Tax bills will be going out all over the country to collect the British poll tax.

To mark the start of the Jewish poll tax month, on this Shabbat we read a special maftir and haphtarach about the first time the poll tax was levied in order to build the Mishkan, the sanctuary in the wilderness.

In today's maftir, we read that the contribution is an anonymous, uniform contribution. Everybody, rich and poor, has to contribute the same amount. The money is used to buy public sacrifices which atone for the people as a whole and the silver donated is used to make the hooks and screws of the tabernacle – not the most decorative parts but the ones which hold it together. Without this contribution, it would collapse.

How is the half shekel linked to atonement? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik says that the scapegoat, used in the Yom Kippur ritual, is one of the sacrifices bought with the half shekel levy. Karen Koenig Schochet, writing in JOFA, the orthodox feminists' journal, takes this further. Noting that the half shekel is gathered as people pass by a collecting box, she compares it to Rosh Hashanah, when, as we read in the Unataneh Tokef prayer, "All mankind passes before God like a flock of sheep".

Although everyone is judged individually, the act of passing before God like a flock of sheep means that no one is judged too harshly. Through contributing something anonymous and partial (only half a shekel) each individual joins the community, becoming part of a whole. As part of the community, which, as a whole, is deserving of life, the individual attains atonement.

Allan Myers is a member of KNMS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

When you encounter your enemy's ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him. When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him. (Exodus 23:4-5)

- A. "Your enemy's ox" – Rabbi Josiah says: This means of a heathen worshiping idols. For thus we find everywhere that the heathen are designated as enemies of Israel... Rabbi Eliezer says: This passage refers to a convert who has relapsed into his former evil predilections. Rabbi Isaac says: This passage refers to an apostate Israelite. Rabbi Jonathan says: The passage actually refers to an Israelite. How then can Scripture say: "Your enemy"? It is simply this: If one has beaten his son or has had a quarrel with him, he becomes his enemy for the time being. (Mekhilta Kaspā 2)
- B. Even your enemy's ox. But it is a greater commandment to do it for your enemy than for your friend, in order to crush the evil impulse. (Bechor Shor (Rabbi Yosef of Orleans), 1140-1190, France)
- C. Moreover the halakhah sees in his unloading of the animal not only a duty you have to carry out towards your fellowmen in difficulty, but also towards the suffering animal, that tza'ar baalei hayim (the prevention of the suffering of living creatures) is a Torah commandment. To help his fellowman he would only be obligated "with him," if the man is doing all he can himself. But for the animal's sake, he must render assistance even if the master wrongfully and lazily stands there doing nothing and leaves the whole of the work to him. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)
- D. Rabbi Alexandroni said: Two ass drivers who hated each other were traveling along the same road. The ass of one of them fell down. The other saw it but passed him by. After he had passed by he said: It is written in Holy Writ "if you see the ass of your enemy... you must nevertheless raise it with him." Forthwith he went back to help him with the load. The other began to think things over and said: So and so is evidently my friend and I didn't know it. Both went into a roadside inn and had a drink together. What led to them making up? One of them looked into the Torah. (Tanhuma Yashan Mishpatim)

Sparks for Discussion

Why is the Mekhilta troubled by the phrase "your enemy's ox?" What can we learn from this mitzvah? Our commentators suggest three possibilities – to control our natural tendency to avoid or ignore people we don't like; to prevent the suffering of animals; or to work at turning enemies into friends. Which do you think is most important? Which can you imagine yourself doing – would you stop to help if you saw your unpleasant neighbour by the side of the road trying to fix a flat tyre? What is the appropriate way to deal with those we dislike?

YITRO

22nd Shevat 5770 ~ 6th February 2010

By Vicky Fox

This week's sedra describes one of the most important, seminal moments in Jewish history - the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. So it is interesting to ponder the significance of the sedra being named after Moses' father in law - Yitro - who opens the sedra with his advice on establishing a system of justice.

When Yitro sees large numbers of people bringing their disputes to Moses from morning until night he asks him why he alone is the judge. Moses explains that he acts both as judge to deal with the disagreements and as teacher, instructing the people in God's laws. Yitro tells Moses that he is wrong and sets out instructions to establish a judicial system based on precedent, with judges appointed from the people and Moses as the senior judge.

The rabbinic commentators note Yitro's deep concern when he sees Moses acting as sole judge from morning to night. What concerns them is not that Moses is overworked and at risk of exhaustion, but that Moses is exhausting the people. By insisting that he is the only one who can solve the disputes, he is forcing the people to wait for many hours waiting for him to reach their case. The Ramban comments that the trouble with Moses' decision to hear all the disputes himself was not simply the frustration it caused the people, but the danger of increasing violence and injustice amongst them. As the people lost faith in Moses' ability to hear their cases, they would start to take the law into their own hands. Rough justice would be the result.

Yitro's advice to delegate authority and share the leadership meant that justice could be dispensed more quickly with the result that the people would be less frustrated and more willing to have their cases heard. The system established the rule of law and most legal systems today are loosely based on Yitro's counsel to Moses.

This judicial system delegates and shares leadership amongst the people and puts responsibility on them to establish a fair system. The establishment of a judiciary drawn from the people leads to a more egalitarian system, with maximum access and "ownership" of the Torah by the people. Having a strong and wise leader such as Moses is important, but so is having people to help, because without all of that combined help, Moses' efforts alone could not succeed.

I suspect it is no coincidence that we are reminded of the importance of justice and our responsibility in maintaining that system just before the revelation at Sinai. The order of this sedra suggests that we had to first establish and accept Yitro's idea of a society based on a justice system before we were ready to enter the covenant with God. We had to

acknowledge the fundamental principle of human responsibility to establish and maintain a fair and equitable justice system. Supporting such a justice system allows us to live a moral life and makes us worthy of our relationship with God.

Vicky Fox is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

- *"You shall not swear falsely by [literally, lift up/carry] the name of the Lord your God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by His name." (Exodus 20:7)*
Note: Traditional translation: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain.
- "You shall not swear falsely by My name" (Leviticus 19:12) What need was there for this text, when it has already been stated: "You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God"? You might have thought that one is not culpable except when His specific name [the Tetragrammaton] is involved. From where do we learn that the prohibition applies to all the names of God? The text adds: "By My name" – whatever name I have. (*Sifra*)
- In any case, one who invokes God and does not keep his promise is as if he is denying God's existence. For the point of mentioning God's name is to say, "Just as God is truth, so is my word." (*Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1092-1167, Spain*)
- The text has been interpreted by our Sages to mean that it is forbidden to swear by the hallowed Name in vain, as for example, he that swears that something is or is not so, where the matter is self-evident – that the pillar is made of marble and he is standing by, and all can see that it is so. (*Ramban [Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain]*)
- The text also implies that he should not bear the name of the Lord who is his God in vain, indicating to all that he is a Jew and a servant of the Lord implying that he is one of His servants – when such is not the case. This prohibition also includes the one who regards himself as more righteous than he really is. (*Or HaHayyim [Rabbi Hayyim Ibn Attar, 1696-1743, Morocco and Israel]*)
- Do not take God's name in matters which are in vain or false. Do not place an imprint of holiness on things which are totally repulsive, which appear as positive commandments but which are in reality serious sins. Indeed, it is the way of the Evil Inclination to deceive people by depicting grievous sins as the most sanctified

commandments. Our Sages said (Shevuot 39a) that the entire world trembled when God said at Sinai, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," because all the most terrible crimes and murders are carried out under the cloak of truth, justice, and uprightness. (*Duda'ei Reuven [Rabbi Reuben Katz, 1880-1963, Lithuania, United States, and Israel]*)

Sparks for Discussion

The translation of this verse found in Etz Hayim limits the commandment to the prohibition of false oaths, but our commentators understand it much more broadly. Surely false oaths are prohibited, but so are meaningless ones. Why? How is pretending to be more righteous than one actually is "carrying" God's name in vain? Duda'ei Reuven warns against presenting sins as if they were mitzvot. How do you understand this? What examples can you think of?

BESHALLACH

Shabbat Shira ~ Tu b'Shevat

15th Shevat 5770 ~ 30th January 2010

By Michael Wegier

This week's Sidra is divided into two equal parts. The first part tells the story of the crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of the Egyptians. It is full of incredible miracles. The cloud and pillar of fire that guides the Israelites, the parting of the sea and the subsequent drowning of the Egyptians. This first part ends with the Song at the Sea which celebrates God's awesome powers.

The second half begins with Miriam's song but immediately afterwards, the Torah changes tone and we are drawn into the beginning of many complaints about the Israelites' situation. The food is no good, Egypt was better, there is no water to drink. Moses is accused of bringing them out in order to kill them. Moses is genuinely scared. He pleads with God to help him. Even though this second section also includes God's interventions, the tone of the text is characterised by complaint rather than the awesome power of God so prevalent in the earlier section.

The extraordinary change in tone cannot be coincidental. We must ask ourselves what the Torah is trying to tell us by juxtaposing these two elements against each other. It seems to me that there is a powerful lesson to be learnt. Religious civilization may be inspired and enriched by miracles but they are no guide for how to live today.

The Israelites who had just witnessed a massive display of God's power could not maintain their faith in His or Moshe's abilities within a small amount of time after crossing the sea. From the 10 plagues through to the killing of the Egyptians, it would be reasonable to

assume that the people would continue to have faith in Moses and God for the foreseeable future.

In fact, the very recent miracles were insufficient to calm their fears or assuage their hunger. The Israelites needed practical (if God given) solutions then and there. The miracles were only relevant and essential for the actual problem they needed to address. As a factor in guaranteeing ongoing commitment they were useless.

Instead, the Torah and subsequent Jewish writing, highlights the role of Mitzva and Talmud Torah rather than the basking in miracle shown to our ancestors. For Judaism to be sustained, it is praxis and study which are needed and not contemplation of miracles.

There is great relevance here for our situation in Israel (where I am writing). I do not know if the creation of Israel and its subsequent development were divinely inspired (I have my doubts). But I am absolutely convinced that even believing it was a God given miracle is irrelevant to how we should construct our lives here. Israel's future and its place in Jewish history will be determined by how we create a just and culturally rich society notwithstanding the evil people who hope to destroy us. Ancient and modern miracles may have occurred. However we must rely on the very human application of the moral use of power, the wisdom of Judaism and the commitment to democracy.

Michael Wegier is a former member of NNLS and director of Melitz

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

The Lord said to Moses, "why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward."
(Exodus 14:15)

1. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the Holy One said to Moses: There is a time to be brief and a time to be lengthy. My children are in great distress, the sea is enclosing them, the enemy is in pursuit, and you stand here praying away! Tell the Israelites to go forward.
(Shemot Rabbah 21:8)
2. Rabbi Joshua said, God said to Moses: All that Israel have to do is to go forward. Therefore, let them go forward! Let their feet step forward from the dry land to the sea, and you will see the miracles that I will perform for them. (Shemot Rabbah 21:8)
3. Rabbi Meir said: When the Israelites stood at the Reed Sea, the tribes were vying with one another, one saying "I will be first to go down into the sea," and the other saying "I will be first to go down into the sea."... Rabbi Judah said to Rabbi Meir: That is not quite the way it happened. In fact, one tribe said, "I will not be the first to go into the sea," and another tribe also said, "I will not be the first to go into the sea." While they were standing there deliberating, Nachshon ben Amminadav sprang forward and was the first to go down into the sea. (Talmud Sotah 36b)

4. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was accustomed to say that a Jew has to be a heretic to a certain extent, and if someone in need comes to him, he should not trust to God to help the person. Instead, he must do whatever he can to help a person in need.
5. Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on man. (Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, 1889-1967)

Sparks for Discussion

According to tradition, it was only after Nachshon leapt into the sea that the waters divided. What do you think would have happened if Nachshon (or someone else) hadn't jumped? What do you suppose was in Nachshon's mind as he leapt -- I have faith that God will save me? I'd rather die than go back to Egypt as a slave? Doing something – anything – is better than this endless debating? What moved Nachshon to act?

Cardinal Spellman makes the point nicely. How can we know whether the “miracles” we see are due to divine or human efforts? Do you believe it makes sense to keep trying in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles?

BO

8th Shevat 5770 ~ 23rd January 2010

By Angela Gluck

We only get it twice—once here in Bo and once in K'doshim, a couple of books later: those two little words “kol adat”—the whole community.

Scores of times in the Torah God tells Moshe to “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them...” but at the beginning of K'doshim (Vayikra 19: 2), we have the interestingly small yet important insertion of “kol adat” in “Speak to the whole community of the children of Israel”. Moshe is to tell them all about the nature of God's holiness and the nature of, as it were, human holiness: not so much the enactment of ritual but more the engagement with justice that we are to embrace as a response to The Holy One.

In Bo, “kol adat” comes at the end of all of the confrontations with Pharaoh after all the yes-you-can-go and no-you-can't-go power plays, the making of Pharaoh's heart variously hard and heavy, when it's all over and the Children of Israel will soon be leaving. The people have just learned that this is to be “the first of the months, the beginning of the months of the year for you”. Then comes this rare phrase “kol adat”—a slight variation on the version in K'doshim—in “Speak to the whole community of Israel...” (Sh'mot 12: 3) Moshe is to tell them about taking a lamb for each family on the tenth day of that month.

Why that extra phrase? Is it because Moshe—other than in these two instances—is only to speak to some of the people? There's nothing to suggest that directly or indirectly. Indeed, we have an image of the whole community gathered to hear what he has to say or at the very least not being excluded from it. Aside from the few mitzvot that are given for identified groups and ‘types’—for example, the Leviim—we're given to see all of the Torah as intended for all of the people.

Is it then because the mitzvot that follow “kol adat” are of supreme significance? That, too, is hard to fathom. “Kol adat” doesn’t appear before “Sh’ma” or “Choose life” or “Justice, justice you shall pursue” or even the Ten Sayings, with the commandment not to murder, so it can hardly be the case that they’re of relatively low importance.

So what, then, might be behind “kol adat” in these verses of Bo and K’doshim? It seems that there are clues to be spotted from a close reading of the two texts and a comparison of their contexts. While spoken in entirely different settings—one in Egypt to slaves, the other in Sinai to free, post-Torah people—they echo each other in unexpected ways.

One parallel is the date. K’doshim—like most of Vayikra—is given on the first of the first month, which we later came to call Nisan: while it’s not explicitly stated, as in Bo, it can be deduced from the Torah’s internal clock. That was quite some day for it marked the dedication of the Mishkan. Like the liberation from slavery, it’s a time of new beginnings—one year on. Another parallel is in the interweaving of ritual and theological elements with ethical and relational elements. In K’doshim, “I am God” is threaded through the list of mitzvot to give human action an ultimate direction and to infuse life with holiness. In Bo, these associations are more scattered. Yet on the point of the Israelites’ departure, their slavery and hardship are not mentioned and the original liberation movement has been transcended: Bo is no mere abolitionist tract. Moshe doesn’t play the human rights card with Pharaoh. He doesn’t say, “let us go because it’s wrong to treat people the way you do” but rather, “let us go because God is to be worshipped—and God has power!” And when the Israelites are ready to go, they’re told the implications of their freedom, one of which is about respect and decency and another is about God’s intervention: “I and not an angel... I and no other...”

Both Bo and K’doshim have an interesting and important place. K’doshim, the middle of the third book, is almost exactly mid-way through the Torah and can justifiably be seen as its heart. Bo is the parashah that launches the Children of Israel into peoplehood; it captures their defining moment; it records their founding narrative.

K’doshim may tell us what the Torah is about. Bo tells us what we are to be about: a people whom God has saved, made free for the Torah and bids to remember and relive and relearn this precious experience—every day, every week, every year. Little wonder that it’s for “kol adat”!

Angela Gluck is a member of NLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning. (Exodus 12:22)

1. This tells us that the angel, once permission to harm is given him, does not discriminate between the righteous and the wicked. (Mekhilta, Pisha 11)
2. The reason the Israelites were forbidden to leave their homes during the plague of the first-born was because “If your enemy falls, do not exult” (Mishlei 24:17) – that they should not see the downfall of their enemies, and they should not become revengeful or cruel. (Rabbi Aharon Shmuel Tamrat, 1869-1931, Lithuania)
3. The Exodus from Egypt is a symbol of liberation and freedom for all times and in all generations, and “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (20:2) As such, there is no way that the Exodus would take place in the night, as if the Jews were stealing away. (Tzeror Ha-Mor (Rabbi Abraham Saba), 15-16th century, Spain, Portugal and Morocco)

4. The Holy Blessed One said: If I bring forth the Israelites by night, they [the Egyptians] will say, He has done His deeds like a thief. Therefore, behold, I will bring them forth when the sun is in his zenith at midday. (Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 45)
5. Pharaoh said to Moses, “Up, depart from among my people.” Moses replied, “Are we thieves, that you expect us to get out during the dark of night? Thus has the Holy One commanded us: ‘None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning’ – we will not go out except with heads held high, in the sight of all Egypt.” (Tanhuma Bo 19)

Sparks for Discussion

Why were the Israelites commanded to remain in their homes until morning? Was it a safety precaution? Was it to prevent gloating? Or, as many commentators suggest, was it important that the Israelites leave Egypt in the full light of day? What does it mean when something is done under cover of darkness? Would the knowledge that events and actions in your life might wind up on the front page of the newspaper or on the internet change the way you behave in any significant way?

VAERA

Rosh Chodesh Shevat

1st Shevat 5770 ~ 16th January 2010

By Daniel Oppenheimer

In the first part of the parashah, God says a curious thing to Moses. “See, I have made you God (elohim) to Pharaoh, and Aharon your brother will be your prophet”.

The commentators tend to interpret the term “elohim” in this context as meaning “master” or “judge” – that Moses now has power over Pharaoh.

I would like to take the term “God” more literally, and read this as God elegantly making a point to both Moses and Pharaoh simultaneously – different points, each appropriate to the person concerned.

To Moses, God is referring back to the interchange between God and Moses in the previous week’s parashah, when God was giving Moses his mission. Moses’s response to God’s clear command to go back to Egypt was, instead of submitting to God’s clearly superior authority, to argue the toss. Now Moses is in the business of giving commands to Pharaoh – but just as Moses did not listen, so Pharaoh did not listen. We can see this verse as God saying with an ironic smile, so to speak, “I am now going to put you in the position that I have just been – namely, to have someone who ought to be obeying your command first time, arguing with you. You go and play the “God” role, and Pharaoh can play the “Moses” role. See how you like it!”

With regard to Pharaoh, God is making a much more humiliating point. The verse can be seen as part of the Torah’s ongoing project to ridicule and belittle idol worship, idol worshippers and political systems based on idol worship, whenever it gets the chance. In Pharaoh’s Egyptian worldview, it is Pharaoh who is a god and Moses who is the humble subject. God says “I hereby turn your world upside down, Pharaoh”. The descendant of slaves will now be God to the former god-king Pharaoh. And in fact, the belittling of Pharaoh is even worse when we bear in mind that of course Moses is not presented as being a particularly superior human being. If Moses is like God to Pharaoh, what does that say about the relationship of the actual God to Pharaoh? In particular, we can read this as God’s

response to Pharaoh's dismissive remark in parashat Shemot, when Moses first asks him to let the Jewish people go, "Who is this "Adonai" person, that I should listen to him?" The verse we are considering is God's answer to Pharaoh. "Fine, you say you don't know who I am. Then I'll give you a God that you do know: this Moses, he will be God as far as you are concerned. How do you like that?"

Daniel Oppenheimer is a member of NNLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

"And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt – its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water – that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone." (Exodus 7:19)"

1. Rabbi Tanhum taught: Why were the waters not smitten by Moses himself? Because the Holy One said to Moses: It is not proper that the waters that protected you when you were cast into the river should now be smitten by you. As you live, they shall be smitten by none other than Aaron. (Shemot Rabbah 9:10)
2. Rabbi Tanhum taught: It is not proper that the dust that protected you when you killed the Egyptian should be smitten by you. Therefore, these three plagues [blood, frogs, lice] were brought about by means of Aaron. (Shemot Rabbah 10:7)
3. Water is an inanimate object that does not have free will. When something floats in water and does not sink, it would not occur to us to give thanks to the water for its buoyancy. Nevertheless, we learn from this verse that if a person derives pleasure from an object, he should show his gratitude by being careful not to cause harm or damage to the object, even though it would not suffer pain... Since this is true concerning inanimate objects, all the more so we must show gratitude toward people who have shown us kindness. (Rabbi Chayim Shmuelevitz) (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, "Love Your Neighbour," pp. 140-141.)
4. Don't point to an institution's imperfections as reason for not acknowledging the good it has done you. The Talmud teaches, "Cast no mud into the well from which you have drunk" (Bava Kamma 92b). Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that if you studied at a school, even if you come to disagree with the school's approach later, don't "throw mud at it" and condemn it because of those aspects of the institution with which you now disagree. This dictum is relevant as well for those who have changed their religious orientation. For example, some Jews who grow up Orthodox later leave for other denominations, while others who grow up Reform, Masorti, or unaffiliated later become Orthodox. Such people often speak with bitterness of the movements in which they were raised, but they should also acknowledge whatever good they gained from their earlier experiences. (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, "A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume I: You Shall Be Holy," p. 107)

Sparks for Discussion

Hakarat ha-tov (acknowledging the good others have done for you) is not difficult when those to whom you owe thanks are well-loved friends and family. What do we owe to those who are no longer members of that group – an ex-spouse, an estranged relative, a former business colleague from who you parted on bad terms? How should we speak about them?

Rabbi Telushkin applies this notion to people who have changed the religious movement to which they belong. We might expand this idea to recognize that we have something worthwhile to learn from all the streams of Judaism even if we disagree with much of their philosophy and practice. What can we learn from Reform, Orthodox, Hasidic, and cultural Jews? What should we appreciate about our own less-than-perfect Masorti movement?

SHEMOT

23rd Tevet 5770 ~ 9th January 2010

By Deborah Silver

And so the curtain rises once more on the story of how our people stopped being just a family, albeit an extended one, and began to be a people instead.

Consider how a saga like this would be introduced in the cinema.

In his book *Working It Out* my friend Alex George had one of his characters summarize how she makes film trailers:

I get presented with two hours of dross and have to cut it down to two minutes of interesting and exciting footage which is going to fool people into spending their hard-earned cash to go and see it...you just take the best jokes and the most violent bits and stick them together...

So for the story told in the book of Shemot, there would be an introductory 'hook' line of some kind; some arresting images of slavery; a bush, alight; a close-up or two on some brooding (and probably male) faces; surging music; probably some thunder and lightning. Jokes? Perhaps not so many, but there are certainly enough violent bits to make up for the deficit.

Yet we tell the story over and over again, even though the adventure sequences must be predictable by now.

So let me offer an alternative focus, as we begin to read once more. In the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah, on page 11b, we find the statement: 'It was as a reward for righteous women that our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt.' (This is followed by an interpretation of exceptional beauty, which I invite you to read and consider for yourselves, since to write about it would take more than the word count here allows.)

Let us notice the female characters in the story, this year. Because if we do, we will find that it is women who drive the narrative. Without Jocheved's courage and Miriam's ingenuity, Moses would have been killed at birth. Without the initiative of Pharaoh's daughter (who is nameless in the Torah, but whom the rabbis of our later tradition name BatYa), Moses would never have grown to adulthood. Without Zipporah's quick thinking, Moses would have been killed in his encounter with an angel (this is a bit we do not normally read at Hebrew school).

And women continue to receive special mention. Indeed, the festival of Rosh Chodesh, the celebration of the new month, is deduced by the Rabbis from a close reading of the episode of the Golden Calf.

So for this year, I invite us to approach that list of names with which the book begins with a readiness to see that the story is going to be told much more subtly than a film trailer would suggest. Rather, there is a huge cast of characters in the story of our evolution to nationhood, a cast in which all are represented.

Deborah Silver is a rabbinic student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of the American, Los Angeles.

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this miraculous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:1-4)

1. A gentile asked Rabbi Joshua ben Karhah: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, speak to Moses from the midst of a thorn bush? He replied: Had He spoken from a carob or a sycamore, you would have asked the same question, but I cannot let you go away empty-handed. Why [did God speak to Moses] from the midst of a thorn bush? It is to teach you that there is no place that is devoid of the divine presence – even a thorn bush. (Shemot Rabbah 2:5)
2. Sometime after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labours. (Exodus 2:11) The Holy One said to Moses, "You have put aside your work and have gone to share the sorrow of Israel, behaving to them like a brother; I will also leave those on high and below and speak with you." Therefore it is written, "When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look" – because God saw that Moses turned aside from his duties to look upon their burdens, "God called to him out of the bush." (Shemot Rabbah 1:27)
3. Once the Kotzker Rebbe [Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, 1787-1859] asked his houseguests the following question: "Where does God abide?" The guests responded, "Surely the whole universe is filled with God's glory." The Rabbi of Kotzk answered, "God dwells wherever God is allowed to enter!" (Leket, From the Treasure House of Hassidism by Martin Buber)

Sparks for Discussion

Did God create the burning bush just for Moses, or had it been burning there all along? Had dozens of passersby seen it, thought "oh, a burning bush," and kept right on walking? It's not difficult to perceive the presence of God in the splitting of the sea, in the birth of a child, or in a spectacular sunset, but how can we learn to sense God in the ordinary and the everyday? What steps can we take to let God in?

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website <http://www.uscj.org>

VAYECHI

16th Tevet 5770 ~ 2nd January 2010

By Rabbi Jeremy Gordon

The Biblical commentator, Isaiah Horowitz begins his commentary (called *Shnei Luchot HaBrit*) on Vayechi with an investigation of Jacob's request that Joseph, 'deal kindly [hesed] and truly [emet] with me.' Jacob is looking for his son to take him back, after his death, to the Land of Israel. Horowitz enquires into the notion of hesed v'emet – acts of truth and kindness performed for those who have passed away. These acts receive tremendous acclaim in the hands of the Rabbis who believe that caring for someone after their death rejects any notion that the carer expects reward or recompense – pure altruism. One who engages in care of the dead is held to meet the great challenge of the proto-Rabbi Antigonus of Socho; 'Be not like a servant who serves their master in the hope of reward, but rather like a servant who serves their master NOT in the hope of reward.' (Avot 1:3)

Caring for the dead is certainly intense work, usually undertaken by an elite chevra kaddisha (burial or literally 'Holy' society) whose motives are deemed exceptionally pure. However, in his Biblical commentary, Horowitz explores whether or not Joseph's motives really are pure. Following Joseph's agreeing to perform this asked for hesed v'emet Joseph's sons get a double blessing from their grandfather and perhaps Joseph saw that reward coming. Indeed maybe even the hesed v'emet of the chevra kaddisha is suspect. Maybe they are doing it for some otherworldly reward, or to appear pious, or maybe, even, in the hope that when their turn comes there will be someone to care for their own death.

I think the point is that it is possible to render any action suspect from the perspective of hesed v'emet – ultimate altruism. We are all one big jumbled up conflagration of competing motivations and inclinations, many of which we barely understand ourselves. Perhaps the secret is not to push too hard at this impossible goal of acting with perfect kindness in search of pure altruism. Maybe we would all do better looking for every inducement to do good and grabbing them en route to making the world a kinder and better place. A wise colleague (whose name I have forgotten) asked this question – why, if we are commanded to give Tzedakah, is there no blessing to accompany the performance of such an important Mitzvah? Maybe, he guessed, if there was a blessing, there would be Talmudic analysis, legal codification, Kabbalistic preparation and so on until the poor person, hand outstretched before us, would drop dead before we would get round to offering something. (Indeed it's an answer based on a Talmudic passage where a poor person does indeed collapse while his potential benefactor gets himself ready to hand over something sustaining).

Acts of kindness should not be subjected to investigation until they can be demonstrated as being pure examples of hesed v'emet, they should be applauded and under-analysed, not over-analysed. We should be encouraged to act gratuitously in being kind. We should practice deeds of kindness wantonly. For, and this is a very Jewish thought, the path towards holiness begins with action.

Jeremy Gordon is Rabbi of NLS

Torah Sparks

By Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Simeon and Levi are a pair; their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly, for when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen.

Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel.
(Bereisheit 49:5-7)

1. Simeon and Levi were zealous and their motives were pure. What they did to Shechem did not stem from a love of battle or war. They would not have risked their lives had it not been for the sake of Heaven. Yet in spite of this Jacob cursed their zealotry, for anger and zealotry are not good qualities, and a person should always refrain from them, even for the sake of Heaven and with good motives. (Mi-ginzeinu Ha-atik, quoting Rabbi Meir of Premishlan, cited in Itturei Torah, Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg)
2. Their anger will be lessened through their lowly state and hard life, caused by the fact that they will be divided and scattered. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
3. “They slay men” – that refers to Hamor and the people of Shechem; “they maim oxen” – that they wished to annihilate Joseph (Rashi). What is the connection between these two events? Rather, Jacob said as follows: When I saw their extremism and their zealotry in the episode of Shechem, where they killed the entire town after their sister had been defiled by Shechem the son of Hamor, I did not know if the source of their action was a holy one, in that they were zealous for God, or whether it was no more than simple revenge and murder. The second incident, then, that of the sale of Joseph, taught me that their first action had not been done out of pure motives, but because of their anger and their desire for revenge: because “when angry they slay men.” (Ma’ayanah shel Torah, Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman, 1897-1943, Poland)
4. The Chatam Sofer explains that the dividing and spreading in this verse refers to the previously mentioned anger of the tribes of Shimon and Levi. Shimon and Levi overreacted with violence. But the other tribes did nothing for the benefit of Dinah. This was improper, for they should have taken some action. Therefore Yaakov said, “I’ll take away some of the anger of Shimon and Levi and spread it among the other brothers, for they need more than they have now. Then they will all have this trait in a proper amount.” (Toras Moshe) Every trait is necessary. The only question is how much and in which situations it should be used. Someone without anger or zealotry will fail to take action to protest injustice. On the other hand, excessive anger is extremely harmful. It causes quarrels, hurt feelings, much pain and suffering. What is needed is the proper balance to be used according to the directives of the Torah... To be a complete person every trait must be used. Fortunate is the person who has mastered a proper balance. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, “Growth Through Torah,” pp. 133-134)

Sparks for Discussion

- How do you understand Jacob’s “blessing” of Simeon and Levi?
- Is anger ever justified? Under what circumstances?
- When is anger appropriate? How should appropriate anger be put to use?
- How can a person learn to control inappropriate anger?

From: United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. More can be found on their website <http://www.uscj.org>